Certainty in History

By E. BERNHEIM. Translated by E. J. THOMAS

(*Note.*—Ernst Bernheim was professor of history at the University of Greifswald in Prussia, and while there published his chief work. *Lehrbuch der historischen Methode* (Textbook of Historical Method, with reference to the most important sources and aids to the study of history, 4th ed., Leipzig, 1903). The following consists of extracts from the chapter on Methodology. He there deals with a problem which has so far been more prominent in the West than in the East, the inquiry whether we can rely on the trustworthiness of any historical records at all. This question became prominent in the 15th century at the Revival of Learning. At that time many ancient records had been discovered, and the very wealth of the new material showed that the records were not history in the sense that they could all be taken as faithful accounts of what had happened. There were too many contradictions. Hence some scholars of the time were inclined to reject the whole, and to say, "History is only a fiction that has been agreed upon." It is against this universal scepticism that Bernheim wrote, for naturally, as in any science, there may be doubts on particular questions. He shows how the material ought to be treated so that we can extract the main certainties from what is merely probable or possible. An example of this in the early history of Ceylon is the story of Vijaya and his ancestors. It may not be accepted as it stands, and yet no one doubts that the Aryan invasion really took place.

E. J. THOMAS.

THERE are two distinct difficulties in historical method, which may occasion doubts about the possibility of being able to arrive at sure results, and which have in fact repeatedly awakened secpticism about "the certainty of history." These doubts cannot be left unexamined, for it depends on their solution whether History can rightly be called a science, since the most essential mark of a science is that it transmits assured knowledge. The difficulties in question lie partly in the matter of history, and so are objective, and partly in our cognitive faculties, and thus are subjective. Accordingly the question is on the one hand about the objective, and on the other hand, the subjective possibility of certain knowledge from history.

1. The subjective possibility of certain historical knowledge.

We need only deal in passing with the ancient scepticism directed against the certainty of any human knowledge whatever, for in that case it is the question of a general theory of knowledge, with which we have not to deal. Further, this general scepticism is directed specially against natural science, seldom specially against history. Why so, however, it is of interest to know. That old familiar attack of scepticism against the faculty of knowledge is in fact valid: "It is not the things themselves, the phenomena of the outer world themselves, that we apprehend in our mind, but only the impressions

which we receive through our senses; who can tell us that these impressions correspond with reality?" This attack can evidently be turned just as well against the knowledge of history as against the knowledge of nature, for the former has also to deal with phenomena of the outer world. If the former has nevertheless occurred more rarely, the reason lies in the immediate relation of our minds to the objects of historical knowledge. For these objects are the actions of men, which proceed from human feeling, thinking, and willing, and they are of the same kind as that which day by day we experience inwardly in our own mental life as actual. This which is our own most intimate experience of our feeling, thinking, and willing, together with the actions springing therefrom as something real, convinces us too immediately and irrefutably of the reality of analogous phenomena among our fellowmen, and hence also among the men of the past, for us to have any room for doubt about it. Only one who goes so far as to assert that his own life is a dream and that his world is the imaginary picture of such a dream can deny the reality of history.

But it is just on this inner basis of historical knowledge that a more particular sceptical doubt is connected. We must in fact be convinced not only of the reality of the historical world, but we must conceive and understand the events as actions, i.e. as rationally connected expressions of human feeling, thinking, and willing. Hence we must so reproduce in ourselves the feelings and ideas of other men as if we ourselves felt and imagined them. Is that possible? Are we then at all certain that our fellow-men in the present and the past did not feel and think in some way quite differently from ourselves, so that it is an illusion to think that I can realise the feelings and thoughts of another? As a matter of fact such a certainty can never be logically proved. Here too we can only appeal to the practical experience of daily existence. But this furnishes us all the more immediately, by means of continually recurring proofs, with the inner conviction and certainty that we rightly understand the actions of the people around us with their motives, according to the analogy of our own actions and motives. This certainty, which is deeply and firmly based on general experience, the certainty of the analogy of the ways of feeling, thinking, and willing among mankind, or, as we might say, the identity of human nature, is the fundamental axiom of any historical knowledge. In fact, if there were or ever had been a people or an individual that did its thinking in a different kind of logic from ours, to whom hate was not hate and love was not love, its history would be even more impenetrable to us than the events in a beehive.

But the recognition of this axiom does not remove all doubts that have been raised. Even if we grant that we can understand the actions of the people living round about us, because we feel and think analogously, yet with some appearance of justification it might be doubted whether long vanished

races and distant peoples thought in the same way. Is not blood-revenge, which was a sacred duty to the primitive Germans, extremely detestable to us? Do we comprehend the asceticism of a mediaeval hermit or an Indian fakir? Are not numberless customs and views of the past entirely strange to us? Such a doubt can only mislead us as long as we do not make it clear that in all such cases we have to deal with what are only different expressions of the same spiritual and intellectual dispositions. We see it most easily in the sphere of thought. This is expressed quite otherwise in different times and among different peoples, in other forms of speech and language. It has continually other content; in fact, the whole direction of thinking, the way of operating with the elements of thought, are continually changing. Nevertheless, we never think of doubting that we can understand, *e.g.*, the works of Aristotle as well as his contemporaries. The reason is that in spite of all difference of expression and subject-matter the general processes of thought remain the same.

