

HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE. NATURE AND MAN: ORIENTATIONS TO HISTORICAL TIME

Dr. William Haskett

Washington D.C., USA

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Summary

This essay examines the relationship of ‘Historical Knowledge’ to the subject of ‘sustainability’ from two related but distinct perspectives:

- That of Nature and Man, as embodied in Science and History, oriented to the question of human aspirations to understand and to control Nature and Natural Forces.
- That of Time itself, posing an opposition between the Historian’s orientation to the Past, and sustainability’s inevitable concern with policy for the future.

Some comments are then added on the tension between the scientific and the technological emphasis of the present project, and the ethical and humanist needs of human communities, past and present, posing the need for a series of case-studies, broader than those now commonly found, on examples from the history of human communities in specific geographic and ecological settings, which have demonstrated either failure or resilience in face of the challenges that change-in-circumstances posed to them. An additional list is then added, most items of which come from the period before the shape of the current ecological problem or its human consequences were

quite established in human consciousness, and when the capacity of men to pose a danger to their own survival was much smaller than it is now.

The essay looks at what historians have done that approximates to current definitions of 'sustainability,' and concludes that there is not much in its nowadays-form to add to the scientific and technological definition of it, but that something more can be done with its translation into 'cultural sustainability,' in something like the form that the World Bank and the World Heritage Sites Commission give to it.

Finally, the essay examines the possibility of cultural resistance to external influence as an offset to fears of uniformity at a global scale, using the work of Norman Daniel as an entry to key examples, from the history of cultural transmission and the utility of barriers to the imposition of knowledge or technology from outside (on the model of Christendom's ultimately successful resistance to the influence of Islam) and the complex meaning of decolonization as a re-assertion of culture.

1. Introduction

In the present state of Historical Knowledge it is literally impossible to omit the personal in the sense in which it is meant in the Science of Nature 'Instruction to Authors.' This is because all historical statements are taken to be hedged around by those considerations which emphasize rather than avoid the personally referential and the subjective, so that their omission would simply be read as a form of dishonesty. This is, for instance, the essence of the feminist critique of what is considered a male-hegemonic history, of ex-colonial society's criticism of the history produced by former masters, and so on. I presume that the inclusion of the prohibition in Science of Nature emerges from the sense that genuine science is without a personal referent, but it must work a particular hardship in this instance. It is worth remembering what Virginia Woolf said about the claims of science in her own day: "Science is not sexless: it is a man."

It is to be understood that all references to 'historical knowledge' in what follows must be understood as referring not to history-as actuality, or as past-times simply, but to that form of written history produced by the discipline practiced by the professional historian, under conditions which are generically described as having the past as its subject-matter, recreated or re-fashioned by some Historian in the present. From this follows the dual necessity of a description of objective reality (which links it to the claims of a broader science) and the acknowledged problem of existential subjectivity.

This first difficulty is given greater linguistic emphasis by the fact that the English language utilizes a single word, 'history', to cover both meanings, i.e. the past is 'history' and the knowledge that we claim to have of it is also 'history,' missing the distinction in German, for example, between 'Geschichte' (= event, affair, business, concern, with some overlap with 'story' admittedly), and 'Historie,' (= history, story, narrative, while the person is called 'historiker' and the adjective 'historisch' = historical) or, in a linked context, that between the knowledge (science) we have of 'natural processes' (Naturwissenschaft) and that we claim to have of the workings and products of the human mind (Geisteswissenschaft').

The ‘history’ of the past that we claim to know is expressed in the writing of history, i.e. in Historiography and this is both a real thing in itself, and the object of a Philosophy of History, which differs from both of the previous things, or is rather applied to one or to the other, without the distinctions involved being always noted or taken into account. Thus, it is sometimes meant that there is a meaning to what actually occurred in the past (= past as actuality, as in Georg Friedrich Hegel’s ‘Reason,’ or Karl Marx’s ‘Dialectical Materialism’), and sometimes that the writing of history (= the professional historian’s creation) takes this or that shape according to what philosophical assumptions about it are being made (as in R.G. Collingwood’s *Idea of History*, or Arnold Toynbee’s *Study of History*, or Jacques Barzun’s *Clio*, or many other analogous comments on the ‘historiographic enterprise’).

In most instances, these comments will be to this last, i.e. to the notion of professional history as a varied form of historiography, where the actual product of the historian’s work is at stake rather than its ostensible subject-matter, i.e. the past in all its varied phases and forms. These comments are cast in two related but slightly different moulds:

1. Nature and Man: Science and History: an orientation to control.
2. Past, Present and Future: an orientation to time.

They then conclude with a survey of the problem of ‘cultural sustainability,’ and a consideration of ‘cultural filters,’ taken as resistances to influences upon forms or technology proposed or imposed from the outside.

