There should by this time be no doubt that in the field of historical studies there is great variety in the materials studied and that different historians often set themselves quite different tasks when dealing with these materials. Therefore, when one raises the question of the extent to which historical knowledge can be objective, and what the limits of such objectivity may be, one cannot expect a single answer that will be equally applicable to all types of historical inquiry. Instead, we shall have to consider the answers that are likely to be most adequate in the various sorts of inquiry with which historians have been chiefly concerned. First, however, it will be useful to consider some of the different ways in which the concept of objectivity has been used.
When the question of the objectivity of historical knowledge is raised, the issue is one concerning the accuracy or reliability of that knowledge; but not all uses of the concept of objectivity are equally concerned with this problem, which has to do with the truth of what is actually affirmed or denied in the judgments we make. Instead, the concept is often used in ways that do not refer directly to the content of a particular judgment, but call attention instead to the conditions under which that judgment was made and by which it may have been influenced. It is in this sense that we say that a person has been objective if he has tried not to let self-interest or fear or anger influence his judgment. Similarly, a person may be said to be objective if he is not prejudiced for or against specific individuals because of their class, their nationality, their religion, or their race. A person’s judgments may also be regarded as objective if he does not exaggerate the virtues of those to whom he is attached, nor exaggerate the failings of those who may have injured him. In all such cases, “objectivity” has to do with keeping personal considerations, sentiments, and emotions from warping one’s judgment, whatever may be the object one is judging. While these forms of objectivity often have a bearing on the truth or falsity of a person’s beliefs, it may turn out that a person has judged truly even when he has not, in this sense, been objective; and he may have judged falsely even though he has. Therefore, when the concept of objectivity is used in this sense, it should not be tied too closely to the question of the truth or falsity of that which is believed. Similarly, the criterion of objectivity may be applied in assessing moral judgments: We challenge the validity of a moral judgment when it seems to spring from self-interest, bias, or special emotional ties to those who are judged. This attempt to purge moral judgments of subjectivity is characteristic of what has been called “the moral point of view,” and it is a recognized element in all moral theories, whether they are classified as cognitive or as noncognitive. Since, according to noncognitivists, truth and falsity are not applicable to moral judgments, it is once again clear that the concepts of objectivity and subjectivity are sometimes applied with reference to the conditions under which a judgment is made and are not necessarily tied to the question of whether what is asserted is taken as true or as false. Furthermore, we may note that the concept of objectivity is often used with reference to the way in which a person conducts himself in a particular situation, suppressing prejudices, sentiments, or personal
inclinations, and in these cases, too, we are not primarily concerned with the truth or falsity of his beliefs. For example, we may hold that a judge did or did not display objectivity in the way in which he conducted himself in court, or in his charge to the jury; similarly, a teacher may or may not be objective in his assignment of grades. In such cases "objectivity" is clearly not used with reference to what one may justifiably claim that one knows.

These facts have not, however, been recognized in most discussions of the problem of historical knowledge. Many controversies have arisen, and have been needlessly prolonged, because it has been assumed that the basic issue is one concerning "objectivity," taken in this sense. Thus, it has been supposed that the truth claims of any historical account must be assessed in terms of the extent to which the historian's work has been insulated from all personal considerations, sentiments, or emotions connected with the events he attempts to understand and depict. This has been unfortunate, since "objectivity"—when interpreted in this sense—does not provide any test of whether or not a statement or set of statements is true or false, either in history or elsewhere.

There is a further, quite different way in which the concept of objectivity is frequently used, but it, too, lacks any necessary connection with the question of the reliability of our knowledge. What is referred to as objective, in this second sense, does not have to do with whether our beliefs are free from the influence of our likes and dislikes, of self-interest, or of our emotions; instead, it involves a contrast between what is attributed to the knower and what exists whether or not it is known. Taking the distinction between that which is "objective" and that which is "subjective" in this sense, philosophers have often included within the subjective all that falls within the realm of human experience, as distinct from whatever—if anything—exists independently of being experienced. Not infrequently this has led them to identify the subjective with "the mental." These particular uses of the subjective-objective distinction are more often found in philosophic discussions than in other contexts, but it is also the case that in everyday life we commonly distinguish between what is subjective in the sense of being "ours," and what is objective in the sense that it is independent of us. For example, the tickle in our nostrils before we sneeze, the soreness of our muscles after unaccustomed exercise, the throbbing of an injured finger, the shooting pain of a headache are all experienced as subjective, as belonging peculiarly to us. In these cases we localize what is experienced as being
within our own bodies. These, then, are "subjective" states, and we do not regard them as having existence independently of our experiencing them. Similarly, we regard our thoughts, dreams, and memory images as subjective, rather than as existing independently of us. With respect to the latter instances, we are not even aware of any bodily conditions upon which they presumably depend; thus we are apt to take them as the clearest examples of that which is subjective, and only subjective. On the other hand, what we see or touch we take to be independent of us. In philosophy, however, there has been a long-standing tradition holding that all that is available to us as a foundation for knowledge is the data of consciousness, taken as subjective states. Most phenomenalists and many idealists belong within this tradition. Those who reject phenomenalism and reject subjective forms of argument in favor of idealism take the opposed view, which is also adopted by most laymen with respect to the foundations of human knowledge: They assign priority to what we immediately identify with the objective pole of our experience.

