CHAPTER 4

Traditional History

Our three theoretical questions are: can historians provide knowledge about reality? What would be a proper justification for the cliometric approach to history? Is answering the question "was slavery profitable?" a way of achieving knowledge, so that, once answered, the issue is disposed of once and for all? With respect to these questions, we saw that we needed a standard for knowledge, and we adopted and conditionally defended, in chapters 2 and 3, a reliance upon the epistemology of (Humean) empiricism: assuming that knowledge comes only from experience, unless we are forced to conclude to the contrary. We have been so forced: we have noted that empiricism requires associated a priori non-empirical metaphysical assumptions, and that the covering law theory of explanation involves a metaphysics which embodies the claims of atomism and mechanism. These metaphysical claims are not themselves derivable from experience. Rather, what we take experience to be experience of presupposes claims such as these.

Historians have to describe and explain the historical world, given assumptions as to what that real world is. Their descriptions and explanations are contributions to knowledge if they are well founded rationally. This rational foundation cannot be empiricism, permitting a simple appeal to experience (whether or not mediated through historical evidence), for we have seen that experience alone will not do. Empiricism is an insufficient foundation for the rational defence of claims to knowledge, for we have seen that additional a priori metaphysical assumptions have to be made, and these also require a rational defence.

The application of the covering law theory of explanation requires that we adopt additional metaphysical assumptions about the kinds of thing that exist in the world, and these assumptions have to fall within a certain range. We have noted the covering law theorist's view that the disagreements between historians are primarily about what kinds of thing exist. We will know when we are correct about the kinds of thing that
exist, given the atomist and mechanist assumptions, when the world makes total sense to us as a regularly ordered structure.

In chapter 1 we introduced two approaches to history: the "traditional" view and the econometric view. It was in the conflict between these two approaches that our theoretical questions appeared. Can the proponents of the cliometric approach be right? An approach to history may be the foundation of a claim to historical knowledge if it is an epistemologically proper application of a rationally justified metaphysics. We will therefore face two broad questions: What are the metaphysical assumptions made by our approaches to history? and, How are those assumptions to be justified?

To help us uncover the metaphysical assumptions made by the two approaches to the writing of history, one question that we shall deal with is whether these two approaches fit the metaphysical assumptions of atomism and mechanism involved in covering law theory. An associated question is this: In the event of one or both of these approaches failing to fit these metaphysical assumptions, should the approaches be rejected? It should now be recognized that questioning such a rejection amounts to questioning covering law theory. Examining the different approaches to history therefore involves — just insofar as they fail to fit atomism or mechanism — examining the possibility of alternative metaphysical assumptions. Whatever metaphysics we adopt will ultimately need a rational justification if knowledge is to be achieved on the basis of it. This last issue will be dealt with in chapter 7.

On the metaphysics of covering law theory, human beings are either natural objects in their own right, or conglomerations of natural objects, or parts of natural objects. Whichever they are, they operate in explainable ways involving appeal to regularities, and indeed a successful mode of such causal explanation at one level rather than another itself determines what kinds of natural objects human beings are. To question all this by offering alternative metaphysics is to offer alternative — and very different — theories of human nature.

In this chapter we shall examine what was vaguely described in the first chapter as the "traditional" interpretation of history. No example was then given, since the presentation could not have been brief, and it was not to the immediate purpose; but now it is. The "traditional" interpretation was introduced by contrast with the new cliometric approach, and Fogel and Engerman defined this traditional interpretation as involving five main propositions:

1. that slavery was generally an unprofitable investment, or depended on trade in slaves to be profitable, except on new, highly fertile land;

2. that slavery was economically moribund;
3. that slave labor, and agricultural production based on slave labor was economically inefficient;

4. that slavery caused the economy of the South to stagnate, or at least retarded its growth, during the antebellum era;

5. that slavery provided extremely harsh material conditions of life for the typical slave.¹

At once we are off the point of the argument. The Philadelphia conference was an occasion for assessing the cliometric approach, an occasion for comparing it with the traditional methods of writing history. But Fogel and Engerman have here given us, not an outline of the traditional mode of historical method or theory, but a set of answers to specific issues. The main propositions they specify here are propositions with which they disagree.² But the fact that they disagree with these propositions and wish to draw different conclusions does not in itself demonstrate any disagreement about method. One can disagree about answers while sharing the same questions and the same methods of answering them. There is nothing in the five “traditional” propositions which precludes their having been reached by statistical means, as we saw in chapter 1. It was a crucial feature of the argument at the conference, however (and a crucial problem for historical knowledge), that the questions, methods and modes of interpretation were not shared by different historical approaches. The matter of importance here is not whether, in achieving one set of answers rather than another, the cliometricians have applied their approach correctly. Rather, it is whether their approach ought to be used at all.