2. Division of Emphasis

2.1. Nature and Man: Science and History: an Orientation to Control

Science in this sense is viewed as essentially reductionist rather than merely descriptive, although it obviously includes descriptive elements of varying degrees of importance, and for modern times is built around a common core of mathematical abstraction, at least since what we term the Scientific Revolution of the European seventeenth century.

One of the earliest examples of the philosophic tensions contained in this last was that between the attempt to provide a firm basis in metaphysics for the new knowledge, represented by Rene Descartes and the *Discours sur la Methode*, with systematic doubt overcome only by recourse to the thinking ‘ego’ which is perceived as thinking, and the discriminations defined by Blaise Pascal between the ‘*esprit geometrique*’ (= the ‘geometric spirit’) which is that of natural science under the common guise of mathematical rules for deriving conclusions from premises which are absolutely clear because formulated by man himself and his reason), and the ‘*esprit de finesse*’ (= the ‘spirit of or the ability to detect fine distinctions,’ which derives what conclusions it can from premises which are grounded only in men’s experience with things and his own affairs—and are so imprecise, but the best that can be got for human ethical purposes. In this latter sense, ‘science’ gives us clear conclusions on matters of fact, but no guidance to ethical principles, while ethics would guide us without being able to demonstrate absolutely and certainly the correctness of its derivation of conclusions.

The dilemmas involved are experienced within science itself as the distinction between those areas of knowledge found to be entirely matters of Cartesian mathematical order, and those which are simply matters of empirical description, such as Charles Darwin's derivation of the materials for the theory of natural selection and evolution from his observations in the Galapagos islands on the voyage of the *Beagle*. The latter fields were also taken to include biology and medicine, botany and geography—most significantly that of physical geography and geology—where the task of the scientist was thought to be limited to observation of whatever there was that was available for human observation, description and ordering, with the goal of following ordering patterns in nature itself.

In fields of knowledge, such as history, which are external to the common core of natural science, it is the Pascalian form of the fundamental human dilemma on which modern historians have most often relied to define a special purpose for historical thought, in the process emphasizing its uncertainties but making firmer its moral, ethical and human value and purpose as a critical means for the education of men.

For better or worse, and despite many excursions in the direction of a common front with some contemporary versions of science, history has, by and large, remained attached to the concrete incommensurability of human existence, conceding in the process its capacity to make generalizations which would be adequate to all forms of human existence, and so denying its study the name of 'science,' except in the general sense of 'a kind of knowledge which humans value.'

This probably accounts for the Historian's lack of interest in the physical, repetitive nature of the world and of nature. It certainly underlies the fine distinctions drawn by Emmanuel Leroy Ladurie in his comments on the argument of Marc Bloch that :

“...Behind the tangible features of landscape, behind what are apparently the most frigid of writings...it is human beings that the historian is trying to discern...If he does not succeed in that he will never be anything at the best but a learned hack. But the true historian is like the ogre in the story: wherever he smells human flesh, he recognizes his prey.”

What this means is simply that History is not merely the story of all the things which took place in the past, nor of their change, but specifically of those things which changed in the past as these are mediated through human experience, which can then be reconstructed by present means.

The notion of time-passing is essential to history, and a time which is essentially timeless because dealing with repetitive chemical or physical processes or their relatives in geological or astronomical time and place, or through the continuous rotation of meteorological continuities and fluctuations, is not a time that has interested most historians. Socrates may have died from drinking hemlock, but the chemical effects of the poison upon human physiology do not stand at the center of our interest in him. We can agree that the same effects would be produced elsewhere and at other times, but we have not succeeded in describing a genuine historical issue. History assumes this timeless background, and locates men and their actions against this backcloth. We

understand this background through scientific knowledge, and scientific knowledge may be endlessly progressive and cumulative, but as historians the special task imposed on us is to attempt to evaluate as well as to understand the human actions that occurred or rather were undertaken within this setting.

It is for this reason that Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie criticizes Bloch for what he views as an ‘*Anthropocentric*’ approach to natural events—in this context referring to climate—that is not in his view useful precisely because it requires the mediation referred to, from process, to men, to history. He wishes, instead, to construct a ‘history of climate’ in itself, and as a scientist might. Despite his immense admiration for Marc Bloch, Ladurie finds his definition, of what properly concerns the historian, ‘*too narrow, and not adequate to the scientific spirit,*’ and declares that “the professional historian would [thereby] systematically neglect a whole category of serial or qualitative documentation, such as early meteorological observations, phenological and glaciological texts, comments on climatological events, and so on.”