Fortunately, this epistemological question need not be debated here. What is important to note is that discussions of historical knowledge have sometimes become entangled by it. This is evident, for example, in Croce. His insistence that all history is contemporary history rested on his view that artifacts and documents, considered as objective facts, are without significance until the historian who examines them brings them to life through his imaginative re-creation of them. Thus, for him, none of the data with which historians deal are ultimately independent of the subjects by whom they are known. A similar emphasis on subjectivity, in this sense, is to be found in Collingwood’s treatment of what constitutes historical facts. Unlike facts concerning nature, it is the "inner side" of events, not their outer, objective forms of expression, that is of primary importance to the historian, who—according to Collingwood—must grasp this inner core through thinking the thoughts that were responsible for what occurred.

On the other hand, many who have discussed the problem of historical knowledge would not accept any such emphasis on the subjective, insofar as the basic materials for historical construction are concerned. For example, although Charles A. Beard frequently cited Croce as a source and an ally of his theory, Beard regarded the artifacts, documents, and many atomic facts concerning the past as objectively given. It was only when he discussed how the historian makes use of such facts in constructing a historical account that
Beard approaches a Crocean position; it was his claim that the way in which a historian synthesizes these facts is a reflection of his experience and is not to be construed as a reflection of independent, objective relationships among the facts themselves. Thus, even a theory that assumes that the ultimate data for any historical account are objectively given may nonetheless claim that any historian's way of relating these facts to one another will be "subjective," rather than depending on the nature of the facts themselves.

It may seem as if the question of what is "subjective" and what is "objective," taken in the sense of what is contributed by the subject through his own experience, and what is independent of that experience, would be the basic issue concerning the objectivity of historical knowledge. This, however, is not the case. In every field of knowledge the background and experience of the investigator will affect his investigations. For example, it is only because of his background and experience that a scientist discerns the problems with which he is to deal; furthermore, whatever solutions he proposes will have been suggested to him through what he already knows, or believes that he knows. In spite of this, the scientist's experience, interpreted as a subjective fact concerning him, is never taken as adequate testimony for the truth or falsity of his interpretation of the events and relationships he claims to have established. In short, whenever we claim knowledge of anything other than of our own immediate experience there is an appeal to that which is regarded as being independent of that experience. This is true not only with respect to our knowledge of nature, as some have been inclined to hold; it is true also of our knowledge of others, and of how they experience the world. In claiming that we know the beliefs or intentions or ideals of other persons, we are claiming to know something other than what we ourselves are experiencing. Thus, whenever the objectivity of some form of knowledge is being discussed, the contrast between the "subjective" and the "objective"—in the present sense of these terms—is irrelevant. Even though subjective facts concerning the experience of any investigator may help to explain how some of his judgments came to be made, they will fail to settle any questions concerning the accuracy and reliability of what these judgments affirm or deny.

In addition to the two senses of the concept of objectivity with which we have so far been concerned, there is a third way in which it is often used. It is this sense that is directly relevant to our problem.

A judgment can be said to be objective not merely because it was not due to self-interest, prejudice, or the like, and not merely because
it refers to events and relationships that existed independently of the
experience of the person judging, but because we regard its truth as
excluding the possibility that its denial can also be true. The objectiv-
ity of a judgment, taken in this sense, constitutes a basic principle
that is presupposed whenever we seek to establish the reliability of
our judgments concerning matters of fact, including facts concerning
those forms of direct experience that are interpreted as being subjec-
tive rather than objective. This principle is obviously related to the so-
called laws of thought, and when applied to the problem of knowl-
dge it may be stated quite simply as follows: Our knowledge is
objective if, and only if, it is the case that when two persons make
contradictory statements concerning the same subject matter, at least
one of them must be mistaken. It then becomes necessary to say, in
any particular area of discourse, how one is to establish which of the
contradictory statements is mistaken, or to adduce reasons for hold-
ing that both are to be rejected. As we have seen, this cannot be
decided on the basis of the attitudes, emotions, predispositions, or
prejudices of the person or persons responsible for one or another of
the contradictory judgments. Nor can a decision be reached by citing
those elements in a given historian’s background and experience that
influenced whatever judgments he may have made, since all histori-
ans, as well as all scientists, judges, or other persons, are influenced
by their backgrounds and experience. Whatever test must be used
must in all cases be directly applied to what is being affirmed or
denied, not to whatever real or supposed influences may have led to
that affirmation or denial. When this is recognized, at least some of
the conventional arguments for historical relativism, and against the
objectivity of historical knowledge, lose much of their force.

In what follows I shall attempt to show that when one clears away
the preceding misunderstandings, the interlocking connections among
the data with which historians are concerned permit us to hold
that the cumulative results achieved through their individual inquiries
can, in most cases, be regarded as establishing knowledge that is ob-
jective in this third sense of that term. To be sure, there are innumer-
able individual cases in which this contention appears open to
challenge, but in many such cases, as we shall see, conflicts arise
because the referents of the two sets of judgments have not been
spelled out with sufficient care. In such cases, the two conflicting
judgments may not in fact be contradictory, and as soon as the defect
has been remedied both judgments can be accepted without violating
the principle of objectivity. Nevertheless, as we shall also see, there
are cases in which the opposing judgments do contradict each other, and a decision concerning the truth or falsity of one or the other cannot be reached unless one can appeal to some well-authenticated general theory that lends its support to one rather than to the other.