Our problem is not the historical one of finding out what people actually meant by “traditional interpretation” here, although we may observe that perhaps no single thing was meant, and that there was considerable confusion of detail in the minds of those at the Philadelphia conference. The expression “traditional interpretation” has a range of implications or associations of meaning. Certainly when historians think of the “traditional interpretation” here they may be thinking specifically of the conclusions reached in, for example, Frederick L. Olmsted’s *The Cotton Kingdom*³ or John E. Cairnes’ *The Slave Power.*⁴ They may additionally have in mind the variations on these conclusions held over a long period of time due to the writings of Ulrich B. Phillips, which suggest that slavery, although inefficient, was civilized and paternalistic.⁵ They may even have in mind Kenneth M. Stampp’s *The Peculiar Institution,* relatively recent though it is.⁶

Yet there is a lengthy and rich development of historical thought about American negro slavery which cannot be encapsulated in a specific set of agreed conclusions at all, and certainly not in just the five given by Fogel and Engerman. While there is a sense — even a widely accepted
sense — in which Fogel’s and Engerman’s five propositions are “traditional,” it is too narrow a sense to be relevant to the purpose of the Philadelphia conference. The issue is not a matter of the particular conclusions reached, but of the method to be used, and, for many historians, the contrast between the cliometric approach and the “traditional” approach is a contrast between cliometrics and the “narrative” approach to historical writing which essentially involves the recovery of meaning from written records. We shall see that the “narrative” approach is not just a style of presentation of results, but itself a way of conceiving historical reality.

For the argument to proceed, we need to present an example of the traditional “narrative” approach to historical writing, and examine the metaphysical assumptions involved in it, initially by checking how far it accords with the covering law theorist’s assumptions of atomism and mechanism. But, before we do this, what exactly is the “narrative” approach to historical writing? We must not select as an example one which begs any central questions.

Three philosophers of history have offered analytical studies of length about narrative writing: Bryce Gallie, Morton G. White and Arthur C. Danto. Gallie stresses that historical writing is essentially the telling of a story. A story, he holds, should be self-explanatory: it involves readers understanding “the successive actions and thoughts and feelings of certain described characters with a peculiar directness,” such that we are “pulled forward by this development almost against our will.” Only in a less skilfully told story, when it is difficult to follow the development towards a climax, do we require the intrusion of an explicit explanation of what the characters are doing and why.

Two features of this position are worth picking out. First, note that what is presented in a story, viewed in Gallie’s way, are successive and developing matters. Necessary to this approach is that the events and states of affairs dealt with are presented in chronological order. The second feature of this position is that the relation between a “story” and an “explanation” is mysterious. On the one hand, a story is self-explanatory. On the other hand, we only need an explanation when the story becomes difficult to follow. Is the story an explanation or not?

Gallie certainly believes that a story is an explanation. But he holds that its explanatory nature is largely a function of the understanding on the part of the reader. If the reader’s subjective puzzlement is removed or kept at a distance then the story is explanatory; otherwise not. If the story becomes difficult to follow, if it deviates from what is expected as normal, then there is a need to provide an additional explanation to remove the puzzlement.

Gallie assumes that the additional explanation is intrusive: it is a different kind of thing from the self-explanatory story itself. According
to him, the intrusive explanation can be (but does not have to be) an explicit, scientifically founded causal explanation. (He analyses causal explanations as being necessary conditions.) We can understand the difference between the self-explanatory story and the intrusive explanation in the following way: each is explanatory according to a different criterion of explanation. A story has to pass a test for being an explanation which is set by the subjective capacity of a reader to follow it. The intrusive explanation has had to pass a test for being an explanation which is set by some objective standard of what reality is, for example, a standard provided by a natural or social science. That an intrusive explanation is objectively explanatory, however, does not alone warrant its place in the story, for it must yet meet the primary requirement which is (in Gallie’s view) the essence of history, that it ensures by its presence an acceptably followable story.

A necessary (but not sufficient) condition for written historical presentation, on this approach, is that the matters described are selected and presented in a chronologically ordered, subjectively explanatory story. If we suppose, with Gallie, that historical writing is essentially of this form, it follows that historical writing must, whatever else it does, present matters in a chronologically ordered way. However, as Rolf Gruner has noted, historical writing is frequently not of this form. Certain classic examples of historical writing describe states of affairs at a given time in an analytical rather than a chronologically ordered fashion, for example Jacob Burckhardt’s The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy, first published in 1860, and Johan Huizinga’s The Waning of the Middle Ages, first published in 1924. Kenneth M. Stampp’s The Peculiar Institution is also like this, as are many other works of traditional history describing the slave and slaveholding ways of life. Surely they are not all to be excluded from proper history?

