

PHANTOM ALIBI

The Impact of the International 'Ought'

But what exactly, it may be asked, is the practical importance of the distinctions between the committee and its members, and between leaders individually, leaders collectively, government, people and state? The importance of these distinctions may be seen wherever a judgment is being passed upon the moral merits of some step in, say, a foreign policy. The country concerned is, let us assume, in the language of those whose criticism we are discussing, a 'Christian' country. For the individual Christian citizen the question might have been: What, as a Christian, can I countenance, and of what is it incumbent upon me publicly to wash my hands? The question raised, however, is neither: What am *I*, a Christian, nor: What are *we*, a Christian people, to do? It is: What is ours, a Christian country, to do? A Christian country—among countries not all of them Christian! Do countries, as such, have any distinctively Christian responsibilities to one another? Could we sensibly expect our non-Christian fellow-citizens to agree with us that they have? And, Christian criteria apart, have countries any kinds of responsibilities, other than legal ones, to one another? Have they in fact? Have they in theory? If so, in what kinds of theory?

Amongst others there are always the following questions to be kept distinct: (a) What ought I personally to do? (b) What ought my country's government to do? and (c) What ought my country to do? It is in the light of one's answer to (c) that one can proceed to consider (b) and of one's answer to (b) that one can go on to consider (a). When put in relation to a matter for our present decision, these questions are not immediately interchangeable. Nor are their counterparts interchangeable, when the historian, in his evaluating of policies pursued by others in times past, puts them to himself.

It cannot be said of all historians that they consistently bear these distinctions in mind, at any rate when reporting to us on what, by their researches, they have found. When Britain, for example, 'gave' independence to India, who in fact did what?

To the lawyer, as a technician, the answers to such questions are, or should be, tolerably obvious. If a treaty binds two countries, or, if one country is in default, it is in point of legal doctrine that this is so. But when a country has done its duty, to whom, by the historian, should be accorded the credit? Which thinking-cap should the historiographer wear? Should it be that of primitive impressionism, or of adolescent scepticism based on naïve realism, or, of sophisticated realism? For which kind of reader is he to cater? Not always does every history-book-writer seem exactly to know. But he does know, presumably. And anyhow, submittedly, he ought to.

The Historiographic Dilemma

Primitive impressionism continues, let us say, to hold 'Germany' answerable for the first world war. What the historian looks into is the contribution made, and in what conditions, by individuals such as von Moltke, Bethmann-Hollweg and the Kaiser. If on balance he finds himself concluding that primitive impressionism has had it broadly right, how shall he present this result? What he cannot do is to pose as personally any longer a primitive impressionist, for that, at least, he no longer is. If then he nevertheless puts it that 'Germany' was not blameless, this is not a simple statement of the facts that he has found. Nor, on the other hand, will he have been investigating a technically legal issue. The answer he is giving is a historian's answer to a historian's, not a lawyer's to a lawyer's, question. How comes he then to speak, if he does so, of 'Germany', as distinct, say, from certain Germans, at all? Are we to say that, as a lawyer in legal, and an economist in economic, categories, so a historian does his thinking in a distinctive kind, the historian's kind, of categories? As there is legal, and as there is economic, theory, is there, analogously, something to be differentiated as historian's, or historical, theory? If yes, then differentiated from what? The answer seems to be that the historian does indeed relate the past in

terms not so much of fact as of theory; but—that there is nothing particularly remarkable about that. Nothing remarkable, because it happens to be what we all do, in so far as, though no longer primitive impressionists, we are not mere adolescent sceptics either. The only question is whether the historian, in using language appropriate to sophisticated realism, is always fully alive to what he is doing, so that he does not slip into thinking in terms of the primitive impressionism with which his language, in addressing his public, is consistent enough.