II

In what follows, I shall not initially be concerned with any differences that may exist between general and special histories insofar as the problem of objectivity is concerned; instead, I shall first examine questions that arise in any form of historical inquiry, whether its dominant structural form is sequential, explanatory, or interpretive, and regardless of the subject matter with which it deals. The most obvious of these general questions, and the one with which it is simplest to deal, is the question of how, if at all, the fact that different historical accounts deal with events of different dimensions, rather than examine all events on the same scale, is related to the issue of objectivity. A second, analogous question arises because different historical accounts often deal with different facets of the same events, and this may seem to raise questions concerning their objectivity. Our answers to these questions will help lay the groundwork for a consideration of the more difficult questions with which, in subsequent sections, we shall be concerned.

To take up first the issues arising with respect to differences in scale, it will be recalled that I used that notion to refer not only to differences in the time span covered in different historical accounts, but also to differences in how restricted or how extensive the subject under investigation may have been. Thus, I not only contrasted the scale of a history of the United States with a history confined to the events in the Civil War period, but I also contrasted a history of the United States with a history of one of its states or one of its municipalities. At first glance, there may seem to be a fundamental difference between the problems that arise when one uses the concept of scale in these two ways, one of which is temporal while the other is, so to speak, geographical. It would seem that every event of historical interest falling within the Civil War period is also an event belonging to the history of the United States, although not every event that happened in Georgia, or in Atlanta, can equally well be said to belong within United States history—however important it may have been in the political life of Georgia, or for the economic development
of Atlanta. Nevertheless, no ultimate distinction of this kind can be
drawn. As I have indicated in first introducing the concept of differ-
ences in scale, one does not expect maps drawn on different scales to
convey the same information: If they did, there would be no reason
for a shift in scale. And this holds no less when we are dealing with
shifts in the time span covered in a historical account than it does
when we shift attention from any other more extensive subject to
some subject that is, in a sense, included within it.

Consider the latter sort of case first. That which a political his-
torian dealing with a particular state wishes to trace will be changes
in its political life, not in the political life of the United States.
Changes in the latter may drastically affect changes in the life of any
or all state governments, as when various powers become concen-
trated in the federal government; and there also are times at which
what occurs in the political life of a particular state may greatly
influence what occurs on the level of the federal government, as is the
case when an issue arising in one particular state has an impact on
the issues or the outcome of a national election. Nevertheless, a
historical study that has as its subject matter the political life of a
state is not a study of the history of the United States, and a study of
changes in the politics and economic conditions in one municipality
within a state is not to be confused with a history of that state. This, I
should suppose, would be entirely clear. It is equally true, however,
that a history of each of the states does not serve as a history of the
United States, and a series of local histories does not constitute any
state’s history. The fact that histories of these types interlock at many
points and that studies of the one must often rely on studies of the
other should not lead us to confuse them: In each case the specific
subject matter is different, and this holds true whether the histories
are primarily sequential, explanatory, or interpretive.

Precisely the same situation holds with respect to histories that
differ in time scale. A historian dealing with the Civil War period
must trace the political, military, and economic events occurring
within that period; he must understand and follow their consequences
during the Civil War itself. Naturally, some of these events will have
had further, long-run consequences; others will not, and in that case
only their immediate impact on the course of the war will be of
importance. When, however, a specific event such as Lincoln’s
Emancipation Proclamation has relevance to what happened in sub-
sequent periods of American history, that event will find a place in
histories that use a different time scale. These other histories, which
are not histories of the Civil War itself, need not go back and trace the various causes of the event whose subsequent influence they are tracing, nor need they describe its original context in detail, both of which a Civil War historian would be expected to do: It will be sufficient for them to consider it, and its consequences, in the framework of the longer time span with which they are concerned.

Putting the matter more generally, the facts with which historians are concerned when they work on different scales are not “the same facts,” even though they relate to the same actual occurrences. There is nothing odd about this. Take, for example, almost any important episode in a person’s life. One may view such an episode in either of two ways: One may describe it and analyze it, treating it as a particularly memorable, self-contained episode, or one can view that same episode in a larger context, as a turning point in that person’s life. When one views such an episode in these different ways, which features appear as most significant may be quite different, since the same episode is being viewed in different contexts. Relativists are apt to seize on this fact as establishing the contention that any historical account is dominated by the historian’s own interests, which lead him to view an event in one context rather than in another. The existence of the influence of one’s interests on the context in which one happens, or chooses, to view an occurrence is indisputable. What must not be overlooked, however, is the fact that these different approaches are not in the least contradictory, since the truth of each is compatible with the truth of the other. To be sure, if any historian were to assume that his account could capture everything that occurred with respect to his subject—if he were to assume that his written work could replicate in all detail the actual occurrence itself, making a historical work equivalent to what Beard termed “history-as-actuality”—then the existence of multiple histories dealing with the same occurrences would entail their being contradictory. Yet, I know of no historian who can be said to have been guilty of such a foolhardy assumption. It would involve confusing a written work with those events to which the work refers. To be sure, some historians have been misled by some philosophers, and have assumed that when a document refers to a fact concerning an occurrence it can be taken to be true, and not a vicious abstraction, only if it refers at the same time to all aspects of that occurrence. This, however, is simply to confuse what is a fact concerning an occurrence with that occurrence itself. While it is truly a fact—based on testimony there is no reason to doubt—that Charles A. Beard died on September 2, 1948, one
need know neither the causes nor the circumstances of his death for that to be a fact, even though it is the case that when any death occurs there are causes that brought it about, and brought it about at one place rather than another, and with or without others in attendance. While it is sometimes important to investigate such causes and circumstances, the fact that death did occur on that date will not be altered, whatever may be the outcome of these further investigations.

