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THE DEONTOLOGICAL FACTOR IN HISTORY AND THE SOCIAL
SCIENCES AND HOW TO DEAL WITH IT RATIONALLY

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SUMMARY

The pursuit of social science and history depends on generalisations which both define and link single events . Generalisations, however, are cognitively intractable and not completely decidable in terms of truth and falsity because they are not inductively transparent. Hence, they embody evaluations. Just as observations are theory-laden, generalisations are value-laden. The presence of these values makes it very difficult in the social and historical sciences to distinguish generalisations which are true from generalisations which are false. In the 19th century it was therefore recommended that historians and social scientists confine themselves to the recovery of the generalisations which other people in other societies believe to be true, thus self-denyingly foregoing the search for genuine explanations and making social science and history a sort of secondary knowledge. This was Historism. Accepting the undeniable intractability of these inevitable generalisations, I am suggesting that 'truth' be replaced by 'explanatory power' as a criterion of selection. In this way one can go beyond the self-denial of Historism and arrive at a rational criterion for selecting generalisations. A warning is sounded about the newly emerging postmodernism which stretches from Kuhn and Wittgenstein to Derrida and Lyotard and which is Historism redivivus.

THE DEONTOLOGICAL FACTOR IN HISTORY AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HOW TO DEAL WITH IT RATIONALLY.

By contrast with the natural sciences which have no truck with values other than those internal to all science, values are the legitimate and necessary concern of all social sciences, including especially the science of history, that is, the science of the past. For in so far as these sciences are concerned with people and their social organisation, the values these people and their social organsiations enshrine, are in fact the subject matter of the social and historical sciences, and the question whether the historian or social scientist who is himself a member of a society which enshrines values , approves them or shares them, is an integral part of the knowledge.

There is one kind of values which loom very large in all human organsiations and activities - lies and other forms of dishonesty and mendacity. The study of such obviously immoral habits is a special branch of social pathology and I will not concern myself with it in this paper. I will concentrate instead on those values and their roles which are inevitable parts of the social fabric and of social behaviour. In conformity with the general theme of this Conference, I will address the question of those inevitable values mainly in terms of the free competition among values. If one is dealing with values, one must be able to distinguish good from bad, true from false; and if one cannot do so in these terms, one must have some other criterion. If there is no criterion at all, one remains at sea and there cannot be competition between values other than by sheer force and violence . My purpose is to find out whether there are rational rather than violent means of dictsinction.

By " values" I mean here all forms of behaviour as well as of understanding that behaviour which are not fully explicable as means to an end or as justifiable in terms of our knowledge of the world. Absence of justification as such , as Popper has persuaded us, is not by itself a sign of an arbitrary commitment to value. He suggests that we judge the empirical content of a statement not in terms of its justifiability; but in terms of its falsifiability. However, pace Popper, in the social sciences falsifiability is as impracticable a criterion as justifiability. Where human beings and the diversities of social organsiations are concerned, the possibilities of ad hoc hypotheses, of defining exceptions to rules, of immunising theories by adding 'yes, but...' are infinite. The opportunities for evasive action are so great that I have never seen a single example of straight and conclusive falsifiaction in the social and

human sciences. If examples are needed, I would briefly refer to Grünbaum's views of the Freudian theory of homosexuality. With all his misgivings about Freud, Grünbaum believes that the Freudian theory of homosexuality is falsifiable and has been falsified. But Grünbaum's evidence is not only not conclusive but invites the consideration of all those circumstances which would explain away all falsifying instances and thus save Freud's theory which would appear immune, or at least immune to the falsifications Grünbaum has suggested . I do not think that such and all similar immunities are due to the logical structure of the theory; but derive from the wellnigh infinite complexity in which human and social life presents itself.

But let me come back to the values themselves. One of the he most obvious instances of values defined as propositions which are lacking in justification as well as in falsifiability, are generalisations. Now one could start by argueing that generalisations are tricky and ought to be avoided and that if values are enshrined in generalisations, one could solve the problem of values in the social sciences by avoiding generalisations. But this view, though widely canvassed by influential philosophers like Richard Rorty, is both innocent and naive. Let me explain.