The Pitfalls of Linguistic Usage

For the sophisticated realist does, it is true, content himself with the language of the primitives. Only he does it with a difference. He does it, in short, with a sufficient awareness of the difference between the metaphorical and the specific, between the notional and the factual, between the conventional and the true. Those, for instance, who have fallen in a war: do we object to their being rated as heroes? Surely not. Yet do we by this our acquiescence beg unwittingly any questions of fact? Do we in our inner minds necessarily ascribe heroism to each and all of them, as if the alternative, cowardice, must necessarily have brought them through alive? Hardly. The truth probably is that, in speaking of the fallen as heroes, we no more impute actual heroism to particular individuals than we beg any questions in imputing honourableness to an M.P. Our conventional way of speaking of them may or may not reflect a conventional way of thinking, of M.Ps.

The idea that every fallen conscript was heroic, or that every little baby is a darling, or ever parent 'fond'—all these are conventional notions. So, presumably, is the idea that, say, Cambridge, as distinct from certain oarsmen, may win a boat race. Or that France and Germany may patch up a quarrel. Or that Germany may still be to blame. Or that Britain did the right thing in India. In our minds, along with these conventional notions, we as people of sophistication carry images, sociologically realistic, of the facts they imply.

Do Historians Pull Punches?

And if, as mere laymen, with our relatively lackadaisical thinking habits, we thus remain sensitive to the realities, how

much more may this not be assumed of the professionals? The popular historian, we may perhaps be certain, remains perfectly clear that those non-existent characters, those notional entities, those mythological beings, Britain, India, Germany, really never themselves took any positive, fleshly, or even any metaphorical, hand in the events that he is reporting upon at all. They simply did not happen to be physically present on the relevant, or on any other, occasion. Like the lawyers, the historians may, as do the rest of us, have their wonted way of speaking and of thinking about the actual facts, but none has thereby any influence upon those actual facts, in so far as they are past, and done with. It is true that our popular historian uses his customary language rather as if he believed it to be literally true. But being, as we are bound to presume, not utterly naïve, he knows that Germany, for instance, was never involved and thus was not to blame. The only question is: Why then does he speak and write as if she had been? Is it that he is using conventional and simplified language for expressing something much more complex which indeed might be literally true? But, if so, what? After all, it is not unimportant for us to know whether, in grammatically blaming Germany, or France, or the Vatican, for something, the historian is actually declaring those 'persons' that he names to blame. In speaking of the sea as angry, we do not impute anger to the sea. But in speaking of France as helpful, or touchy, or vindictive, does not the historian sometimes come rather close to ascribing the qualities in question to France?

Of course he does, in common with us all. For, as the lawyer talks his theory, so do we, and along with us our historian instructor, talk ours. Ours, and his, is the language of a certain sort of theory, the theory, let us acknowledge it, of diplomatics, the theory in terms of which diplomacy proceeds.

The Expectations of England

It is true that the historian, in employing the idiom of diplomatics, may be yielding to a romantic streak in his personal image of the real. He may even have been reading poetry. Or remember Nelson, with his 'England expects . . .'. May

that not have conveyed the very thought that was in Nelson's mind? Nelson's idiom had about it something of the poetic, something of the politically rhetorical, something of naval convention, something of personal primitive impressionism. But the historian knows.

So also should the social cosmologist know. What the cosmologist does, or should do, is, G. E. Moore-fashion, to ask for the 'analysis' of what people are saying. And the result may be as it were to substitute the physician's technical diagnosis for the patient's account of his trouble. The historian is peculiar in that, though his investigation be as strictly scientific as is the skilled physician's, the language in which he communicates his findings is more likely to be the language, misleading if not meaningless as it may be, of the patient. Diplomatic theory posits the personality, the presence, and the participation, of the state. So does popular, and poetic, convention. But cosmology must bear in mind that it is mere convention, and—shall we say?—nothing more.