A similar but somewhat more complex situation obtains when we turn our attention from differences in the scale of the events with which different historians deal to differences in the facets of the events that may occupy their attention.

In some cases it is fairly obvious that two different historical accounts that deal with different facets of the same occurrences are more likely to supplement one another than to clash. For example, a military historian's account of a war and a political historian's account of the war period can be expected to mesh, since political decisions are frequently linked with military successes or failures, and military successes or failures may depend upon political decisions. To be sure, these historians—like others—may disagree with respect to some points that each discusses, but this will not be because they are dealing with different facets of the same occurrences; nor should we assume that the judgments of one are more reliable and more in conformity with all of the evidence simply because he is concerned with one of these facets rather than with the other. In this case, as in others, the evidence cited, along with other evidence that might be cited or that might be discovered, is the basis on which the controversy is to be resolved. What is important to note is not the existence of any such disagreements but the fact that neither the political nor the military historian can adequately cultivate his own specialty without relying on data and interpretations with which the other is primarily concerned. What holds in this obvious case holds also, in greater or lesser degree, in other cases—even, as we have seen, with respect to the ways in which a special history of, say, Dutch painting relates to the political and social history of the Netherlands during that period. If one thinks of the different facets of a society and the elements entering into its culture as different perspectival views of one very complex object, the advantage of multiplying the perspectives from which one views that object becomes obvious. This is analogous to the fact that if one is to learn the true shape of a mountain one must be able to see it from many angles, since no one
perspectival view will, by itself, reveal its dimensions and its contours. So it is with multifaceted materials with which general historians, at least, are required to deal.

Trouble develops, of course, when a historian contends that one perspectival view is more important than any of the others because he believes that facet of societal life to be more basic, or more revealing, than any other. Such claims may be made with respect to specific societies: that in this society, in this period, certain events—economic or political or religious—had a preponderating role in shaping the society and the changes it underwent. It is in fact almost inescapable for those concerned with general history to make assumptions of this sort as to which of the facets of a particular society were of greatest significance in ensuring its stability or in bringing about change in it. It need not, however, be assumed that there was only one such facet, rather than several, that played a crucial role in these respects. While different historians will often disagree on such questions, there exists the possibility of going far toward the resolution of their disputes through the examination of evidence as to how events that were primarily of one type influenced events of other types, and the extent to which the latter were influenced by the former.2 While such disputes may not be readily resolved to the satisfaction of the disputants, the fact that unresolved differences of opinion are to be found in this area should not lead one to accept a relativistic conclusion, any more, say, than unresolved disputes between medical practitioners concerning the causes of an illness and disputes as to how best to treat it should lead one to hold that in medicine there are no criteria on the basis of which such disputes can in principle be settled. In such cases we do not hold that each practitioner, given his background, interests, and preconceptions, is equally entitled to his own view as to the relative importance of the factors that are admittedly present in the situation concerning which they disagree; instead, we assume that there are ways in which further knowledge can lead to a resolution of the issue.

While adequate in many simpler cases, this answer may break down when the issue does not concern which of several facets is of primary importance in a specific society at a particular time, but involves a theory that in all societies, at all times, certain facets are basic while all others are dependent upon them. Theories of this type are predicated upon a view of the nature of a society and upon beliefs concerning the factors responsible for societal and cultural change. In the history of sociological theory there are many examples of such
theories, and many philosophers of history who would not consider themselves sociologists also represent the tendency to generalize in this fashion. In either case it is important to examine how general theories influence attempts to understand historical events and what relevance they have for the problem of objectivity.

III

It may safely be said that there is no universally agreed upon meaning of the term “theory” such that all philosophers of science will distinguish in the same way between what they regard as a law and what they regard as a theory. Insofar as my own use of the term “law” is concerned, the reader will recall that I held that a law formulates an invariant functional relationship between factors present in a variety of concrete occurrences (chapter 5, section 2). No one, I take it, would regard such a characterization as a correct formulation of what we designate as a theory. Nor is a theory simply a generalization from a set of experimental laws, since the acceptance of a theory may precede the discovery of those observations and laws that serve as partial confirmatory evidence for it. Furthermore, it is to be noted that direct observations and experimental findings may in many cases be explained through appealing to different theories; therefore, no theory is rigidly entailed by some particular set of data. Speaking generally, though nontechnically, a theory (as I shall use that term) is a widely applicable hypothesis that serves as an explanatory framework through which a variety of observations and—ideally—a variety of laws can be connected with one another. The unifying function of a theory depends upon the theorist’s ability to show that the basic concepts and assumptions of that theory can be applied to a wide variety of phenomena and can usefully serve to connect a diverse set of apparently independent laws.

