

# TEACHING HOW TO MAKE SPECIFIC HISTORICAL CAUSAL CLAIMS

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## **Abstract**

The theme of the conference is a celebration of history teaching in the 350<sup>th</sup> year of schooling in South Africa. A lot of developments have happened during with regard to the teaching and understanding of history as a subject. In order to appreciate these developments in the classroom, students should be able to make specific historical claims. Making specific historical causal claims of the form 'A caused that B' is one of the most important things that a person learns.

However, the making of causal claims is not confined to the teaching and learning context. School children of whatever age, are in a position of making specific historical causal claims, and do this in varying degrees of skill and standards. The purpose of effective history teaching should be to develop in students a deeper understanding of historical processes. Whilst historical claims can be made about all sorts of things, in this paper, attention will be confined to those claims that have direct relevance to the teaching and learning situation in history. The paper identifies critical issues that need to be considered to make this succeed in the history classroom.

## **Introduction**

One of the important things a person learns is how to make specific historical causal claims of the form 'this X caused that Y'. Such claims are; (a) specific in that they specify the particular occurrences (X and Y) about which the claim is made; (b) historical in that they are about some effect (Y) which either occurred in the past or is now occurring and about some cause (X), which occurred at some time prior to Y and, finally; (c) causal claims insofar as they make appropriate use of any of the numerous locutions which express causal relations. Making specific historical causal claims is not confined to professional historians or to teachers and students of history alone..

Children at any age can make specific historical causal claims. I asked some young children “What caused the light to go on?”, I got varying responses. Muzi, a four year old boy said “On”, Siphon a five old boy said “The Sun”, and Lile an eight-year old girl said “You turning it on”. In answer to the question “What caused the light to off?”, the respective replies were “Off”, “The Moon”, and “You turning it off”. I then asked “Why did that cause it to go on?” Muzi said “Cos I want it on”, Siphon said “It is light”, and Lile said “Because you turned it on”. In response to the question “Why did that cause it to go off”, Muzi and Lile answered as before except that they substituted ‘off’ in place of ‘on’. Muzi said “Dar\_\_\_, it is light but darker”. Although none of the children could give the meaning of ‘cause’, in answering the first two questions they were making specific of ‘cause’, in answering the first two questions they were making specific historical causal claims and in answering the third and fourth questions they were attempting to defend their claims.

This example illustrates that children can make specific historical causal claims and they are able to do so with varying degrees of skill and differing standards of relevance. Part of the formal education of these children will be to improve their skill in making specific historical causal claims and to enable them to make such claims regarding an ever increasing range of topics. One could assume that the formal education of these, and other, children would be improved if their teachers were to understand specific historical causal claims and their use in the subject matter being taught. The paper indicates some of the issues to be considered in defending the assumption stated above with particular reference to the teaching and learning of school history.

### **Making specific historical causal claims**

While historical causal claims may be made on all sorts of things and for all sorts of reasons, in this discussion it is confined on such claims as are of direct relevance to teachers and students of history. However, it may be that there are no specific historical causal claims which are relevant to teachers and students of history, notwithstanding the prevalence of such claims in professional historical writing and in history examination answers. One reason for holding that specific historical causal claims are irrelevant for teachers and students of history is that the demise of ‘cause’ in science was predicted by Russell and advocated in history by

Oakeshott. Nagel contends that

“Nevertheless, though the term may be absent, the idea for which it stands continues to have currency. It not only crops up in everyday speech, and in investigations into human affairs by economists, social psychologists, and historians; it is also pervasive in the accounts natural scientists give of their laboratory procedures, as well as in the interpretations offered by many theoretical physicists of their mathematical formalism.”

Another reason is that advanced by Barraclough in his Presidential Address to the Historical Association,

“The results, the consequences, of actions are there to be seen; the causes, the motives, are hidden in men’s minds, and only God can disentangle them. If one-tenth of the energy which has gone into trying to apportion responsibility for the outbreak of war in 1914 had been devoted to studying its consequences, we might be further forward. For the causes belong entirely to the past, their study serves only the purpose of saving national honour; but the consequences are with us still.”

Provided that it is recognized that the consequences of the unification of Germany, the unification of Italy, imperialist scrambles in Africa and elsewhere, the decline of Turkish power in the Balkans, the arms race, etc., can be studied as the causes of the 1914-18 war, then the identification of causes with hidden motives can be rejected. Moreover, the consequences, which Barraclough is so keen to have studied, include the Weimar Republic and the League of Nations and neither of those consequences of the war “are with us still”. A more serious objection to the relevance of causal claims to teachers and students of history is that raised by Oakeshott who suggest that

“It is a presupposition of history that every event is related and that every change is but a moment in a world which contains no absolute hiatus. And the only explanation of change relevant or possible in history is simply a complete account of change ... The relation between events is always other events, and it is established in history by a full relation of the events. The conception of cause is thus replaced by the exhibition of the world of events intrinsically related to one another in which no lacuna is tolerated.”