When signalling 'England expects . . .', Nelson was not, presumably, invoking diplomatic theory. Nor was he composing poetry; or indulging in political rhetoric; or merely availing himself of a naval jargon. He was not just giving unstudied expression to the way he felt. Nor was he just using a metaphor for conveying a complicated matter of fact. What then was he doing? He was affirming in a straightforward and unadorned manner what was indeed, notionally, the then existing state of affairs. What he was giving was not merely his private interpretation: it was the orthodox social theory of the matter. It was a social theory whose prevalence and orthodoxy and natural acceptability were due precisely to the ease with which people like Nelson, and the rest of us, could feel and think that way. And historians too.

Two-track Minds

One might imagine somebody, not simply because he was naïve but because he was timid, thinking to resist in himself a disposition to feel sentimental or romantic, lest he lose altogether his capacity, at need, to call a spade a spade. But others of us, and thus do we hope to get the best of both moods, believe we know very well when to be sentimental and when severely

matter of fact. At one moment man is pining for his dream cottage; at another he is resenting its perforated roof, its rudimentary plumbing and its distance for the bus. To the mother whose infant is at one moment the little darling, it will, presently, be again the little wretch. The world of my illusions and the world of my experience play Box and Cox. Life is a thrill and a burden, both.

Our moods, let us recognise it, vary between widely separated extremes. The mother is well aware of being ambivalent in her feelings for her child. When poetry has momentarily possessed me I may feel sincerely what I say of the angry sea. Soon, a prey to seasickness and hence temporarily allergic to the very thought of poetry, I resent, without reason, the sea's behaviour, yet do not impute it to anger. The historian, blaming Germany, is not always entirely innocent of the primitive impressionism that saw Germany herself as also in part to blame. But now, in the disciplined spirit of a scientific social cosmology, he consciously re-constructs his language as merely the conventional shorthand formulation of the fact that individual Germans seem deserving between them of so vital a part of the blame that a feeling that Germany is the culprit comes natural, objectively dubious though this, as a way of putting it, may be.

Dishonour where that is Due

Notionally, action occurs on a number of levels. Factually, it is all individual, and all blame for it individual blame. Official indignation may be expressed at the behaviour of collectivities holistically conceived, or of organisations seen as persons. But genuine indignation, if realistically directed, will fall only upon individuals, whether severally, or in common with others. Yet this is not of course the way in which the behaviour of countries is commonly appraised. Instead, the state is conceived of as if itself a living person, and its relationships as if those between individuals in a context of private life. And, with a major premise, What is wrong for the individual cannot be right for the state, one quickly arrives at a verdict of Guilty-my-Lord—and with no recommendation to mercy—against whatever state it may happen to be. One's gaze tends so often to centre upon what is notionally, not actually,

the case. Officially, of course, whatever has happened is what has happened in the official theory. And in the official theory it is indeed the states and governments that do what is done, and should accordingly have the credit and the blame.

It is, in the eyes of the academic observer, bent on tracing responsibility to centres of real, not just of postulated, volition—to the wills, that is, of real people—it is in his eyes that the official picture becomes a veil that he must thrust aside. For if this be not done, the possibility is that a phantom will serve as a scapegoat, and guilty flesh and blood get off scot free.

In the United Kingdom, for instance, the power of ultimate decision lies, in formal theory, in a specific quarter, namely, with the notionally-single electorate—conceived holistically as the unitary seat of a single will. And persons of flesh and blood are each of them responsible only for such part, whether actively or by omission, as they may individually have had in causing or permitting 'it', the electorate, to behave in such a way. The procedure of such ultimate 'decision-making' is strictly speaking such that it seems almost frivolous to ask for solid evidence of anyone's being existentially responsible for it at all. It is a system whereby results can be got without anyone having to be identifiably responsible, unless notionally only. How much more congenial—and how much more customary—to remain on the level of things primitively notional, and, ignoring the multiplicity altogether, either blame the state itself, or else assign to some single individual a responsibility out of all proportion to any personal opportunity he may ever have had for controlling the flow of events.