In the physical sciences, the particulate theory of matter is one example of a theory, taken in this sense, for it is applicable to a host of observations and serves to connect a wide variety of experimental laws that are not known to be deducible from any one more general law. In the biological sciences, on the other hand, there were no already well-established laws that Darwin’s theory was called upon to connect, but there were many apparently independent phenomena that he was able to bring together in a single explanatory system. He accomplished this by first assuming that in any new generation some
individuals will possess characteristics not possessed by their ancestors, and by assuming that there is a selective process operative in nature as well as under domestication. On the basis of these assumptions, and by using the concepts of a “struggle for existence” and “the survival of the fittest,” his theory served to connect many observed facts concerning the distribution of plants and of animals; it was also able to account for the existence of similarities and of differences between apparently different species; it also offered a consistent interpretation of the fossil record.

Similarly, historians and social scientists have repeatedly sought to establish connections among broad ranges of historical facts by means of theories concerning societal organization and the factors responsible for societal change. Marxism is one example of such a theory; so too were the evolutionary doctrines of Comte and of Spencer, various forms of functionalist theory in anthropology, and the philosophies of history of Vico, Spengler, and Toynbee. In fact there are so many such theories, most of which are mutually inconsistent, and so few of which have seriously sought confirmation through an examination of a sufficiently broad survey of available data, that historians are likely to hold that no general theories of societal organization and change have a proper place in historical inquiries. This, however, is a misguided claim. Historical inquiries do not ever proceed without at least an implicit acceptance by the historian of one or another set of theoretical commitments—as Werner Sombart remarked, “No theory, no history.” Among such commitments will be those that characterize the historian’s view of the nature of societies and of the factors affecting social stability and change. For example, some historians envision social institutions as reflections of the concrete aims and ideal goals of those who share in the ongoing life of a society, and they therefore seek explanations of stability and change in the values and choices of individual persons. Others—usually termed “holists”—deny that the aims of individuals determine the institutions under which they live; instead, they regard institutions as developing and changing to meet the needs of the society in which they are embedded, regardless of the goals that individuals may wish to attain. Such differences in the basic conceptions of a society (to which, of course, there are alternatives) will deeply affect the sorts of inquiries that different historians are likely to undertake, and also the ways in which they explain what has taken place in the past. So, too, will differences in their views regarding the degree to which various aspects of life in a society form a single
integrated whole. Some historians expect a very high degree of free play in the institutional and cultural life of any society, whereas others expect that changes in some one institution, or in some aspect of culture, will invariably be correlated with changes in all others. Some historians will not, of course, hold either of these extreme views. They will work within a different theoretical framework, believing that different societies display different degrees of unity in their organization and that no one society need at all times display the same degree of unity. Not all of the relevant theories one might cite are as general as these. I have used them as illustrations to show that even though historians usually look with grave suspicion on the utility of the more specific theories that have been formulated by social scientists to explain societal organization and change, they cannot themselves escape taking a stand with respect to some general theoretical issues concerning the nature of societies and the factors involved in societal change. To this extent at least, there is justification for Sombart's dictum "No theory, no history."

The question now arises as to whether the presence of such theories necessarily limits the degree of objectivity to be found in any historical work. The answer will depend upon the extent to which the theory informing a historical work is itself capable of being tested for its truth. If the general theory one accepted were to depend upon one's attitude toward the world, as the economist J. C. R. Dow claimed in reviewing a book concerned with the work of J. M. Keynes, it would not be plausible to maintain that objectivity is attainable. On the other hand, even if a general theory cannot be confirmed through showing that a particular set of facts is deducible from it and not from any of its rivals, it may still be possible to show that the total weight of the evidence favors one general theory rather than another; and this is all that one can expect by way of confirmation for a general theory (as distinct from an experimental law), even in the natural sciences.

In most forms of general history—to which I shall for the moment continue to confine myself—it is indeed possible to marshal convincing evidence in favor of, or against, some general theories. When the theories are as broad as those concerning the roles of individuals and of institutions in fostering stability and change, a comparison of different situations in a wide variety of different societies would surely show that neither extreme view can be rendered plausible by the evidence. In this case, as in the question of the unity of a society, practicing historians would be inclined to take the middle road. Here,
too, they are apt to think that they are not espousing any theory at all, simply because their theory does not propose that whatever is true of one society at one time must also be true of all societies at all times. What it does propose—and what permits one to consider it as a theory—is the view that in all societies at all times one must be prepared to take into account both institutional factors and the actions of individuals if one is to understand stability or change. Similarly, the view that the nature and changes of one institution often have repercussions on other institutions is a theory that offers historians guidance in their attempts to explain many of the events they are called upon to explain. If a historian doubts that this constitutes a theory—holding that it is merely common sense—he need only consider the extent to which earlier general histories of nations were written primarily—and sometimes almost exclusively—in terms of political life. Implicit in those histories was a theory of societal organization, whether it was articulated or not, according to which the institutions of government were the most basic feature in the society, and societal change could be understood almost without reference to changes in any other institutions, except for the role played by religious differences in political life. The fact that this politically oriented theory has now broken down does not mean that an older form of history has merely been supplanted by a new and different form. There has been an advance. Political history is still written, and is very well written, but since it is now recognized to be merely one form of historical writing, dealing with only one facet of societal life, historians are more alert to the possible effects of other institutions on government, and the explanations of political change that they are in a position to offer have proved to be richer and deeper than those previously offered when “society” was equated with “the state.” For those acquainted with the relevant data from anthropology, or for those interested in the Middle Ages, it can scarcely be doubted that it is a mistake to assume that at all times and in all places political events should be allowed to occupy center stage whenever a historian seeks to explain either stability or change. Thus, theories that were once very much taken for granted are given up when historians extend the range of their interests to include evidence previously unknown or neglected.