Although one may agree with Oakeshott that a complete description is sufficient and that causal explanation is, in such circumstances, quite irrelevant, it may be objected that no such complete description does exist because some events are not recorded and that no such complete description could exist because, as “the relation between events is always

other events”, it involves infinite regress. Yet if the historian sets out to give a causal explanation in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, it is incumbent upon him to show why he should not give a complete description of the kind required by Oakeshott. Oakeshott claims that there is no more reason to isolate some of the events of the past as the cause than there is to isolate any other of the past events, and Thompson presents a similar view when he argue that

“Isolation and identification of a few specified ‘causes’ is thus an entirely artificial procedure .... To unravel from the intricate mesh of historical change one strand and to present it as the determinant of the whole pattern is a crudity alien in spirit to the historical attitude.”

The way by which the argument will show that specific historical causal claims are relevant to teachers and students of history, is to illustrate the point of doing history and to focus attention on the reasons for isolating some past occurrences as causes. The paper adopts this course because giving a complete description is something the historian cannot and need and an analysis of ‘cause’ in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions is inapplicable to specific historical causal claims in that all past events are necessary and jointly sufficient for a particular event.

There are two related but distinct points of doing history suggested. These are the content or subject matter to be studied and the procedures or methods used in the discipline. The content or subject matter to be studied is selected because it is not possible to study everything in history and the selection is “an entirely artificial procedure” but one which is, contra Oakeshott, based on reasons or clear criteria. In attempting to understand an aspect of human activity, either present or past, it is necessary to see that activity as a part of a developing sequence rather than an instantaneous time slice. Furthermore, what we can see in the world depends upon what there is in the world to be seen and upon our reasons for looking at the world. Our specific reasons for looking (or purposes) are, of course, determined by larger theoretical or disciplinary frameworks; but such frameworks are relatively stable and need not concern us here.

The other aspect to be considered as part of the point of doing history is the procedure or method used in the discipline. Instead of studying history or doing history in an attempt to understand modern, or any other, times we may seek to learn how to use the methods or procedures

which are developed to high degree in history. For the purposes of this argument, One would assume that there are certain procedures which are common both to history and other disciplines as well as ordinary straight thinking and, further that there are some procedures which are either peculiar to, or very highly developed in, the discipline of history. The procedures which are common to a wide variety of fields are the sort of thing which formal logic, among other things, seeks to render explicit and the peculiarly historical procedures are the sort of thing which form the tacit professional knowledge of professional historians. Instead of studying to gain an understanding of an aspect of the one has selected to comprehend, one may study history in order to develop mastery of the historian's procedures. What content is to be selected for study is dependent on the reason the student has for studying history, in particular, whether the content should be an extended treatment of a historical period or an intensive treatment of something which exemplifies a methodological problem. Having determined the point of studying history in a particular case and having isolated the aspect one seeks to understand or the method one wishes to master, only then is one able to begin to select the content to be studied. It is true that the reason for studying history in the particular case arose from prior consideration of some content. In this way the formulation of the reason for studying history, the selection of the content for study, and the study of the content may interact and be continuous. What is not done by historians is to give a full account of the relations between all and every event, for those relations are the given, albeit in many cases unknown, but rather what is done is to refine the selection of the relations to be considered. When the relations which are taken to satisfy the point of the particular study of history have been selected then the historian may choose to set these relations out in narrative form or in the form of a collection of documents or as an argument to support generalizations.

It may seem that the task of the historian, as set out here, is one of great complexity and requiring great skill and yet one may feel that Boswell<sup>9</sup> had the historian summed up when he said "Great abilities are not requisite for an Historian; for in historical composition all the greatest powers of the human mind are quiescent."

As each person undertakes part of the task of the historian every time they make a specific historical causal claim it is perhaps just as well that

so little talent is required. However, the professional historian does make things a little more difficult for himself by setting some rather imaginative questions which require considerable penetration, accuracy, colouring and varying degrees of invention. The professional historian is required to develop a theoretical framework, undertake empirical research to discover the facts and exhibit literary skill in presenting the results of his endeavours. Where he differs from others who make specific historical causal claims is because he confines his attention to aspects of past human actions which he deems to be of professional interest.

