

Edward Carr's Conception of History-Science Relation

by

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In Chapter 3 of Edward Carr's *What is History?*, Carr deals with certain problems about History, Science and Morality. Here we will only deal with the subject of History and Science relation as developed in this chapter.

Carr begins the chapter criticizing many thinkers who have conceived History in the image and likeness of Natural Science. Specifically he mentions some authors who talk about the "Laws of History" as if they were scientific laws (72-73). He refers to the prestige that scientific laws had since the times of Newton and Galileo, and makes reference to the way that some historians tried to talk about the "Law of History" in the same way that Science talks about the "Law of Evolution".

After referring to Henri Poincaré and his fabulous work *Science and Hypothesis* and his assertions about a conventionalist vision of science, Carr talks about induction as part of the scientific method (73-75). In a certain point, Carr says that scientists do not discover, nor do obtain new knowledge establishing precise and general laws, but stating hypotheses which open the way for new investigations (74-75). Much later, he mentions explicitly the "scientific method", in which induction and hypothetical statements form part of, and which later are modified, refuted, or accepted after empirical testing.

It is important to mention several facts concerning science to evaluate Carr's views on History. First, ever since Karl Popper wrote his *Logic of Scientific Discovery* and W. V. O. Quine wrote his "Two Dogmas of Empiricism", the concepts of induction and scientific method have been questioned. After David Hume's criticisms we know that it is not possible to logically derive universal laws from particular experiences. Popper went further than that in order to say that induction does not happen logically *nor psychologically*, because our mind posits these laws and concepts to interpret sensations. Concepts are meanings which attribute certain universal behavior to their extension. Second, we have to place in question the assertions of what I have called the "high-school interpretation" of the scientific method: we begin with observation, then generalize, then we formulate a hypothesis, and if it is confirmed by testing it is turned into a theory, and if keeps being stated it turns into a law. Nothing further from the truth. Science, contrary to what Carr says, *has* to posit concepts and laws that let us interpret experience. Our approach to the world is always conceptual, it never begins with sensibility to do science. From sensibility and conceptual realm we have a continuous "dialog" with experience.

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History definitely is not Natural Science, but it *is* Science in the sense that it provides knowledge, and, just like Natural Science, it tries to explain historical facts. These explanations inevitably depend on the conceptions that the historian has about a certain subject. Carr presents the case of the debate about whether the problem of Russia is if it is an European country or it is not (76-77). He criticizes the notion of Natural Science as working with the universal while History deals more with the particular. He says that neither History nor Natural Science use universal laws in a strict sense. This statement is false. Let us look, for instance, Newton's Three Laws of Motion, which are considered universal. Under the pertinent conditions, they work *every single time without exception*. This is only true in Physics, not in other areas of Natural Science, and, of course, it is not true in history. History, because of its use of concepts, has to generalize when it offers an explanation of historical facts, but these generalizations, as Carr says, cannot be considered universal laws, like in the case of Natural Science (79-82). Carr's assertion of the relation between the individual and the general (82-83) is not too different from the way Natural Science relates the universal (or the general) with particular phenomena. In this sense, Natural Science and History are very close.

Also, we can see the second point Carr discusses a parallel case with Philosophy of Science. Carr correctly rejects the statement that we cannot learn anything in History. For him, the fact that we are only fixed in observable facts is evidence of what we learn in history using generalizations (84-86). In Philosophy of Science we see the same thing, because some important philosophers and thinkers like Thomas S. Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend question our capacity to grasp phenomena and scientific theories in general. However, our ability to be able to formulate theories and laws which have explanatory success, and which have great predictive power, can indicate a growth in scientific knowledge. Otherwise, this success cannot be explained.

About the third point, he treats the problem of historical predictions very well. History, in essence, is not like Physics, which formulates natural laws with which we can predict certain specific phenomena. Instead, History looks for explanations to historical facts, and any "prediction" only aims to be a probable one and for a short term in the best of cases⁺. Human subjectivity and humans' decisions, along with our serious experimental limitations, imply that it is impossible to posit "historical laws" which are capable of predicting what will happen specifically (86-88). Maybe the best example of this is the predictive failure of materialist conception of history.

In his fourth point, Carr talks about the way in which Social Science and Natural Science develop. To treat this point, he compares constantly the discoveries made by Modern Physics, specially those who have to do with Quantum Physics, with Social Science. He makes an allusion to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle and the influence of the "observer" on quanta. This supposedly eliminates the dichotomy between "observer" and "observed", there is an interdependency between them (91-93). Carr compares it to Social Science and the influence of the social scientist over the object of his study, for him there is no "divorce" between the social

⁺ Carr is wrong when he says that scientists are not enthusiastic right now about talking about natural laws. The examples given by Carr (the apple that does not fall because it is picked up by someone, among other examples) are caricatures of what scientists wish to say by "natural laws" (119-120). What scientists say is that *given certain circumstances*, a phenomenon *has* to occur as a result of such conditions *along the laws of nature*.

scientist and what he is studying (93). He is aware that this analogy with Natural Science is “imperfect” (92), but they reveal some truths. However, we have to be very careful with this analogy. For example, not all physicists nor philosophers of science embrace the Copenhagen in Quantum Physics. Also, we have to remember that the influence of the “observer” over quanta has very specific results which are out of the “observer's” control: for example, if an “observer” observes a quantum, it will manifest as a particle, *but it will not manifest in any form other than a particle, even when the “observer” wishes to observe a wave.* The *objective* result is always the same. Also, as some scientists argue, it would be absurd to suppose the existence of the universe before humans existed to observe it, which would obviously imply an ontological independence of the physical objects from the “observers”. Carr does not suppose an absolute subjectivism in Social Science, but he wants to posit the existence of a “dialog” between subject and object (93-94). However, this “dialog” is very different from the “observer's” and the “observed” in Quantum Physics. This analogy made by Carr seems to be too weak. The dialog between the social scientist and his object of study is more alike the “dialog” between the natural scientists with his objects of study.

As we have seen, all of this discussion as developed in Edward Carr's *What is History?* deals one of the most important problems in Philosophy of History, and the relation between History and Natural Science. He sees a close relation between both disciplines, and he makes several questions about scientificity and the objectivity of History and Social Science. In this way, he contributes to his answer of the question “What is History?” while trying to stipulate the existence and importance of the objective and subjective in History. Without taking into account this “dialog” between both of these, we disregard a very important aspect that helps us look for the answer we are trying to give.

Works Cited

Carr, Edward Hallett. *What is History?* NY: Vintage Books, 1961.