To be sure, some theories may be dogmatically held and be very resistant to change, especially if they are connected with metaphysical commitments or with basic political-ethical convictions. It is then that they reflect what J. C. R. Dow labeled “rival attitudes toward the
world." Yet even the most basic attitudes toward the world are sometimes drastically altered because of an accumulation of new data that they are unable to absorb. Unfortunately, many general theories of society and social change have defended themselves against this possibility by defining as relevant only such data as conform to their initial interpretive scheme. Among philosophers of history, for example, it has commonly been the case that the only facts or periods or even geographic areas considered to be relevant to the truth of the theory are those that illustrate whatever grand design the philosopher of history takes to be paramount in importance; all else is dismissed as insignificant "in the long run." This tendency is clearly evident in Hegel, but it is no less true of Comte and of Spencer, who held the discipline of history, as practiced by historians, in contempt. Marxist theory has often (and sometimes with justice) been condemned for the same fault, although some formulations of that theory involve an attempt to bring it into line with a wider range of facts than Marx himself was able to take into account. Even in the case of an interpretive history, where the theme of the study dictates what materials are to be included and at what points the main emphasis is to fall, it is possible (as I have already suggested in chapter 2, section 3) to assess its adequacy by checking its interpretation against further ranges of fact. Thus, while I acknowledge that there often are limits to objectivity in theory-dominated works, it is not true that the impact of a general theory, or point of view, makes it impossible, in principle, to justify or to refute an interpretation of the past.

When, however, we turn from any form of general history to special histories, and consider the question of objectivity with respect to them, the problem becomes more complicated. Not only will the special historian, like the general historian, be forced to make certain theoretical assumptions concerning the factors that induce societal and cultural change, but his work will also presuppose some characterization of the particular subject matter with which his special history is to be concerned. For example, an art historian’s work presupposes at least an implicit theory of what separates art from non-art. Similarly, underlying any history of philosophy there will be at least a tacit definition of philosophy that serves to justify labeling some persons as philosophers, but withholding that designation from others who may to some extent share their intellectual, moral, and religious concerns. We have already noted that the same situation obtains with respect to the problem of what constitutes “literature.”
Sometimes the definition of a concept such as "literature" derives from a general theory of the arts; in other cases it represents a program or a tradition to which the particular literary historian (knowingly or not) tends to adhere. In neither case can such disputes be readily resolved, even in principle. In this field, therefore, there is some reason to doubt that objectivity can be attained. This point is worthy of further comment.

Insofar as the definition of what, for example, constitutes "literature" rests on a general theory of the arts, the major difficulty lies in the fact that the particular instances usually used as evidence for or against such a theory are not neutral facts whose relevance is beyond dispute. When there is a dispute that is fundamental, involving two different general theories of the arts, each disputant will be inclined to reject the counterexamples that his opponent will be most inclined to cite, precisely because his definition of his subject matter differs from the one his opponent accepts. Thus, if the evidence upon which one draws in support of a general theory of the arts is confined to the particular instances that the theory attempts to interpret, the quarrel between rival theories cannot be resolved: Each will in the end be arguing circularly for his own theory. What holds with respect to the difficulty of establishing objectivity in the field of literary history, because of its dependence on a general theory, also holds, mutatis mutandis, in all other forms of special history. Thus, we have here approached the possible limits of objectivity in one form of historical inquiry.

In those cases in which different definitions of literature are not primarily dependent upon the acceptance of one or another general theory, but rest upon familiarity with an interest in different traditions, or upon commitments to different programs as to what is worthy of encouragement and what is not, the limits of objectivity are also reached. In such cases, so long as each of the opposed historians maintains his position, each will be writing a history that is biased by the nature of the works with which he is already best acquainted and of those that he prefers. When one takes into account the fact that literary forms and modes of expression have undergone radical changes over time, one can appreciate how pervasive such biases among literary historians are likely to be: A literary history written at one time, in the light of the then known past, will almost certainly differ in orientation from one written with full awareness of the changes in genre and in style that subsequently occurred. What is in
this respect true of literary historians is no less true of those concerned with other forms of special history, such as the history of philosophy, of science, or of art.

It may seem that the factors I have mentioned as limiting objectivity in special histories would necessarily limit the objectivity of any general history as well. Such an argument might be constructed along the following lines. Just as a literary historian's definition of the special subject matter with which he is concerned determines the content of his work, so the general historian selects certain types of event with which he chooses to deal and constructs his account to include events of this type, while excluding others. And just as the literary historian is limited by the tradition in which he stands, or by programmatic aims as to what is and what is not of importance in literature, so the general historian tends to be confined within one or another historical tradition, or to be influenced by one or another programmatic aim. Finally, it might be argued, the field of general history has undergone many radical changes in its style and in its concerns, and much of it now differs profoundly from historical works that were produced in Greece or Rome, in the Renaissance, or even in the Enlightenment; to expect these different ways of writing history to yield compatible results is simply quixotic.