We would indeed be required to exclude them if it could be shown that the nature of historical method or subject matter was of such a kind as to necessitate chronologically ordered subjectively explanatory story writing. Our selection of an example of the traditional narrative historical approach would have to be made on this basis. But, as Gallie presents the nature of a story, we have no reason to think that history must be like this. A story, on Gallie, is essentially a mode of presentation to a given readership. It is structured according to what that audience happens to find explanatory, and while many lay people in our culture find storylike presentations especially followable, there are in practice other intelligible modes of presentation: the analytical approach, film (itself structured in various ways), maps, graphs and even statistical tables. The narrative approach to history, however, is not just a claim about presentation.
But is there a more powerful argument than Gallie's in favour of his important claim that history is essentially storylike in form? While we may be gripped by a story which pulls us almost against our will, it may not be a purely subjective matter of successful presentation. While a story's success may depend on our capacity to follow it, it is also true that a scientific theory must be intelligible to us, and we would not regard that as an argument for the subjectivity of science. We might wish to say that the power and followability of storylike presentation derives from some objective source, and that is why a story has the explanatory force it does. It is these supposed objective storylike connections or features of reality which would warrant the claim that historical writing must, to be truthful to history itself, be storylike in form.

Gallie offers no criterion for an objective storylike reality beyond chronological ordering. And while historical events may be in reality chronologically ordered, they may at the same time be chaotic, and there is nothing objectively explanatory about stringing an arbitrarily selected muddle of events along a temporal line. The other two analytical philosophers of narrative whom we have mentioned, White and Danto, both offer causation as the solution. On their view, narratives are nothing more than modes of writing which string together implicit causal explanations of the sort that were described in chapter 3, thus committing these philosophers to the metaphysics of covering law theory. But while such causal links may be selected in chronologically ordered fashion and thus used to support (rather than intrude into) a story, they do not need to be presented in this way. The objective regularity of events may be presented in either storylike or analytical form. While it is the objective regularities give the story an objective explanatory force, they do not necessitate a storylike mode of presentation, so that the story is not essential to history.

Plainly we may question whether White and Danto are correct about this. We may wish to identify objective storylike connections or features of reality which will mark the story as essential to historical reality. These connections or features will supply a reason to recognize the story as alone having an objective explanatory power, a power which accords with its subjective followability better than causation and much better than mere chronological ordering. One suggestion that occasionally has currency is that stories themselves — with beginnings, middles and ends — exist as objective entities in the real world.

The medieval philosopher William of Ockham stated the rational requirement that we not suppose things to exist without necessity. This requires us to be parsimonious in our metaphysics, and as it stands the suggestion that stories exist objectively is metaphysically incontinent, for there is no apparent limit, other than that naturally imposed by our imaginative powers, to the range of stories which may be written about.
a historical episode. Each one, supposedly, will have its complement in reality. We shall not say that it is impossible for epistemological and metaphysical sense to be made of this proposal. But we suggest that there is no need to travel such inconclusive and barely understood paths while our interest is in historical knowledge rather than literary theory.\(^{11}\)

On the other hand, the very subjectivity of a story is of importance here. It is plausible to say that individual people understand themselves to be part of a story, in that they make their own lives (and the lives of those around them) intelligible to themselves in the form of a story, through constituting themselves as the persons they are in virtue of beliefs about their past and their intended future, which beliefs they organize in a chronologically ordered storylike way.\(^{12}\) States and other organizations, as well as individuals, may constitute themselves as essentially narrative structures, so that the public conception and recognition of the organization (which determines its existence) is of an entity progressing in a storylike way. If this is what real people and societies are like, then it may be appropriate for historians to represent their subjects' lives in storylike form.

But there is still no necessity for this. If the human world is storylike in form, it does not follow that knowledge about it is necessarily or even usefully expressed in storylike form. To assert that the development of some state has the form of, say, a tragic story is not in itself to tell a tragic story: analytical histories may well be (and have been) written of the Renaissance, a historical entity constituted in a storylike way with beginning, middle and end. Additionally, even if people do understand themselves in a storylike way, they may not be right. A person may believe himself to be acting in accordance with a storylike plan of his own devising, and yet really be subject to determination by, for example, external economic forces. Historians must not limit their understanding of what is going on to the modes of understanding used by those they are talking about. On the contrary, the critical evaluation of, for example, a person's diary or letters, including that person's conception of what kind of person he is or reasons for doing what he did, is one of the first lessons for historians to learn. Moreover, it is a historical question whether people have always understood themselves or the world in storylike ways, and plausible to suggest that they have not.\(^{13}\) We conclude, therefore, that while history may properly be presented in storylike form, it is not essential that it be so presented.