Contrary to the position of Wittgenstein and the old Vienna school, the world does not consist of a given number of events which can be registered by protocol sentences or which can be formulated as elementary or atomic propositions. The world is as it is; but it can be sliced up in an infinite number of ways into separate facts. Some of them are quite small - like the fact that I am sitting here, typing at a certain moment. Others are quite big, like the Gulf War or the French Revolution. If we do one kind of slicing, we can scramble the slices at will and do a different kind of slicing and will then get a completely different - I would stress: unrecognisably different - lot of events or facts even though the same area in space and time is covered by them. Every one of these events, the small ones as well as the big ones, are constructions and if any of these constructions can claim any kind of stability ,let alone permanence, it is exclusively in terms of a generalisation from which they can be deduced. Any picture of social reality, past or present, depends on generalisations. This, if anything, directs our attention to generalisations. The problem is that these generalisations, since their truth or falsity is not epistemologically unequivocally decidable, embody values or valuations. For this reason the historian and the social scientist have to have a method by which they can discriminate among these generalisations .

There is another circustance which points in the same direction, that is towards the inevitability of generalisations. If somebody tells us "the king died ; and then the queen died", this recital is not a plot because it is not an intelligible sequence. It could easily, as these two statements stand, have happened the other way round. The time sequence by itself is not an explanation and mere contiguity in time does not yield any intelligibility. In passing, one should stress that the two events are, strictly speaking, not even temporally contiguous . Even if the queen died at a moment which one would call chronologically 'immediately after', there remains a temporal space between the two events into which one could insert all manner of other events which would go to separate the first event chronologically from the second event. I do not want to pursue this mattter here: but chronological sequences are not causal sequences; and causal sequences can be sequences of events which are not only not chronologically contiguous, but chronologicall very far apart.

However, when we say " the king died and then the queen died of grief", we immediately obtain a coherent plot and an intelligible story, because we have constructed a narrative in which the two events are linked. In this narrative,the two events become fixed by themselves and at once stand in an intelligible relationship to one another. Why is this ? The answer is that with the addition of the words "of grief", we have linked the two events by a generalisation. We all know that grief is painful and that pain can kill. This knowledge is a generalisation . But without this generalisation, the two events cannot be linked. With the generalisation, one event is seen to be the cause of the second.

For the social scientists there arises a special problem. The people or the society he is studying have generalisations of their own which they use to explain themselves to themselves. The historian or social scientist belongs to a modern, mainly western society, in which other generalisations are current. Is he to use the generalisations current in his society,complete with their valuations , to study other societies and construct a picture of them ? Or is he to shed the generalisations he is familiar with and confine himself to those generalisations which are or were current in the society he is studying. During the history of the social sciences different answers have been given to these questions. But whatever the answers, they depend on a criterion by which one can distinguish between generalisations.

Let us therefore take a closer look at generalisations. To old fashioned inductivists, there was no problem about generalisations. One could, they maintained, easily

. distinguish true ones from false ones. True generalisations were based on the accumulation of particular instances and could legitimately be derived from such accumulations. False generalisations were all those generalisations which could not be so induced. There is no need to go over this ground again. Thanks to Karl Popper, we are today all agreed that this kind of induction does not work and that the argument that we have an ability to so distinguish between true and false generalisations , falls to the ground.

If we cannot distinguish between true and false generalisations in terms of induction, how can we be sure that some are truer than others and that some are downright false and ought not to be employed ? I am afraid that my answer to this question is extremely pessimistic because I do not believe that we will ever be able to make a distinction por a choice in terms of true and false. There is no way in which we can genuinely, let alone rigorously, distinguish true generalisations from false generalisations in the social and human sciences. Modern pragmtists - and I am thinking here of thinkers like Richard Rorty - would say that this is hardly surprising. because there is in fact nothing in the world which corresponds to generalisation. The world, they argue, consists only of particular events and if one uses generalisations about particular events, one does so at one's own peril. But this view is not helpful. Peril or not, we have to use generalisations and the fact that they are cognitively intractable does not entitle us to dismiss them as both useless and unnecessary as modern pragmatists are wont to do. People do make generalisations not because they are wrong-headed or blind or both; but because without generalisations there can be no knowledge at all. Some of Korty's friends like the Frenchmen Lyotard, have exclaimed "the less the better!" But this is a conclusion I cannot accept and I am not prepared, to believe with Lyotard, that the wild chants of the Cashinahua are the last and only words possible. Generalisations are indeed intractable . Not only can they not be derived from induction; but they cannot even be supported , as has been argued, by statistical reasoning. For statistical reasoning presupposes generalisations. One cannot observe or list so called 'data' unless one can define the contours of these data in terms of a general theory.