However, it is mistaken to draw this parallel between general histories and special histories. It will be recalled that I emphasized the fact that general histories have as their subject matter particular societies, which are continuing entities existing in a region over a particular period of time, whereas the subject matter of any special history is a class of resembling cultural products, many of which are related through strands of influence but which do not comprise a unitary ongoing entity, as does a society (cf. chapter 1, section 3). As a consequence of this difference, a general historian cannot exercise the same freedom in delimiting what will and will not enter into his account. He must take a society as it is, analyzing it in terms of connections that exist among its component parts. Thus, even though a general historian may define his task as one in which he will deal directly with only one facet of a society and not with the society as a whole, he is not thereby set free of constraints as to what must be included within his account: He will have to recognize whatever other factors may have directly affected the changes with which he seeks to deal. When, on the other hand, a special historian defines his subject matter, he does not necessarily place himself under the same types of
objectivity. He may, for example, decide to deal with a certain body of works produced by some writers, but not others, setting himself the task of tracing the similarities and differences in their interests and styles, and comparing them with respect to the esteem in which they were held. He may or may not choose to account for whatever similarities or differences he finds among them, or in their popularity; one cannot say that given the task he has set himself, he is obligated to do so. Thus, the criteria we use when estimating the work of a special historian may shift according to the sort of task he has set himself; we can demand that he do well whatever he has set himself to do, but we cannot criticize him for not having done something else. In the case of a general historian, however, the situation is different. He purports to understand and depict what was in fact true of some society, or true of some aspect of it; the scale on which he has chosen to work will of itself determine what he should include—as well as what he need not include—in his account. If, for example, his account purports to deal with some segment of the political history of a nation, and if he did not take into account the impact of some religious or economic changes on the changes that occurred in the political life of the period, we do not say that he need not have done so; we hold that his account stands in need of correction, even though we may still admire his ability on other grounds. In short, even though we recognize that different general histories reflect different assumptions, we demand a reconciliation of their differences, rather than accepting both. On the other hand, in the field of special histories, we demand a reconciliation only of differences among accounts that proceed on the basis of the same assumptions, or on the basis of assumptions that are compatible with each other. Unfortunately, it is often the case that different historians of literature, or different cultural historians generally, proceed on the basis of incompatible assumptions, and when this occurs a limit of objectivity has been reached: In comparing two such accounts, we cannot say that at least one of the ways in which the past was depicted must be rejected. It will be recalled that it is precisely in this sense—and not in any other—that the concept of objectivity is being used in this discussion.

The contrast just drawn between the objectivity to be expected in general histories and what may be said of the unresolved differences between different special histories has a bearing on recent discussions of the role of colligation in history. The term "colligation" was apparently first used in a specifically philosophic context by William
Whewell in his discussions of method in the natural sciences; it was W. H. Walsh who first introduced it into discussions of historiography. Whewell had characterized colligation in saying, “Facts are bound together by the aid of suitable Conceptions. This part of the formation of our knowledge I have called the Colligation of Facts: and we may apply this term to every case in which, by an act of the intellect, we establish a precise connexion among the phenomena which are presented to our senses.” In his use of the term, Whewell was referring to the step in scientific method that he regarded as intervening between the establishment of facts and our inferences to hypotheses: Colligation involved bringing appropriate concepts to bear on what had been observed. Thus, it was a step preliminary to the formation of the hypotheses that were to explain what had been observed. Walsh, on the other hand, does not use the concept of colligation to apply to a step preliminary to explanation; he views it as the way in which historians transform their data into “significant narratives” that do not stand in need of further explanation. He says: “Different historical events can be regarded as going together to constitute a single historical process, a whole in which they are all parts and in which they belong together in a specially intimate way. And the first aim of the historian, when he is asked to explain some event or other, is to see it as part of such a process, to locate it in its context by mentioning other events with which it is bound up.” According to Walsh, it is through the introduction of “dominant concepts and leading ideas” that the historian moves from a merely “plain narrative” of what happened to a “significant narrative” in which we are able to see why it happened, that is, to see it as a part within a larger intelligible whole. Whether this position leads to a subjectivistic or to an objectivistic position depends, of course, on the factors that determine the nature of these intelligible wholes. On Walsh’s view, the concepts by means of which the historian colligates his facts are concepts such as “the Industrial Revolution” or “the Enlightenment,” which he claims are “arbitrary and not natural units.” Thus, according to Walsh, it is the historian’s own choice of concepts, rather than the data with which he works, that underlies the kinds of explanations he offers of the events with which he deals. This in itself is sufficient to undermine any claim to the objectivity of historical knowledge.

On the basis of what has already been said concerning the role that definitions play in delimiting the materials with which historians of “art” or “literature” or “philosophy” deal, there would be much to be
said for Walsh's emphasis on the importance of colligation—and the lack of objectivity it introduces—were he concerned only with what occurs within the realm of special histories. This, however, is not his concern: He is attempting to deal with all forms of historical explanation. Even were we to grant—as he assumes—that in history generally we are always concerned with human actions and that human actions are always to be interpreted teleologically, historians are not free to use whatever concepts they choose in order to arrange these data into significant wholes. As I have repeatedly attempted to show, once a historian has chosen a subject matter and a working scale, it is in the first instance the data that inquiry reveals, rather than the historian's own initial concepts, that serve to control the structured connections of the facts within his account. Wherever his selection of facts appears to be dependent upon his initial conception of what the whole must be like, rather than being confirmed through inquiry, his reconstruction of the past may be considered interesting as revealing his own mind and as mirroring his own times; but that does not mean that it will be accepted by those who are primarily interested not in him, but in the events his work sought to depict and explain.