Thus, while the historian may typically use a "plot" or storyline as a contextual device to provide an explanation in traditional historical writing, the usefulness of "plot" as a mode of analysis of history is a matter which does not affect the epistemological and metaphysical issues which concern us here. It is not the type of storyline which marks the contrast between traditional and econometric history. Rather, as we shall
see later, it is in the model of human action that we find the contrast between econometric and traditional presuppositions about human nature, and views of human nature that express the contrast between econometric and traditional modes of writing history.

The traditional approach we are concerned with was described above as the "narrative" approach to historical writing involving the recovery of meaning from written records. When historians talk about the traditional "narrative" approach they do not usually mean a particular form of presentation, but rather a conception of human beings and how they are to be understood, which can be, but does not have to be, expressed in the form of a followable story. Chronological ordering of presentation is not the issue, and was not the issue discussed between the traditional and the cliometric historians at the Philadelphia conference. We shall avoid the associated problems (and equally beg no questions) by choosing an example which, while "traditional," is not a chronologically ordered story.

Our example is a brief passage taken from Kenneth M. Stampp's *The Peculiar Institution*. Fogel and Engerman, opposed to the "traditional interpretation," describe Stampp's book, with respect to this interpretation, as "retaining only the proposition that slavery provided extremely harsh material conditions of life for slaves." However, they note that some two thirds or more of his book is concerned with this issue of the material treatment of slaves rather than with the issues of profit, economic viability, efficiency and economic growth, and they quote a number of works which recognize Stampp's concentration on the question of the material conditions of life. Two thirds of Stampp's book is thus clearly "traditional" in terms of the argument at the Philadelphia conference, and our example is derived from this part of the book. In Stampp's chapter IV, entitled "To Make Them Stand in Fear," we find the following passage, one of many which together are intended to reinforce the claim that slavery was harsh:

Beyond this were cases of pure brutality — cases of flogging that resulted in the crippling, maiming, or killing of slaves. An early nineteenth-century Charleston grand jury presented "as a serious evil the many instances of Negro Homicide" and condemned those who indulged their passions "in the barbarous treatment of slaves." "Salting" — washing the cuts received from the whip with brine — was a harsh punishment inflicted upon the most obstinate bondsmen. Though all but a few deplored such brutality, slaveholders found themselves in a dilemma when nothing else could subdue a rebel.

If a master was too squeamish to undertake the rugged task of humiliating a refractory bondsman, he might send him to a more calloused neighbour or to a professional "slave breaker." John Nevitt, a Mississippi planter not averse to the application of heroic remedies, received from
another master another chattel "for the purpose of punishing him for bad conduct." Frederick Douglass remembered a ruthless man in Maryland who had a reputation for being "a first rate hand at breaking young negroes"; some slaveholders found it beneficial to send their beginning hands to him for training.15

What metaphysics and mode of explanation does Stampp's style of writing here involve? As with covering law theory, we need to unravel the matter to reveal the assumptions about what it is that exists. We have no commitment about these assumptions independent of Stampp's account itself, which offers plural descriptions of individual people and their actions. Stampp's passage can thus be regarded, like covering law theory, as embodying the assumption of atomism.

But for Stampp's passage to be a contribution to knowledge, the covering law theorist requires that the many things referred to make connected causal sense, requiring the interleaving of covering law arguments. Covering law arguments are therefore required to explain the individual actions involved.

Let us, for the first action, take one of the "cases of pure brutality — cases of flogging that resulted in the crippling, maiming or killing of slaves." The covering law theorist may hold flogging to be an event which can be regularly associated with others, and thus be the kind of thing which can be admitted to his version of a mechanistic universe. However, these cases of flogging are also described as being of "pure brutality." The words imply strong moral disapproval on the part of Stampp, and he allows that all but a few slaveholders equally deplored such behaviour. Deploring something, or expressing moral disapproval, are actions which might be held by a covering law theorist to be regularly associated with other events. But the traditional theorist would believe, against this, that moral disapproval of a chosen action entails the denial of mechanism.