If we cannot do without generalisations and if we must accept that generalisations are in principle undecidable, we must take a closer look at the way in which values creep into all generalisations. I propose to consider this matter from two different angles.

First, let me give two brief examples of generalisations which, because of their essential undecidability, enshrine value judgements and are therefore ,when analysed properly, not truly descriptive of matter of fact. Among the ancients it was universally believed that all men strive for fame and this belief was used to explain all manner of behaviour. There was then and there is certainly not now a way in which we can decide whether this belief was truly justified; nor is it sensible to consider it falsified because we can cite two or three or even a hundred examples to the contrary.Though cognitively intractable, the generalisation about fame was held nevertheless because it embodied a value about after-life. Or take a totally different example. In New Zealand it is at present widely believed that lack of economic growth is caused by inflation.In New Zealand there is quite a lot of evidence to show that this generalisation is not true. However, the evidence is not decisive because people can keep citing special conditions which explain the falsifying evidence away. One very popular way of explaining it away is to say that the massive unemployment which admittedly impedes growth because it reduced the spending power of the consumers, is "structural" and not an economic phenomenon. Being intractable, the generalisation is not only not abandoned but not even doubted because it enshrines a value. To combat inflation, government has to pull out of all manner of social and economic activities. Since it is believed - and this is a value judgement - that government activity is bad, such pulling out is welcomed.The faslifying evidence, such as it is, is dismised as irrelevant. This hidden value ingredient is keeping the generalisation afloat.

If generalisations belong to the realm of values because they are cognitively fairly intractable, there is another quite different reason why they function as values in social organisation. We talk glibly about social organisation and take it almost for granted that some form or other of social organisation is a condition of human existence. I do not doubt that it is ; but the way it functions is really quite mysterious. Human beings are enmeshed in so called primary bonds with one another. But these bonds are strictly biological and derive from the fact that children have parents and have to be nurtured by them. These bonds though tremendously strong , do not extend far enough to produce what we call social organisation. Moreover, if a wider and larger social organsiation is to take shape. there are good reasons why these biologically given bonds have to be weakened . It used to be a commonplace of social science to say that the family is based on these primary bonds and that social orgnaiation is an assembly of families.But this formualtion disguises rather than explains the problem. How is it that families can form bonds ? The first

answer is that exchanges of women between families extend the primary bonds to include a number of families. But by this method the range of the resulting social organsiation is strictly limited and by this method one would never arrive at the formation of larger social organisations, such as nations, let alone of Common European Markets or the United States of America. It is a truism of anthropology that primitive societies which rely exclusivley on these extended primary bonds remain very small. It would take us too far to go into the history of the evolution of social bonding. But let me briefly state that one of the many efficient ways of creating social bonds which extend beyond the primary bond and which can replace it, is shared generalisations. A vast number of large societies are indeed based on the acceptance of generalisations within a boundary. People who share certain generalisations, are people who belong to the same society.