A similar contrast can be drawn between the objectivity to be expected in general histories and the limitations on objectivity in special histories if one considers the ways in which periodization affects each form of historical inquiry. In both cases the historian periodizes the past in terms of events he regards as marking the beginning and the end of a particularly significant development. The general historian may mark off periods in terms of the reign of a ruler or a dynasty, or in terms of what he regards as the beginning and the end of some significant economic development within a society or group of societies, or he may do so in terms of the rise and decline of a nation or an alliance of nations. Similarly, in the field of special histories periods are marked off in terms of, say, a dominant style in literature or a style that is held to characterize various forms of art at the time; or a period may be marked off in terms of the acceptance and subsequent rejection of a set of presuppositions in philosophy, or in the background, development, and final acceptance of a series of epoch-making scientific discoveries. For example, one thinks of Romanticism or of the Baroque, of Rationalism, of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Empiricism, or of the Scientific Revolution as terms sometimes used to characterize periods in literature, in the arts, in philosophy, and in the sciences. Where general histories and spe-
cial histories differ with respect to periodization is not in their delimitation of a period by means of significant events in the field with which they are concerned; this is common to both. Where they differ is in the impact of their periodization on what their accounts will include and exclude. In a general history the periodization may rest on political events, on economic changes, or on a view of changes in the relations among nations over a particular span of time, but whatever dictates the choice of these events as marking off a period will not justify the historian in excluding other types of events that brought about changes in society during that time. On the other hand, when a historian writing a special history has characterized a period in terms of the development of a style or in terms of a common set of philosophic presuppositions or in terms of the development and acceptance of a new set of scientific concepts, methods, and paradigms, what he is obliged to include within his survey of that period are only those other works that share a common denominator with the works that have given rise to his periodization. However, the works produced within a particular period, even within a suitably defined geographical area, are not apt to be characterized by any simple homogeneity in conception or execution, even when one confines one's attention to those that are clearly comparable in intent and in function. Disparities in taste and the influence of regional and class interests are evident whenever one looks closely at the total range of these works, even when there is one overriding style that generally dominates the period.\textsuperscript{15} This is not only true with respect to literature and the arts, but also clearly applies to philosophy as well. For example, it is unmistakable that there was a continuing scholastic tradition both in England and on the Continent throughout the period in which Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz, as well as Boyle and Locke, provided the innovations that mark the new Rationalism and the beginnings of modern Empiricism.

The difference between general histories and special histories with respect to problems of periodization is symptomatic of the basic difference between them: General histories have as their subject matter entities having a continuous existence, and special histories do not. Therefore, as we have already noted with respect to histories of literature, and as now also appears with respect to periodizations in special histories, unity is introduced by a principle of exclusion that permits a historian to consider only certain works, and not others, on the basis of his evaluation of their importance when they are considered as representative of the type of cultural activity with which he is con-
cerned. No matter how intimate the connections among these works may be, it is not their relationships that are decisive in singling them out for attention; if it were, the historian would also have to trace all of their other influences, and not be content with how they influenced works that, on his view, were also important. Since different historians will adopt different views, based on different theories or evaluative criteria, one cannot expect a resolution of the differences between alternative special histories, each of which may be excellent so long as one adopts its point of view, but each of which will prove unsatisfactory if one does not. Thus, in this field, one cannot expect objectivity in historical knowledge.

One final contrast may be drawn between general histories and special histories insofar as the problem of objectivity is concerned. While different general histories may deal with different facets of a society and need not make use of identical scales, any one such history will dovetail with others, and a cumulative, consistent record of past societies can be built up. Similarly, different biographies of the same person—though starting with varying interests, and stressing different aspects of that person's character and career—will, when taken together, yield a more trustworthy interpretation than will any single biography that seeks to interpret his achievements and failures solely with reference to one of many alternative points of view. What holds of biography also holds of interpretations of the literary, philosophic, or scientific work of any specific person with whom a special historian of literature, philosophy, or science may be concerned. While many interpretations of classic figures in these fields are possible—and some prove to be extremely stimulating even when they are obviously one-sided—in the end an attempt must be made to achieve an interpretation of that person's work in terms of its author, its contemporary context, and the cultural traditions to which it belongs. While preferences and personal background will tend to dictate what any one interpreter will see and will stress, it is necessary when dealing with the life and work of a particular individual to take diverse points of view into account and to offer a nonidiosyncratic interpretation of the person with whom one is concerned. Nor is this impossible, even when one is dealing with writers, painters, scientists, or philosophers. Therefore, what precludes objectivity in some forms of cultural studies is not the character of the materials with which they deal, however value-laden these materials may be. Rather, it is the fact that if a historian of culture is not dealing with the life and work of one person, or with some limited group of persons, but is
seeking to trace a continuous history of some form of cultural life, the principle by means of which he chooses and organizes the specific materials with which he is to deal represents merely one among many possible principles. In the field of general history, the same factor of relatively free selection is not to be found. It is to establish this point, and to conclude this discussion of objectivity, that we next turn.