We note, further, that "[i]f a master was too squeamish to undertake the rugged task of humbling a refractory bondsman, he might send him to a more calloused neighbour or to a professional 'slave breaker.'" Here we are offered a reason for a master sending a difficult slave to a slave breaker, but "reason," as a traditional theorist understands that word, marks an entity which the mechanist cannot admit to his universe: for the covering law theorist, a "reason" (in the traditional sense) cannot be explanatory.

However, if "reason" is explanatory, then, on the covering law theorist, it must be regarded in a non-traditional way as involving, or being part of, a regularity. The covering law theorist can choose to regard the quoted sentence as expressing the appropriate regularity: "whenever a master is too squeamish to humble a slave, then he sends him to a slave breaker." Here there is no "reason" as ordinarily understood, only a regularity. We are able to recognize the "cause" in this: squeamishness.
The slaveowner being a person like us, it is important for the plausibility of the covering law explanation that we be able to empathize with — recognize and understand — such a cause, and no doubt we can empathize with a person's squeamishness, to a sufficient extent. Mental reasoning is superfluous; the covering law theorist’s claim is that any slaveholder would have behaved in this way, if he were squeamish enough; and this is a not implausible suggestion.

Next we read that “John Nevitt, a Mississippi planter not averse to the application of heroic remedies, received from another master another chattel ‘for the purpose of punishing him for bad conduct.’” Here we have the adoption by a slave master of a specific purpose. One could perhaps regard the adoption of a purpose as yet another event to be causally explained, but we shall not argue for or against that here; the point is rather that the explanation of the slave’s move from his master to John Nevitt is cast in terms of this purpose, regardless of its source. If this explanation is to be squared with the covering law theory, the covering law theorist has to account in his terms, not just for the adoption of a purpose, but for the transfer of the slave given the purpose.

Just as with a “reason” discussed earlier, so “purpose” is not an entity to be admitted in its own right to the covering law theorist’s interpretation of a mechanistic universe. If it is explanatory, it must be regarded as involving, or being part of, a causal connection, which is a regularity. The covering law theorist might recast the explanatory sentence in the form of a regularity, as follows: “Whenever a slave master wishes to punish a slave for bad conduct, he sends him to a slave breaker.”

The difficulty with this regularity is that it is clearly not true. While the slave master may have achieved his purpose by sending his slave to the slave breaker John Nevitt, that action was not the only way of achieving his purpose, and the narrative does not suggest that it was. In other words, the passage purports to explain the slave’s move to John Nevitt, given the adoption of his master’s purpose to punish him, even though it is not being asserted — and it is certainly not plausible — that there is a regular association of events involved here.

Simply, therefore, the traditional theorist holds that something A can be a reason for action B, or purpose A can be achieved by performing action B, without it being true that whenever A then B. Nor need it be true that whenever B then A; a purpose can be used in a narrative to explain a certain action even though that action was not one which achieved the purpose, but was only part of a number of possible routes to its achievement, or even a failure. A need be neither necessary nor sufficient for B. Given this, it follows that the passage quoted from Stampp does not square with covering law theory. It is, indeed, essential to the traditional approach to history that this be so. Covering law
Theorists, and other causal theorists, offer accounts of "reasons" and "purposes" which seek to bring these notions under the mechanist umbrella, but, on the traditional approach, the burden of proof is on them to succeed in such a causal analysis. It is not a burden that has, on the traditional view, yet been discharged.

If we accept the mechanistic metaphysics involved in covering law theory, then it follows at once that Stampp is talking about kinds of entities which do not, and never did, exist, characterized as they are as being the kinds of thing which act for reasons or with purposes, notions for which a causal analysis is denied on the traditional approach. Thus Stampp's account, like any other account which uses such notions, cannot be admitted as a contribution to knowledge, given the covering law approach. Since these notions are typical of much traditional historical writing, it follows that such traditional historical writing is, as Catherine Morland said, sheer invention, since the entities purportedly referred to do not exist.

However, we are only forced to accept this conclusion if the premises are true, if the mechanistic metaphysics is to be accepted. The argument for the covering law theorist's interpretation of mechanism is an argument for conceiving the world as being of many things in regular relationship with each other. "Many things" is a notion which we may keep. It is the causal relation, the relationship of regularity, which is problematic. Against this, we shall next specify more clearly the metaphysics which is involved in the traditional approach to historical writing.