It is at some such line of demarcation that modern history comes to ground.

2.2. Past, Present and Future: an Orientation to Time

This would emphasize that written history’s central concern is with change over time, and the time meant is past-time. This appears to come into direct tension with the future-orientation of Science of Nature, and is summed up in a small diagram.

It emerges with particular force in the apparent paradox, variously stated but amounting simply to Benedetto Croce’s aphorism that ‘*All History is present history.*’

This involves the distinction between the past-as-actuality and as it really was, and the present-as-constructed by the historian in the present, and written out of his own circumstances and capacities. This is involved in the distinctions drawn by Michael Oakeshott, where the underlying, but also the explicit thesis is to dissolve virtually all patterns in history beyond the provisional coherence given any assemblage of properly historical elements made or given it by a particular historian in the present. Thus, all collective terms are simply ‘names’ (e.g. Middle Ages, or Renaissance), and all events, complex pointillismes of temporary construction, liable to dissolve and become something else by the addition or the subtraction of one or more of their elements by the same or some other historian.

The ‘properly historical’ is required, because Oakeshott makes a distinction between the commonplace or ‘practical’ historical things—that refer to the use that can be made of them by someone in self-referential utility—and the properly ‘historical’ things that subsist without reference to the uses that someone might wish to make of them.

Thus ‘the past’ did exist (that much we can assume), but it does not exist as an ‘historic past’ until it has been given this temporary definition by some historian in the present (but exclusively concerned with the past) who can use it as a component of his own assemblage, i.e. what the French call ‘This ‘history’ is not a re-creation of the past: it has no such aim because it is self-consciously simply a selection of those things which

existed previously, and which happened (sometimes by accident) to survive for us to examine in the present. The historical past did not exist as an anticipation of the present (there are in this sense no ‘origins’ of anything); nor *a fortiori* of the future, which does not yet exist, even for us. Each written history exists as created out of the things in the present—those objects we take to survive to us from the past—and is self-sufficient and temporary. The evidence for it is here and now, immediate to the historian, and checked by critical methods, but it only finds its own temporary meaning as assembled with others, similarly arrived at, and liable to disproof, or correction.

History is not a thing that can be learnt, but an *activity* concerned with the primitive human impulses of ‘doing, understanding and explaining.’ These *activities* may have started out in naivety, like childrens’ play, and subsequently acquire complexity, evolving finally into specific practices and activities, of which our own professional history itself is a late form, no more than two hundred years old in the form ascribed to it by Oakeshott, and with a logic which is still being worked out.

The activity of being a historian is itself an historic emergence, and is still incompletely intelligible, as the disputes over its meaning and its forms would indicate. There may, for all we know be some possibility of its further evolution towards a definitive statement of what historical practice is as such, or what it might become in a perfected form, or even some mode of it in which it would be possible to generate general laws of historical events or understandings of them, but the actual level of current historical practice is very far from that remote possibility, and Oakeshott is not really concerned with it at all.

3. Historical Knowledge and ‘Sustainability’: Part 1

On the general topic of sustainability and the manner in which it is to be related to this kind of ‘historical knowledge’ it is permissible for the reader to be made a little uneasy at the evident scientific and technological drift of the whole, neglecting almost entirely the possibility that all of knowledge may be overturned by unwise or undesirable politics or policies in other parts of the spectrum of human organization as these arise *for any purpose*.

This means it may be necessary to include in what we need to know, or to teach within an educational system, not merely the question of what needs to be done from the point of view of science or even of technology, but what needs humanly to be done to give this knowledge a better (or rather a better-informed) chance of being actually being done. And this, within the context of values other than mere survival. Just as man does not live by biology alone, nor by the goods that consumption-values make desirable, so the whole thing is balanced on a narrowly-cast basis of rational or technological knowledge. It therefore has to assume that knowledge will or can make its way simply because it is knowledge and not because people are given an active wish to use it in this particular way. The closest that we approach the latter is in the construction of rational or economic incentives to behave in certain ways, and the efficacy of these depends very heavily, and self-evidently, upon the institutional (and intellectual and moral) framework within which such incentives are offered or accepted. Almost as of course they are themselves cast in economic behavioral terms, and do not envisage serious

institutional change. The limitation of scope is almost always cast in terms of individual (and therefore in statistically cumulative) behaviors, as these are reached or modified by economic incentives.