Here we encounter a very odd phenomenon. There are some generalisations which are quite unsuitable for generating this kind of social bond. These are the generalisation which are shared by a large number of people on the simple ground that they are true.Take the generalisation that the sun rises in the morning. I will not go into the question as to why most people believe this to be a true generalisation and as to whether they are or are not justified in that belief. But the belief is so widely held that whatever else it does, it cannot function as a social bond because it does not exclude anybody.Or, if it does exclude anybody, it only excludes lunatics whom no society would be keen to count among their members anyway. There is, however, one special kind of generalisation which can perform the function of creating a social bond among certain people and of excluding other people, perfectly well. Paradoxically , this is the kind of generalisation which is so false that it is not generally held by all people but which is held only by a smallish number of people. It is well known that the generalisatioin that the earth is flat - a generalisation about planetary motion and the visual appearance of horizons, etc. which by any standard is false - is capable of acting as a social bond among certain people. The people who believe it to be true, form a society - the so called flat-earth-society - and all the people who do not, are excluded. If there is to be social bonding other than social bonding based on the biologically conditioned primary bond, these false generalisations play an important part. Here then we have a reason why certain values are socially efficient. Bad ones or false ones are socially more efficient than true and good ones.

For the sake of argument I have been exaggerating. It is not vital for a generalisation

to be false or bad or both to act as a social bond. All that is necessary is that it should differ from other generalisations held by other people, so that these other people can be defined as excluded from the society in question. The people who hold the generalisation are included and in this way the generalisation acts as a social bond. All I am saying is that the requirements of social bonding are such that human beings need vast numbers of different generalisations - or at least a vast number of generalisations which are sufficieintly different from one another so as to be able to act as a social bond between some people and designate the rest of mankind as excluded. So we come to the conclusion that the inevitable value component in generalisation is not only epistemologically grounded; but also socially advantageous. No wonder that we get a vast array of different generalisation and different values.

What then is the attitude of historians and social scientists ? Strangely enough, for a very long time, right down to the 18th century, the differences in these valuations were not noticed; or, in so far as they were noticed, they were not considered essential but merely due to local idiosyncracies. Historians of historiography and historians of social science have all remarked on this fact. From Herodotus to Gibbon it was taken that human nature was uniform and that whatever the local circumstances happened to be, all human beings reacted more or less in the same way. This indicates that neither the cognitive intractability of generalisations nor the social efficiency of idiosyncratic,divisive and /or false generalisations was noticed. During these long centuries methodological debates always turned exclusively upon the difference between myth and history. That is, on the question whether something alleged to be the case really was the case or not.

I do not wish to belittle the importance of this problem. Myth and history are not readily distinguishable. The only way in which one can distinguish between them is by establishing a time scale so that one locate the event.If it cannot be so located,it remains mythical. One notices that almost all myths start by mentioning a place where the event is supposed to have happened; but avoid a location in time by using the formula 'once upon a time' that is, they explicitly avoid a time indexation. What mattered therefore for rational discrimination was the establishment of a chronological scheme This means one had to agree on a point from which to count either backwards or forward. There were many competing schemes - the first Olympic games, the birth of Christ, the foundation of Rome, the creation of the world, etc. and the preferred scheme always enshrined a value. But since it was

merely a question of counting, it was possible to compare the schemes and to locate if at all, an event on more than one scheme. It is significant that the first scholar ever to attempt such a rationally universal comparison of chronological schemes was a Christian bishop, Eusebius of Caesarea who died about 340 A.D. The mere fact that,of all people, a dedicated Christian apologist should be able to embark on this task shows that the task itself was considered innocuously value-free. Admittedky, Eusebius' purpose was limited. He did not doubt that human nature was uniform and that the sanme generalisations were used everywhere. He merely wanted to find a rational method to distinguish between myth and history.

All this changed at the beginning of the modern era.In the 18th century the view that human nature was uniform and that the same generalisations - barring idiosyncratic deviations - held good everywhwere and at all times, collapsed. There were a number of reasons for this collapse and it would take us too far to go into them.   Briefly, they came from very diverse quarters. One reason was the ascendancy of the Romantic view that all individuals differ from one another and that each individual is ineffable and with individual ineffability there went, naturally, the stress on the individual differences between nations and other societies. The generalisations current in societies were deemed to be derived from the national spirit of that nation and so,again naturally, differed from one another. The other strong influence was the growing knowledge of the world and with it, an awareness of how many different people there were in the world and that the differences were by no means confined to the differences between Muslims, Jews and Christians.