There are, it is commonly expressed, two "worlds," one of nature, and one of man. This common expression is misleading. It need be supposed that there is only one world, with two kinds of entities in it. One kind of entity is that which occurs in inanimate regular association with others of a like kind, and this is the world of nature already expressed in the mechanism of covering law theory. Against mechanism, however, there is also another kind of entity, which operates on other entities (whether animate or not) in ways which are not to be characterized in terms of regularity, nor in terms of the mechanistic alternative, randomness. These entities are persons, and they operate with purposes and for reasons, although, since they impinge on the natural world and it on them, they can arrange to enter into ordinary causal relationships too.\textsuperscript{17}

On this view there is an animate side to reality, an "ideal" side. To accept this metaphysics is thus to be an idealist, but it is an explanatory idealism contrasting with mechanism, and not a full metaphysical idealism contrasting with realism, such as that introduced in chapter 2. The two idealisms are often confused, but they are not necessarily linked. We know about these animate entities, and understand and can explain their operations, not by relying upon empiricism, but in a special way
deriving from the fact that we are those entities. We empathize with other people, and this is a mode of knowledge which is both special and appropriate for the subject matter.

There is no theory of empathy to give. We know what we are like, and need only be reminded of what is involved in the understanding of action when we are mistakenly led to adopt alien modes of explanation, such as that required by covering law theory. The covering law theorist complains that historians typically do not spell out the laws and theories supporting what purport to be historical explanations. The reason why historians do not spell out the theory behind their explanations is that there is no theory, and hence no need; the giving of reasons and of purposes bears its full explanatory weight alone, without need for further theoretical support.

Nevertheless, we do need to be reminded of the empathetic form of understanding which lies at the heart of the traditional narrative approach to history, and one of the most powerful expressions of the position is that offered by W. H. Dray in his book Laws and Explanation in History. What we typically want, he points out, is a reconstruction of a person's calculation of the means to be adopted towards his chosen end in the light of the circumstances in which he found himself. This calculation gives the person's reasons for acting as he did, and it shows that what was done was the thing to have done for the reasons given. The action is thus displayed as having been an "appropriate" thing to have done, rather than the thing always done. In this way we may understand the action of the slave master who sent his slave to John Nevitt for punishment: this action was an appropriate thing to have done, given his purposes and beliefs as to the situation in which he found himself — purposes and beliefs which, of course, we need not share. We may use this system to understand the master who is just squeamish, too; but we are not forced to if, say, he was himself unable to master his own squeamishness. "We give reasons if we can, and turn to empirical laws if we must." Calculating is not something which we take time to do before every intended action, but there is a calculation which could be provided for every such action, and we often understand our own actions after the event by thinking them through in this way, Dray reminds us.

When we empathize in this way with another, we are able to project ourselves into their mental position, and see things from their point of view. We readily grasp the metaphors which have just been used, for empathetic understanding is so familiar to us, and these metaphors remind us that the mental position or point of view of another person is very likely not the same as our own. Distinguish, therefore, "empathy" from "sympathy": with empathy there is no sameness of mind, as sympathy would require. To empathize with another is not necessarily
to sympathize with him or her, and thus empathetic understanding does
not entail approval: to understand is not necessarily to forgive. Empathy
is like sympathy with a suspension of acceptance.

We can empathize with others, and thus such knowledge is available to
us, and we can separate our understanding of action from moral
judgement of it. Nevertheless, there may be moral problems intrinsic to
empathetic understanding, in that perhaps we ought not to engage in it
in certain cases. It may be argued that, although we could come to
understand, by empathetic means, a particularly horrific action carried
out by some slaveholder, we would nevertheless be better not to do so.
One reason for this might be a supposed effect upon us, the knowers:
perhaps we ought not to grasp the means enabling us to recognize just
when a horrific action might be appropriate, for we are corrupted
thereby. Another reason for this is that the perpetrator of some horrific
action may not be deserving of empathetic understanding. To regard
such a person as undeserving is not to imply that he is irrational, in
that his action could not have been “appropriate”; on the contrary.

Certainly the slaves, and the anti-slavery movement in the Northern
states, did not think that to understand was to forgive. They wished
others to understand slavery the better to judge it. Understanding a slave
master and the punishment of his slave, we may blame him; and we do
so, given the conception of human nature outlined here, for one of two
reasons. First, the slave master may be blamed, for example, for sup-
posing blacks to be innately inferior, such that slavery was appropriate
to them. He ought not to have had this false belief. It was a failure of
his own empathetic understanding that he did so. We blame, and yet
we empathize; had we shared this false belief, no doubt we could have
acted similarly. Second, the slave master may not have had an explicit
belief in the inferiority of blacks, but perhaps no explicit belief in their
nature at all; given this, he may be blamed for acting for profit to himself,
when this conflicted in the case of slavery with acting out of respect for
a natural morality regarded as binding on all. We blame, and still we
empathize: we know what it is to act wrongly, carelessly ignorant of the
claims of others.