In short, it begins to look as though the present project would benefit from the inclusion of at least one ‘area of concern’ which would deal more directly with the political and philosophic difficulties of administering knowledge. Even that of ‘educational systems’ does not get to this, because it assumes again that we know just how such a schema of scientific or technological knowledge could or should be taught, and to whom, at what cost and with what human consequences.

Let us assume, for example, that we now actually ‘know’ what human populations (whether drawn together in national or ethnic groups, organized as tribes or clans, or given tighter structures as states or other forms of political organization) have actually done in the past. What then actually follows from this knowledge? And what in all of it is usable for the purposes of future policies? It seems to be forgotten that ‘policy’ and ‘politics’ come from the same etymological roots, and refer to the framing of deliberate intention by some institutionally-organized group or groups. We are then led to the question of decision and the power to implement it, within the limitations of knowledge, then obtaining, and for any period.

The trouble with starting from ‘policy’ is that this always appears to imply a set of conscious decisions, framed by rational purpose, and directed to an end which is significantly better for those affected than the latter could independently reach for themselves. This, in turn, often takes for granted the authority to command, or the ability to so construct a system of incentives that make it more than likely that what we wish to achieve will in fact be freely chosen. The problem is always that ‘knowledge’, in and for itself, carries us only so far, and cannot compel or secure obedience to its wisdom when its rational appeal fails to persuade. It is always relative to the interests and power of those who would wield it, and subject to the conflicts which inevitably arise when two or more claims of genuine ‘knowledge’ conflict, as they often do.

This might mean that any program of general education which would propose a reliance upon historical knowledge would be interested in historical examples of each situation, presented as case-studies of past systems where one or the other element of power or knowledge was predominant: for example:

- The settlement and development of the overseas parts of Europe, (i.e. transplanted Europe of the temperate climate colonies, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa) including the Americas, as the combined effect of individual freedom and clumsy or insufficient policy, at a time when either system was poorly equipped with the fundamental knowledge that we can now take for granted or aspire to. In this form we can then think of American development in the nineteenth century for example, as the uninformed spread of population across and into unfamiliar territories, with all the consequences that that process entailed.
- The development of Russian settlement in Siberia as the authoritative extension of the Russian state, only partially informed by scientific or technological knowledge in

- an area where climatic factors have proven themselves extremely difficult and susceptible to repeated failure even when twentieth century science was applied to it.
- The development of Africa under colonization from Europe, and its repeated difficulties and failures even under independence demonstrated the difficulty of fitting together science and technology and political and social structure in an area where a successful outcome was of extreme importance, and failure meant an enormous extension of the scope of hardship.
 - South America had already made its own contribution to the same dilemma, in principle analogous to North America in size and resources, but much less successful in harnessing what was known to what was desired or desirable in human consequence.

The result of a rapid survey of this kind is to suggest two different principles at work, which might then be studied:

- **Extension by authority**, more or less centralized and more or less controllable by and through policy, but often choked off by ignorance of effects, and not always able to make itself effective even to those limited ends it did seek.
- **Extension by individual freedom**, not centralized at all, and often largely statistical in its effects (in the sense that a large number of individuals acted on their own apprehension of what was best or in their own interest) but often choked off by a similar ignorance, or by an insufficient control of overall effects, as in the mixtures and successes in the settlement of the American *Great Plains* in the mid to late nineteenth century.

Some of this can be known from what we now know in history, but it is rarely assembled in this fashion, and we might all benefit if it were. One possible derivative from this reflection is that one might make a data base of examples of human failures, i.e. instances where human societies have shown that they did not possess either the knowledge or the will to take or to keep decisions which bore on their own survival.

Of their nature, most of these examples stem from periods when the system of systems that we now term 'global' did not exist, and where the nature of the changes almost necessarily involved a succession of human groups, each occupying an ecological or geographic niche relinquished under this kind of failure by another, which proved better able to cope with the conditions which had caused the failure of the earlier one. This is not, of course, the only possibility: sometimes, the failure was more absolute, and the area of application was left more or less vacant by men for lack of either the knowledge or a sufficient technological equipment to deal with the challenge.

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Biographical Sketch

William Haskett was born in Washington, England, August 28, 1930. He was educated there, and graduated from the University of Nottingham in 1952 (B.A. with Honours) in History: Fulbright travel-grant student to the University of California at Los Angeles with M.A. (1954) and PhD in American History (1957). Fellow of the National Humanities Institute at the University of Chicago (1976). Research interests in the Impact of Science and Technology on University Curriculum in the Humanities: on Political Theory, and early-modern British Historiography; on a History of Encyclopaedism in 18th century Germany, and of historical Climatological Change.