This major revolution in our awareness of the differences rather than the similarities between people and peoples is the subject of Meinecke's Origins of Historism and was desribed by him as one of the really profound changes in human awareness. The change in outlook produced a complete reorientation in the social and historical sciences. So far the problem had been to distinguish between myth and reality. Now it became clear that that distinction was not enough and that behind it there was looming a more formidable problem.

If the generalisations current in a certain society at a certain time were fundamentally different from the generalisations current in all other societies at all other times, it follows that the unavoidable employment of generalisations in

reconstructing the past or even the present of a society leads to a chaotic situation. If the historian employs the generalisations current in his society to reconstruct the society of the ancient Romans, he will get one result. If a historian from another society uses his generalisations to reconstruct the events in ancient Rome, he will get a different result. The question then arose as to which generalisations should legitimately be employed. Since generalisations are cognitively intractable, the answer that one must use those that are true is not available, for one cannot distinguish true ones from false ones. Hence the value ingredient came more and more to the fore.

Eventually in the wake of the German Romantic school of historiography and social science there was established a very straight solution. It was widely hailed as a sophisticated method but in my view amounted to no more than a resignation. The argument went like this. We cannot apply out own generalisations to, say, the Romans. But we can try to recover the generalisations the Roman used in order to reconstruct their history and their society. That way we will get a picture of the Romans which will very nearly coincide with the picture which they had of themselves. This methodological principle was then generalised and summed up in the view that while one cannot pronounce on the truth of any generalisation in any society, one can truthfully establish what generalisation were used in any given society.

This principle led to the position which has become known as 'Historism'. Its problems are well known. They consist in the first place to a committment to total relativism in the face of the values inherent in generalisations and a suspension of any judgement about the truth of these generalisations. In the second place, they preclude any consideration of evolution or even development. For if any society can only be known in its own terms, that is, in terms of the generalisations which that society uses, one cannot arrive at a criterion by which to compare different generalisations. Confined to relativism, one cannot see why some generalisations are earlier than others, why some gave way to others and why the relationship between the passage of time and the emergence of generalisations and the societies that are based on them is not random. In the eyes of a genuine Historist , it is pure accident that Manhattan came after the Olduvai Gorge and not before; or that feudalism preceded rather than followed capitalism. As one critic put it, in Historism the world and especially the past of the world becomes randomized. The truth of a social science or a historical narrative can be established relative to what

was believed to be true in the society and in the past the social science is about; but there can be no basis for judging as to whether these generalisations were true or not.

In a way, given my earlier argument that generalisations are by their very nature cognitively intractable, this Historist conclusion is not surpirising. Nevertheless, we have to ask ourselves whether it can be the last word. To begin with, relativism as a methodological principles is an essentially untenable position. There is only one world and whatever varieties of adaptations, both biological and cultural, there are possible, they must all be compatible with one another. This means that they must be capable of being related to one another.It indicates that there must be a way in which one connect all the several adaptations.This is certainly so in biology in which we can account for the great variety of varieties and species by a very simple over-arching principle of natural selection. It must also be so in the case of socio-cultural evolution, because all social organisations are variations on the basic theme of cooperation. How this can be done is a thorny problem; but the one thing we can be sure of is that these variations on the theme are not random and that some are earlier than others and that they are not all - as Leopold von Ranke would have it - 'equidistant from God'.

We must,therefore, decidedly reject the Historist claim that the final truth about any society at any time is the reconstruction of the picture they had of themselves with the help of those generalisations which they themselves used to employ. Since we also understand now that many of these generalisations fulfill their social purpose of providing a social bond because they are false generalisations, we must be doubly suspicious of any society's claim that their self-identification in terms of their own generalisations is final.On the other hand, there is no reason to believe that a construction of a picture with the help of the generalisations current in the constructor's society is preferable. For the constructors' own generalisations are as intractable, as value-charged and as undecidable as those of the society which is being studied. We must admit to be at sea , for the cognitive intractability of all generalisations deprives us of the one simple criterion of distinction and preference which would be available if we could decide which generalisations are true and which are false .