Quite correspondingly in the sphere of feeling the expressions and the content of the particular feelings differ according to peoples and times. But the general psychic processes at the basis remain unchangeable. For example, the modes of expressing feeling are very different when the Indian fakir mortifies himself, when the Greek in praying raises his hands to the gods, or the modern man kneels down humbly at the sound of the organ, and is absorbed in the thought of the All. But the feeling lying at the base, the devotion, is in its inner process one and the same. It is of course quite easy, owing to the external form in which feelings and ideas make their appearance, to be mistaken about their real nature. Hence one must methodically pay attention to the fact that they change and how they change, and be able, under the different modes of expression, to recognize the feelings and ideas lying at the basis.

There is still one doubt to be considered, which is closely connected with what has been said. Even though we have recognized that the emotional and ideational processes of all men are analogous, we do not wish to deny the difference of the individual human feelings and ideas, nor would it be possible to do so. This difference rests on the relative difference of the individualities not only of peoples and epochs, but also of individual persons. The constitution of our sense-organs results in no one of us perceiving an object of the outer world quite in the same way as another would. No one realises exactly the same factors of an external event as another contemporary observer. In the sphere of the natural sciences we can control and eliminate this defect of the human power of observation by repeatedly observing the same object or by bringing the same event repeatedly to our perception by experiment in order finally to have grasped all the factors equally. With the subject-matter of history that is mostly impossible. The actual events that it deals with, the events, are only once accessible to immediate observation, and they are usually

so complicated that even the immediate observer can observe only the smallest part with his sense-faculties, and only some of their results are lastingly to be observed as remains[1] and existing states. When that is the case one may with seeming justice doubt whether, in view of the diversity and incompleteness of individual apprehension, we are in a position to recognize the particular historical events in conformity with truth. But this doubt too, when more closely examined, involves its own refutation, for it is precisely from the relative diversity of individual apprehension that the actuality of those factors of the events that have been observed simultaneously and in the same way by two or more independent personalities, comes out with all the greater certainty, and the different incomplete observations can thus be mutually supplemented. The correspondence and the completing of a number of observations are, in the sphere of natural science, our means of control and protection against the one-sidedness and insufficiency of the individual's capacity of observation.

Besides this, the evidence of remains and of concurrent circumstances comes in, when they correspond with the other somewhat onesided observation of the events and many another item furnished by "higher criticism."[2] In addition there are the original conclusions that we may draw from the remains independently of a psychological interpretation of the facts and circumstances that caused them. We thus acquire a great stock of ascertained facts, sufficient to protect us against the sceptical generalization of that doubt. As remarked, higher criticism has further to set out the criteria of actuality. It has also to show us in what cases we cannot attain certainty, but must be satisfied with different degrees of probability. The recognition that there are such cases cannot on the whole affect the knowability of the historical events. It is something quite different from the sceptical doubt from which we started. Thus it appears here also as usual that scepticism is indeed based on correct

1. Bernheim uses the terms *remains* and *tradition* in a technical sense to distinguish the two great groups of historical material. *Remains* are everything that survives of the period in question, such as the kitchen-middens of early Europe, the language that the people spoke, the customs, laws, and institutions, works of art, tools, weapons, coins, and buildings, and finally acts of councils, decrees, registers of landed property, and inscriptions other than historical.

Tradition aims at recording the actual events, and is historical material proper. It may be pictorial (statues, maps, plans), oral (legends, anecdotes, ballads), or written (historical inscriptions, chronicles, genealogies, biographies, etc.).—E.J.T.

2. Criticism is divided into lower or outer and higher or inner criticism. The former deals with the questions, (1) whether the source is what it professes to be. If it is not, it is a falsification. (2) Whether the source is really what we have supposed it to be. If not, there is an error. By these means we arrive at the real sources, but they do not tell us whether the sources are recording the truth. They merely remove errors that may mislead us in interpreting the sources. To determine the truth of the resources requires higher criticism, which aims at determining whether the witnesses are trustworthy, probable, possible, or to be rejected.—E.J.T.

actual observations, but that it goes too far in doubting the possibility of any certain knowledge, while a scientific method only finds occasion for the application of special rules.

2. The objective possibility of certain historical knowledge.

The observation just made about the character of scepticism can be made still more clear in connexion with the attacks upon the matter of history, for these have rested upon entirely pertinent observations about the nature of historical material.

Even since the revival of the scientific spirit in the time of the Humanists, it was soon observed, as soon as historical writers began to be more sharply criticised, that their accounts of the same events, either owing to lack of knowledge or party prejudice were often enough contradictory. Now instead of asking, cannot the truth nevertheless be reached ? are there no ways and means of removing the sources of the mistakes ? the critics went too far by holding that in view of the untrustworthiness of the tradition it is not possible to acquire any certain knowledge of the past. We meet this view already in Agrippa of Nettesheim (1530), in his work *On the uncertainty and vanity of the sciences*, and it passed into France, where it was linked on to Pierre Bayle's critical and often sceptical investigations in his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1696) ; and chiefly among the versatile spirits of France it has repeatedly found approval, and has won its classical expression in the well known *bon mot*, " history is only a fiction agreed upon " (l'histoire n'est qu'une fable convenue), attributed to Fontenelle (b. 1657) the nephew of Corneille.