As a first step towards showing that specific historical causal claims are relevant to teachers and students of history, an indication of the point of doing history has been given which focuses attention on the reasons for selecting some occurrences rather than others as relevant for the historian. The next step is to stretch out some of the aspects of specific historical causal claims, of which some examples were given at the beginning of the paper, and the use of specific historical causal claims in historical explanation.

In making a specific historical causal claim of the form 'this X caused that Y', the speaker is identifying one or more of an indefinite number of relations as being a causal relation, that is, the relation between X and Y is a causal relation and X is the cause of Y. That some relations are seen as causal and others are not in a particular case is the result of the point of how one looks at the world. At least in principle, any relation could be a cause and whether one chooses to identify something as a cause or as a partial cause and whether that identification is justified depends upon his/her purposes or reasons. That something is properly identified as a cause is the result of the combination of the existence of that thing in the world together with the criteria established by the person's purposes.

To say "this X caused that Y" is not only to say something but also to do something which is not done by saying "this X is related to that Y". What is done is to make a causal claim and in so doing the speaker is giving his guarantee that (1) X and Y existed at the time in question and (2) the relation between X and Y is of significant importance for his purposes. The significance of the identified causal relation is indicated by saying either "this X caused that Y" or "this X was a cause of that Y". If "this X caused that Y" is said then the discovery that X does not exist or

the discovery that the relation between X and Y is not the most salient relation for the speaker's purposes thereby defeats his causal claim. Note that alternative utterances do not share the same fate of retroactive disclaimer. If "this X is related to that Y" is said then to show that the relation which holds between X and Y is that which holds between a mythical object or event and an actual object or event. To show that the relation between X and Y is, for the purposes of the speaker, trivial only indicates the nature of the relation and not that the speaker was wrong to say "this X is related to that Y".

It is the purpose, either of the person asking for the specific historical causal claim or of the person making an unsolicited claim, that determines which of an indefinite number of possible replies is appropriate. For example, if I am asked "What caused this paper to be read to this meeting?" then the following may or may not be appropriate answers; (1) "The intellectual stimulation provided by Ennis caused this paper to be read to this meeting"; (2) "When required to produce a dissertation, Haynes began writing and that caused this paper to be read to this meeting"; (3) "Someone asked Haynes if he would like to say something and that caused this paper to be read to this meeting"; (4) "Some to Haynes that he had nothing at all worth saying and that caused this paper to be read to this meeting"; (5) "The selection committee for conference papers made a mistake and that caused this paper to be read to this meeting". Without further information about the questioner's purpose it is unclear as to how we can decide which, if any, of the answers is appropriate. Each of the answers may be appropriate if the questioner had in mind one of the following roles of specific historical causal claims as outlined by Ennis:

- to help allocate credit and blame (and perhaps also reward and punishment) for the production of effects that are of interest...
- to help understand the past and present in the light of the past...
- to ground causal possibility statements, which can serve as warnings...
- to ground broader causal generalizations, which can serve as recipes...
- to suggest a place where we might have interfered in the course of events, if we were able and sufficiently interested in doing so."

If we are aware of the questioner's purpose and the role of the specific historical causal claim which was given in answer, we are in a better position to assess the claim. That either X or Y did not exist at the

time in question is sufficient to show that the claim is unjustified but to show that they did exist at the time in question is not to support the claim in any significant way. The claim is to be supported, or rejected, on the basis of the relevance of X's relation to Y given the purposes for which the claim was made and the appropriateness of the role of the claim in terms of those purposes. A further ground for criticizing the specific historical causal claim by using an expression like "But X didn't really cause Y", is that the questioner's purpose was inappropriate, given the theoretical framework which gave rise to that purpose, or that the theoretical framework itself was inadequate because it was incoherent, irrelevant or merely different from that held by the person criticizing the claim.

Rather than open the floodgates of subjectivism, the emphasis on purposes provides criteria for judging what are causal relations which are totally lacking if one adheres strictly and exclusively to an account of causality of the kind which says "In its most rigorous form, causality denotes the sum of necessary and sufficient conditions for the occurrence of any event". By referring to purposes we are able to avoid Oakeshott's position where either everything is a cause and we have no basis upon which to discriminate between them or else nothing is a cause. It is in this way that we are able to avoid losing a useful way of speaking about the world.

A historian making specific historical causal claims is required to be objective, that is, not allow bias to override his professional judgement by ignoring evidence which does not suit his claim or misrepresenting his claim. What is not required of the historian is that he enters the field with a "tabula rasa" and presents the results of his endeavours with the inter-subjectively ascertainable facts in a neutral observation language. It should be recognized that a most difficult and important task of the historian is the sorting out of his theoretical framework so that he can ask the right questions.