There is,however, a way out. If we cannot distinguish between generalisations in terms of their truth and falsity, we _can_ distinguish between them in terms of their

explanatory power. The degree of explanatory power sets up a very natural competition and we can say that the generalisations with the greater explanatory power are to be preferred to the ones with the lesser explanatory power. It will then appear that those generalisations which are most explanatory, are the explanations which are to be preferred . To be more precise: the competition on these terms, is, admittedly, not natural in the sense of being automatic. But it is not a competition which the historian or social scientist carries out according to arbitrary preferences dictated by his own value judgements. The criterion of explanatory power is firmly rooted in ontology. There is only one world and no matter how many varieties of things there are in it, they must all be compatible with one another. Even if they do not appear to be so at first sight, there must be an underlying explanation of that seeming incompatibility. Nero's opposition to Christians is not compatible with Constantine's promotion of Christians. But there is an obvious explanation why Nero was against and Constantine for Christianity, so that the incompatibility disappears. To put it briefly: a preference for a generalisation with a high degree of explanatory power is not arbitrary but in conformity with reality.

Let me give a very brief example of how this would work out in practice. Muslims, Jews and Christians have perfectly good explanations of the origin and "truths" of their religions. But each explanation is current inside the religious group it explains and has no currency outside that group. It is parochial and its explanatory power is therefore very low. Now the old Historist would , when faced with this situation, simply state that it is his business to recover the Jewish, the Christian and the Muslim explanation and to leave it at that. But then Durkheim came along and offered an explanation of the origin of religious belief which is applicable to all three religious groups. That explanation has greater explanatory power than either of the three parochial explanations. For this reason the generalisation on which it depends is to be to be preferred to the generalisations on which the parochial explanations depended. I would like to stress that the preference is entirely in terms of explanatory power anmd not in terms of truth. There is no way in which one could determine whether Durkheim's famous theory is "true" in the sense that it correponds to the facts. What indeed, in this case, are the 'facts" ? Even if we could confront the founders of these religions and ask them, we could be certain that each would indignantly reject the Durkheim explanation and prefer his own. As the parochial explanations are clearly attempts at self-legitimisation and therefore as suspect as any judgement in one's own cause, one could brush them aside. But one would then be left with the task of having to produce evidence for Durkheim's

alternative explanation or state under what conditions it would be false. I think I am not exaggerating when I say categorically that it is impossible to define what would count as evidence or what would count as falsification of Durkheim's generalisation about the origin of religious belief. One would always be thrown back upon interrogating the founders and, even if that were possible, one would always meet with their firm denial of Durkheim's allegation and Durkheim, equally firmly, would be entitled to dismiss that evidence as the evidence of a hostile and clearly self-serving witness.

Next, we have to consider a power ful objection against our preference for Durkheim. One could argue and it has indeed been argued, that Durkheim's explanation is based on a generalisation which is nothing more than the ideology current in modern western society. To export it to earlier and foreign religious communities is an act of intellectual tyranny, aided and abetted and indeed made possible by western imperialism. It may look indeed that way; because it brushes aside the indigenous explanations and substitutes a foreign explanation. Since all explanations are based on cognitively intractable generalisations, we are here faced by an example of political tyranny; and not by a case of scientific understanding.

This objection cannot be rebutted by the simple appeal to "truth". As I have argued, Durkheim's theory is not "true" in any meaningful sense of that term. But the objection can be rebutted by an appeal to its explanatory power. It is superior to any parochial explanation because it explains more. It explains not just the origin of the Christian or the Jewish religion; but it explains the origins of all religions. The application of the word "imperialistic" or "tyrannous" is therefore out of place and can have no more meaning than the application of the word "fascist" by criminal skinheads to the police. Durkheim, to repeat, is not imposing his own "parochial" explanation on others; but is proposing a universal, non-parochial explanation. If his expolanation were parochial and would apply only to his own, French society at the beginning of the 20th century, he would indeed be guilty of "tyrannous imperialism". (This argument in favour of Durkheim is equally applicable to contemporary feminists who tend to dismiss theories proposed by male persons as instances of phallogocentric male chauvinism. Some of those theories no doubt are such instances; but many others are more universal and transcend the parochialism of academic clubs even though the majority of their members happen to be male persons.)