In blaming the slave masters, we suppose that they had a choice.
We do not, on the conception of human nature presented here, regard
them as determined to act and believe as they did by unblamable factors
external to themselves. This marks a contrast with mechanism. We face
here one of the fundamental issues in philosophy, that between “free
will” and “determinism.” The nature of this issue itself depends upon
which solution to it is adopted. The problem exists for each of us, in
how to understand what kinds of being we are. On the present view, we
are able, in part, to constitute ourselves as being what we are through
individually choosing what the answer to the issue is to be, and acting
and taking responsibility accordingly. We are, moreover, moral beings. There are moral constraints upon our choice of metaphysics, which require us not to regard ourselves or others as mechanically determined to act. We are not to escape responsibility. If we regard others or even ourselves as machine-like, then we are morally at fault.

The metaphysics of human nature outlined here permits many different approaches to the explanation of human action. Lawrence Stone appropriately observes that

the individual is moved by a convergence of constantly shifting forces, a cluster of influences such as kinship, friendship, economic interest, class prejudice, political principle, religious conviction, and so on, which all play their varying parts and which can usefully be disentangled only for analytical purposes . . . the relative importance of the various background characteristics will vary from culture to culture and nation to nation and time to time.23

All these and other "forces" operate on individuals through being accepted by each individual, consciously and deliberately or unconsciously and habitually, as part of his circumstances, and taken into perhaps weighty consideration in the calculation of appropriate action, given that individual's purposes and beliefs.

We now have a sufficient outline of the theory of human nature which is involved in the quotation from Stampp. But the discovery of the metaphysical assumptions involved does not end here. For the "traditional" approach adopted by Stampp and others is the "narrative" approach to history, described above, which involves the recovery of meaning from written records. This element of the recovery of meaning from written records, this traditional interpretation of evidence, has still to be understood.

I shall pick out from the passage quoted from Stampp a typical reference to that evidence which is offered as warrant for it. We find that "Frederick Douglass remembered a ruthless man in Maryland who had a reputation for being 'a first rate hand at breaking young negroes'; some slaveholders found it beneficial to send their beginning hands to him for training." The proffered source for this claim is stated as "Douglass, My Bondage, p. 203." This reference is to Douglass's My Bondage and My Freedom, published in New York in 1855. Such a document is "evidence." This is not an original source, however. For exactness, we should remember that this book of Douglass's was written somewhat later in his life and is more distant from the original events than his first attempt at expressing those events. His first attempt, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself,24 was published in 1845, seven years after his escape from slavery. It brought him international prominence and a political career. This career
flagged in due course, and the publication of My Bondage was an attempt to regain public attention, which was not successful.

How is such a basic source for the historian as Douglass’s Narrative to be interpreted? Here is a passage from it:

One of my greatest faults was that of letting his horse run away, and go down to his father-in-law’s farm, which was about five miles from St. Michael’s. I would then have to go after it. My reason for this kind of carelessness, or carefulness, was, that I could always get something to eat when I went there. Master William Hamilton, my master’s father-in-law, always gave his slaves enough to eat. I never left there hungry, no matter how great the need of my speedy return. Master Thomas at length said he would stand it no longer. I had lived with him nine months, during which time he had given me a number of severe whippings, all to no good purpose. He resolved to put me out, as he said, to be broken; and, for this purpose, he let me for one year to a man named Edward Covey. Mr Covey was a poor man, a farm-renter. He rented the place upon which he lived, as also the hands with which he tilled it. Mr Covey had acquired a very high reputation for breaking young slaves, and this reputation was of immense value to him. It enabled him to get his farm tilled with much less expense to himself than he could have had it done without such a reputation.

It is very easy to read through this passage. But merely by reading it one has already jumped to a conclusion of very great importance. That conclusion is that this passage is a meaningful piece of writing. Not for a moment would we suggest that this is false. But it is nevertheless a considerable metaphysical jump to get to this conclusion, and it is necessary to explain what has to be assumed in order to achieve it.

What are the characteristics which Douglass’s Narrative has? Like every other ordinary object it has colour, shape, position, weight, and so forth. We can describe how, as a book, it can be opened, and our attention may be drawn to the marks on the paper of which it largely consists. We will certainly find it difficult to see these marks as marks rather than as the words which we normally interpret them to be. But this only shows how engrained in our nature is our capacity to interpret certain marks as symbols. A traditional historian used to working with nineteenth century archives will find it quite unrealistic to refuse to interpret such marks as symbols. But no archaeologist or historian working with unfamiliar or unknown peoples will make such a move without careful thought and much evidence. Perhaps one finds a scratched piece of pottery, of an unfamiliar style, in a new Middle Eastern site of historically mysterious date. Are the scratches writing, or just scratches? The evidence of your own eyes alone will not tell you.