The Knight that Failed

In imputing personality to the state, as the member of international society, modern social theory does nothing very new. It merely takes advantage of a rooted disposition of man's emotional and mystical self. The folklore or mythology which sees international relations as those between personified states is as dominant today in personal, prevalent, collective, and communal, calculations as it can ever have been. In recounting therefore the evolution of those quasi-interpersonal relations, the historian is merely attuning his idiom to the ear and

the understanding of the common reader. That he should find this so easy a thing to do is most convenient. What is indeed remarkable is the ease with which he does it, even when presenting the upshot of inquiries all of which have been concerned with the doings of flesh and blood. Contrast the judge. The judge of course is well aware that what his language reflects is not the facts as they nakedly are, but those facts as they figure in contemplation of law. But the historian seems scarcely to remember that in his kind of summing up it is the position not in fact but in terms of a sort of mythology that he is giving. That there has been a migration in his thought from one to the other of two logical planes, that of the factual and that of the notional, he scarcely seems to know. Certainly his reader is not warned of the transition. Rarely is he advised against attributing blame to Germany when it is Germans only who have been shown to him as deserving of censure.

There is as little intrinsic validity in imputing blame to a country as a country as in reporting a sea as angry or in calling silly the knight on a chess board for succumbing to a pawn. But, rather as we may be tempted to impute folly to the chessman, or wrath to the sea, so in the same uncareful manner may we find ourselves blaming Germany.

Do we never then regard it as proper for a historian to end an inquiry by blaming Germany? We do, do we not? Do we not, in effect, assume that there is a species of doctrine (we might call it 'historical doctrine') which, like legal doctrine, deems things to be such as they strictly are not? If so, we shall presumably claim, for the words of the historian, that they are not just metaphorical, nor even merely the simplification of a complex truth, but aptly reflective of what we are here calling historical 'doctrine', a species which imputes personality to the country as such. Or that at least is what, in logic, we might be expected to do.

International law does, of course, notoriously see the country as a person. So too does diplomatic theory. And so, it would now appear, does 'historical' doctrine. So too, come-to-think-of-it, does the doctrine, the social doctrine, of the man-in-the-street. But, by contrast, so definitely *not* does the analysis performed by an austere realistic social science. So rooted in

our colloquial speech and thinking is the convention whereby countries count as persons, that the social cosmologist has almost to apologise for the pedantry that requires him to insist that they are not.

Why Blame Anybody?

The truth is that blaming an individual and blaming a bank or a sovereign state are different sorts of blaming. The more one reflects on what an individual has done the less may be one's disposition to excuse him. But the more one reflects on the behaviour of a sovereign state or a bank the more does one's mental picture of whom it is that one is blaming dissolve before one's mental eye, giving place to a fuzzy vision of various individuals contributing each in his degree to a process whose outcome one deplores. One should recognise that the vivid understanding of what really happens when a state commits a wrong is not readily to be squared with the attributing of blame to the state, as such, for what 'it' has 'done'. If he himself is to be distributing praise and censure, let the student clear his thinking on what exactly he is doing, on what grounds, and with what philosophical warrant.

Sometimes it may be easier, yet still emotionally satisfactory, to say of some process that such a thing ought never to have happened, without then bothering to specify who, for the fact of its so having happened, should bear the blame. In life generally, and especially in international relations, it is useful to remember that the attributing of blame may well be idle, and better done without. But is this the idea with which historians most commonly write? And their readers most commonly read? The transition from the sifting of evidence on what happened in fact to a judgment in terms of what may be held to have happened in theory is seldom explicit. It is almost as though the transition were not made consciously at all. As though, that is to say, when statesmen performed certain motions, England, a person distinct from those statesmen, was understood as behaving—not figuratively merely but in fact. Allied intervention in the Russian civil war of 1918–19 forms, for instance, a complicated story. Why should it be necessary to establish that any single country had any precise conception of what it was about? If Soviet doctrine sees the U.S.A. as

having deliberately assailed the infant U.S.S.R., one ought not indeed to complain. For are not western historians often themselves a party to the use of just such language? The mythology of the matter is treated as if it were history. And the 'persons' who acted are then thought of as still today alive, and still of course to blame.