Questions asked by historians require specific historical causal claims for answers, although generalizations can be obtained as the result of such investigations and may form the bulk of the written output of some historians. The historian does not, in seeking an explanation of a particular occurrence, produce a deductive argument with a set of facts as the minor premise, a set of laws or generalizations as the major



premise and a specific historical causal claim as the conclusion. It is not simply that this is not how the historian sets out his argument in thought or in print but that such an account omits the salient feature of the historical reasoning. No account is provided for determining which set of facts are to constitute the minor premise or for determining which of a number of valid arguments with true facts and laws is to produce the conclusion. Further, Adelman has suggested recently that the models of historical explanation given by Hempel and Dray are both based on a notion of rational selection of alternatives which does not fit the examples they use as well as does an account of historical explanation based on “opportune decision”.

While there is not the time, nor is this the place, to enter into the details of the controversial area of rationality and explanation in history, certain points have arisen in the course of this paper that seem to indicate the relevance of specific historical causal claims for teacher and students of history, viz.,

- Children, professional historians, teachers and students of history all make specific historical causal claims and they do so with varying degrees of skill and for different purposes;
- The purposes for which the specific historical causal claims are made are what determine which of the relations in the world will count as a causal relation;
- In order to criticize a specific historical causal claim one may seek to show that the relation posited in the causal claim did not exist or that the claim is somehow irrelevant, given the purposes for which it was made, or that the theoretical framework which gave rise to the purpose is defective in a particular way;
- The point of doing history may be to understand the content under study or it may be to develop methodological skills.

## **Conclusion**

With regard to the teaching and studying of history, it would seem that understanding the historical content is intimately bound up with making specific historical causal claims rather than with memorizing immutable facts. Textbooks which are fundamentally chronologies should therefore be recognized for the stultifying things they are. Courses, in which history is taught so that students memorize and regurgitate facts, even if the facts are learnt from an excellent narrative textbook, should also

be seen to miss the point of doing history. Provided that teachers and students of history concentrate on the specific historical causal claims of professional historians as presented in adulterated summary form in textbooks or as conclusions in historical works, that is, so long as the emphasis is on learning the content, then the methodological skills of the historian together with the development and use of theoretical frameworks may be seen to be irrelevant. What is required is that teachers and students of history recognize the commitment they make when they make specific historical causal claims. In making such claims they offer their guarantee that the relation they have selected meets the criteria appropriate to the purposes for making the claim. As such, this requires that teachers and students of history are aware of the criteria, purposes and theoretical framework they and others use in making specific historical causal claims and that part of doing history is attempting to improve their ability to make such claims by attending to these aspects of the process.

One would assume that recognition of the aspects of specific historical causal claims outlined in this paper would indicate that introductory courses in history would have, as their content, exemplars of historical method and puzzle-solving so that students could be initiated into the discipline of history. After such an initiation, the student would then be in a position to choose to pursue the study of historical topics of interest at greater depth and further develop his methodological skills. Teachers would then be in position to use these skills in their classroom to develop the students' enjoyment and deep understanding of history.

Too often history curricular have been based on the notion that there is a body of fact which is good for the student to know and which may, perhaps, help make the student into a good citizen. One would suggest that the teaching of history may be more fruitful if it is thought of as teaching how to make specific historical causal claims in history. This is not to say that teaching how to make specific historical causal claims is the only fruitful aim of history teaching for it may be that the teaching of history could also be usefully thought of as developing the notion of time. Nor is it claimed that teaching specific historical causal claims is the sole responsibility of history teachers as it is also the responsibility, for example, of those who teach natural science.

History is a complex subject and teaching history is even more

complex. Effective teaching of history is more than the transmission of knowledge, but rather it is a process where students and teachers interact in the classroom as they share ideas, reflect and engage in reasoning. The process of teaching students how to make specific historical causal claims is a process of getting students to participate in their own learning and in constructing their own understanding resulting to deep learning. The general claim underlying this paper is that, at an appropriate point in their formal education, children should be initiated into major disciplinary studies by way of consideration of the central methodological features of those disciplines.

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\* I am pleased to acknowledge the helpful comments from my history methods students in the M. Ed programme. Some may argue that the cause and the effect may occur simultaneously but I think that nothing in this paper hangs on that issue. The point of 'historical' in 'specific historical causal claims' is to distinguish such claims from specific causal claims of the form 'this "X will cause that Y'.

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