It is a historical, and not a philosophical, problem how to warrant the conclusion that the scratches are, or are not, symbolic. But a crucial
philosophical point is assumed in this historical problem: it is assumed that a contrast can properly be drawn between that which is symbolic and that which is not. To take scratches to be symbolic, which one is historically warranted in doing in many cases, is to take them to have been deliberately made with the intention that some future reader (perhaps only the author himself) could understand what they meant and could recognize the intention that they convey meaning, that they be understood.

What we are therefore required to assume here is that a past author had an intention that his marks be capable of being understood. Writing and reading thus involve the ascription of intentions to other people. The historian who interprets Douglass’s Narrative as a piece of meaningful writing is thereby committed to the ascription of certain intentions to its author. He is thus committed to a metaphysics which includes people who are intentional or purposive entities, and who act in the appropriate ways when they wish to convey or register their intentions. This does not, of course, entail that one must swallow Douglass’s assertions uncritically or accept everything he says as true, even about his own intentions. (His writings had a political purpose, after all.)

The successful interpretation of evidence as meaningful provides an important constraint upon our specification of the metaphysical assumptions involved in traditional historical writing. The traditional narrative approach which involves the recovery of meaning from written records requires a commitment to a metaphysics which permits the recovery of meaning. This in turn commits the historian to a metaphysics which assumes people to be purposive entities. Stampp’s interpretation of the writings of Douglass and others commits him to a metaphysics of human nature which is consistent with the metaphysics which he assumes when he writes his own narrative.

This consistency is crucial. Note that one cannot interpret evidence on the basis of one set of metaphysical assumptions and then use that interpretation to support a historical account which uses metaphysical assumptions which are inconsistent with it. For example, one cannot assume in one’s historical narrative a metaphysical theory such as a version of mechanism which entails that people cannot engage in meaningful or purposive actions and at the same time interpret the evidence for one’s account as itself a meaningful product of the purposive action of writing. The principles used in the interpretation of evidence must be the same as those used in the written narrative, on pain of inconsistency.

Historians have to describe and explain the historical world, given assumptions as to what that real world is. The questions they ask, their procedures, descriptions and explanations are contributions to knowl-
edge if they are well founded rationally. We have adopted and conditionally defended, in our developing argument, a reliance upon empiricism, assuming that knowledge comes only from experience, unless we are forced to conclude to the contrary. We have been so forced: we have noted that empiricism requires an associated metaphysics, and that these metaphysical claims are not themselves derivable from experience. Rather, what we take experience to be experience of presupposes such claims. Metaphysical assumptions have to be made, and these also require a rational defence. This rational foundation cannot be a simple appeal to experience, even as mediated through historical evidence, for we have seen that the interpretation of historical evidence itself presupposes metaphysical assumptions.

By means of our comparison of Stampp's writing with the metaphysical assumptions of atomism and mechanism involved in covering law theory, we have now said sufficient to characterize the metaphysical assumptions which are central to the historical approach examined in this chapter, that of the narrative approach which involves the recovery of meaning from written records. In summary, we have a metaphysics which permits at the minimum two kinds of entities: those in the natural world which are causally related, and those in the human world which are individual persons. The natural and human worlds co-exist and interact. Each kind of entity has its associated theory of explanation: for the natural world, covering law theory; and for the world of individual persons, empathetic understanding.

Can historians provide knowledge about reality? Our answer to this question must in part tell us whether the cliometric approach to history is a possible way of achieving knowledge. As part of this, we wish to know whether answering the question "was slavery profitable?" is a way of achieving knowledge, so that the issue can be disposed of once and for all. We must next ask two questions: first, does the question "was slavery profitable?" fall under the metaphysics of the traditional approach which has now been outlined, or is the cliometric approach fundamentally distinct? and, second, is the choice of the metaphysics involved itself rationally warranted? The next two chapters will address the first of these questions.

NOTES


20. Ibid., p. 138.

21. That knowledge may corrupt is an idea that dates from the Garden of Eden.

22. Refusal to empathize may be right; yet consider a refusal to empathize with the leadership of a foreign country which has committed an act which seriously offends against human rights. War may be the outcome, and perhaps our own leaders ought to take upon themselves the personal moral dishonour of empathy in such a case, for the benefit of the rest of us. This is one of the problems of "dirty hands" in politics. See *War and Moral Responsibility*, M. Cohen, T. Nagel and T. Scanlon eds., Princeton University Press, 1974.


25. Ibid., p. 87.