In a finer and lessened manner, but consequently more embracingly, this scepticism is again making itself felt, just because of the most keenly penetrating critical research, and it often steals upon us at our work with its doubts. These are the doubts that rest partly on the same basis as those discussed above, but which here are however directed at the state of the material. Not only in the case of historical writers but rather directly in the case of any of the various forms of historical tradition—the sources of history, as we generally call them—we come with keener critical penetration upon a limit, where owing to the character of the sources in question certainty itself ceases, and serious doubts arise. The reporters, orally or in writing, and the authors do not in fact record the events directly, but only so much as they have apprehended in their minds, and only in the way they have apprehended it, coloured and distorted by the manifold intentional and unintentional modifications of their subjective ways of apprehending and reflecting. Often enough we come upon a fact recorded only once by one untrustworthy reporter, or upon several

statements that contradict one another, without being in the position to hold that one of them is absolutely correct.

The remains of occurrences of course present us with immediate testimonies, but by no means always with the unconditioned reality. In documents and official acts, for example, the events often enough owing to some tendency are recorded in a way that does not correspond with the truth—secret instructions, articles of peace, which wholly or partially revoke or cancel the published ones, have disappeared. In general the material is often so defectively preserved that from the documents that happen to come to our knowledge we get a quite onesided or erroneous picture of the actual events. Further, the documents are often dated erroneously or not at all, or their purposes are unintelligible because they presuppose what we lack, the immediate knowledge of the points in question possessed by the interested parties who knew the inner motives. These are all valuable observations and quite to the point, but they are not calculated to lead us to a downhearted scepticism, as in the case of Sir Walter Raleigh, who according to the well-known anecdote is said to have thrown the second volume of his History of the World into the fire, because a street-affray before his window, which he had himself witnessed, was immediately reported by another eyewitness quite differently from the way in which he had himself observed it. These observations only suggest to us that we should treat the sources methodically, each according to their character, and apply methodical rules of control and precaution in order to recognize the actual events through all the obscurities. To be sure, in many particular cases we shall not be able to arrive at absolute certainty, yet even our methodical inferences and judgments about the reliability of the sources rest on general principles of experience, which in particular cases may be exceptionally crossed by individual divergences and incidental occurrences. In any case we shall not lose sight of the fact that we must exclude chance as far as possible.

But if we finally see that we cannot in all circumstances arrive at absolute certainty, we shall not give way to the sceptical generalisation that there is no certainty at all in history. Otherwise we must for that reason say the same of any other science. For can one name a single science in which, besides the certain knowledge, there are not also probable and hypothetical results ? And that the latter are any the more frequent in the case of history can only be for a moment the view of the investigator of details, when the more he penetrates into the particular he all the less arrives at established facts, and forgets that the main features of the events are undoubtedly established and remain established. Although the course of a battle, for example, may in detail arouse disparate and insoluble doubts, the actuality of the battle itself, its place, time, and result, are not at all affected. And thus in spite of any doubtful events, there remains a great stock of indubitably certain facts throughout history,

which we only overlook and undervalue because we have accustomed ourselves to treat them as taken for granted. To realize this properly let anyone take an outline of history or set of historical tables compiled more or less according to the principles of modern criticism. How few dates will one there find of which the certainty could be disputed! In view of this certain stock we can calmly grant and recognize that, as in all sciences, so also in history we must not rarely be contented with probabilities, often also with possibilities.

For that reason it is no good to give way to sentimental laments about the inadequacy of human knowledge. It is rather the task of the investigator to give himself and his public a clearly recognized and strict account as to how far he comes short of the limit of certainty, and to what degree his results are only probable. By " probable " we mean the facts in historical inquiry whose occurrence are supported by reports on indirect reasons more weighty than the reports or other reasons that are in favour of their non-occurrence. " Possible " we call the facts against the occurrence of which there are no direct or indirect reasons, while there are no positive grounds for assuming their occurrence. It is clear that according to the number and weight of the reasons on both sides and according to their relation to one another there can be very different degrees of probability, rising to an approach to certainty and down to mere possibility. The balancing and determination of these eventualities and different degrees of probability is everywhere a matter of scientific method, and we shall not neglect it. Whether the science of history has on the whole fewer certainties and more mere probabilities to show than other sciences is a consideration as difficult to settle as it is idle, which E. A. Freeman (The methods of historical study, p. 152) settles with the pertinent words: " Whether such evidence is enough to make history a science or the pathway to a science, is really a question of words and nothing else."[3]

3. This work of Freeman's consists of his introductory lectures given in 1884, while he was professor of History at Oxford. It treats in a vivid manner of some of the problems here discussed by Bernheim.—E.J.T.