It would be comforting if one could leave the matter here. But unfortunately the old Historist argument that one must understand every society in its own terms and do no more is making a powerful come-back at the present time in the guise of so called postmodernism. I consider this revival of Historism as postmodernism a very grave intellectual threat to scientific integrity - a threat which I believe to be much greater than the recourse to Keynes or the appeal to other forms of collective responsibility. Many people are too concerned with what Hayek called the "fatal conceit" and are looking in the wrong direction and are not aware that the real threat to freedom of choice between theories and explanations is now coming, at the end of our century, from postmodernism. I would therefore like to conclude by spelling out the nature of this threat.

Historism held sway because it was argued convincingly that generalisations are cognitively intractable and that a search for truth about societies can achieve nothing more than the discovery of the truths current in other societies. One can indeed decide whether a statement that the ancients believed that men are prompted by the search for fame is true or not. The question whether they were genuinely motivated by that search cannot be answered. The correct reply to old-fashioned Historism was that ,though one cannot decide what ancient people were really motivated by, one can prefer a generalisation with greater explanatory power to a parochial generalisation with poor explanatory power. But our contemporary postmodern fellow-intellectuals have succeeded in reformulating the old-fashioned poverty of Historism so that Kuhn, for example, has come up with the proposition that there is nothing much to chose between Ptolemy and Einstein. Neither Ptolemy nor Einstein,Kuhn is argueing, tells the truth about the planets. The difference between them is simply that they have two different ways of calculating the position of the earth relative to the planets. The fact that Einstein's way of doing it has greater explanatory power than Ptolemy's way of doing it is swept under the carpet. Applied to our own example, a Kuhnian would argue that there is nothing much to chose between Durkheim's explanation of the origin of the Jewish religion and the indigenous Biblical story. How has it come about that this postmodern revival of Historism has proved so widely appealing ?

The reason for this wide appeal lies, it has to be admitted, is a fatal conceit modernism was guilty of. It was believed that language is a totally neutral and transparent medium which unequivocally refers to the world and enables scientists, social as well as natural ones, to tell it how it is. The first thinker to discover that this

assumption was a conceit and to point out that that conceit was fatal, was Nietzsche. Nietzsche has been blamed for, as well as credited with , all sorts of contentions. But it seems to me that this insight was his most important and crucial contribution . It led him to a scepticism which went far beyond that of Marx and Freud. Marx believed that only the powerful and the rich are dishonest and Freud tried to persuade us that only repressed wishes cause trouble. Nietzsche pointed out that the weak and the exploited and our unrepressed desires are equally untrustworthy and self-serving.

Nietzsche was profoundly ironical and there is no telling what conclusions he would have reached had he not lost his mind altogether. But the epigones, less ironical and lacking his sense of detachment, took the suggestion that language is not a neutral medium, seriously and literally and worked up to the conclusion that our languages are our prisons and that as long as we are following the rules of any one language game we are as right or as wrong as one can ever be and that there is no way in which one can compare one game with another,let alone prefer any one game and the propositions it allows to any other proposition. In this view, a text is a text and one cannot criticise it by looking at another text, let alone by looking at the world. If one does, one is committing nothing less than rape and if one is not raped in return, one becomes a powerful tyrant whose propositions triumph over others not because they are true or because they have greater explanatory power; but because they happen to be the propositions of a powerful group resting not on their laurels but on their nuclear weapons. There is no need to make detailed attributions of these views. We will all recognise here the pronouncements of Wittgenstein, Kuhn, Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard - all of whom have contributed their bit to the prevailing postmodernism which revives the original position of Historism in which it is impossible to distinguish between generalisations. This postmodern extravagant reaction to the fatal conceit of modernism that language is an innocent,neutral medium, appears to me as the beginning of a new dark night of the intellect. I would strongly recommend that we resist the postmodern lure of Wittgenstein and Kuhn , Lyotard and Derrida and that the fatal conceit of modernism be rectified instead by the substitution of "explanatory power" for "truth by correspondence to the facts" as the criterion of comparison and of the selection of generalisations.