

'If the anti-realist account of truth is correct, then it is possible that at some time in the future those who deny the existence of the Holocaust will be asserting the truth.' - Discuss.

"Day by day and almost minute by minute the past was brought up to date. In this way every prediction made by the Party could be shown by documentary evidence to have been correct; nor was any item of news, or any expression of opinion, which conflicted with the needs of the moment, ever allowed to remain on record. All history was a palimpsest, scraped clean and reinscribed exactly as often as was necessary" Orwell 1984.

"Fatherland", a 1992 thriller by the English writer and journalist Robert Harris, takes the form of a detective story in an alternative history in which Nazi Germany won World War II. In the novel it is now the 1960s and evidence of the Holocaust has been eradicated. As far as ordinary people are concerned, the event never occurred. In Orwell's "1984", "memory holes" exist in various government ministries, and evidence which is to be wiped from human memory is deposited therein.

These two pieces of literature describe ways in which knowledge of past events can be altered. Some historical events can be eliminated altogether (as with the Holocaust in "Fatherland") and others can be created, as with the increase in the chocolate ration in "1984". In both of these cases, the effect is achieved by manipulating human memories, and is presented to the reader as repugnant, since it sets up a version of history apparently at variance with the immutable facts.

For realists, the story of the holocaust is a true story by virtue of the fact that the events making it up are independent of us; they are mind transcendent. The truth conditions for the holocaust would be real historical events. Even if there were no human memory left of the holocaust (reference Harris and Orwell) it would still be a real event in history. The truth of either of the two propositions "there was a Holocaust" and "there was no holocaust" would be governed by the rule of bivalence, accepted by realists. One of the propositions is true. We may not know which one, but one is still true. The lack of evidence would not alter the fact of the Holocaust.

It is important to note in passing here, that whether we are realists or anti-realists about the past, the problem of deciding the truth of history has always been a problem. Many see history as process rather than a series of events. The Holocaust is just such a process, consisting as it does, not of a single event, but a whole series of events, which, for the purpose of telling a historical story, we unite together under a single conceptual heading. In that excellent, but little-read book, "What Happened in History" by Gordon Childe, the writer explores the truth of the statement "Caesar crossed the Rubicon". Such statements view history through the eyes of metaphor; Caesar must have crossed the Rubicon many times throughout his career, no doubt regarding these crossings as a necessary and routine act. So what does it mean to say that "Caesar crossed the Rubicon"?

However, even if we take into account all of the difficulties of describing what actually went on in history, the problems of relating historical process and historical fact, and the untangling of metaphors, such as the "Crossing of the Rubicon", we are still able to find a correspondence between facts, processes, metaphors and actual real events. The difficulty of knowing history is an epistemological question; we can still be realist about the past; the Holocaust happened.

For the anti realist the position about events in the past would be more complex. As Wittgenstein famously stated, language is use, so that our understanding of propositions and sentences is manifest in our behaviour and use of them. Our knowledge of true propositions is not dependent on reference to mind independent facts. In Dummetts analysis, instead of relying on truth conditions for validating propositions, we should concentrate on their assertibility. The reason why we can assert propositions is because we have evidence which verifies their truth. Propositions are undecidable if they are not known to be determinately true or false and there is no method of investigating and settling the matter. Propositions such as

“there is a planet in the solar system whose existence will never be established”

are not only undecidable, but may (in a strong version of verificationism) actually be meaningless.

This has certain implications for our knowledge of past events. Dummett states that

“statements about the past, if they are true at all must be true in virtue of the traces past events have left in the present present memories and present evidence.”
(Truth and the Past).

Suppose that, in a hypothetical future time, a situation described in the novel *Fatherland* happened, where there was no remaining documentary evidence concerning the Holocaust, no present memories of that event, no remaining survivors or perpetrators. To a realist, the Holocaust is still a real event, but for anti realists

“past events, the memory of, and evidence for which has dissipated are expunged, not merely from our knowledge, but from reality itself; they are no more; they have not happened.”
(Truth and the Past)

It should immediately be stated that these remarks were made about past-tensed propositions in general, and not specifically about the Holocaust. Dummett was well aware of the possibility of a “vanishing past” in his account of verificationism, found the consequence “repugnant” (his word), and worked hard to find ways of saving both verificationism and the past.

Are there any steps we can take to save the “vanishing past”? The idea that vast areas of the past will become not merely unknown, but untrue is so counter-intuitive that it needs further exploration. One detail we might notice is that although people may not be able to assert a proposition such as

“a long time ago, an event called the Holocaust occurred, for which there is no existing evidence”;

they also cannot assert the proposition

“no event called the Holocaust for which there is no evidence ever occurred”.

For anti realists basing their position on verificationism, such a proposition would not be assertible and might even be meaningless.

Can we go further, and turn a proposition about the past existence of the Holocaust from an undecidable one to one which has truth conditions?

It seems that what we need to do is to show that the proposition P where

$P = (E \text{ Happened at time } t1 \text{ AND there is no evidence for } E \text{ at time } t2)$

is true. To the anti realist this is false, but to the realist it could be true. However, the realist needs to give some explanation as to why we should believe P .

Perhaps we could make some headway by arguing that we may have indirect grounds for assuming the truth of P . For example, an ideally placed hypothetical observer, "suitably located in space and time would have observed that state of affairs as obtaining there and then". (Dummett). I do not think that such indirect evidence could ever be strong enough to count as verification at time $t2$ for the occurrence of an event alleged to have happened at time $t1$.

It seems to me that the only way of grounding our belief for a past event for which there is no current evidence is to use a modal argument based on contingency. This would proceed as follows; if the Holocaust occurred at time $t1$ and there was evidence for it at time $t1$, then we may, in time $t2$, assert that the Holocaust occurred, even though the earlier evidence has disappeared.

As far as I can see, there is no other argument we can use, which leaves us in a very unsatisfactory position. If you are a verificationist, then you seem to be committed to accepting that large sections of the past will disappear; without verification there seems to be no way of asserting the truth of non-evidenced past events. You need to relax some of the principles of verification in order to "save the past" If you are a realist about the past, then you will need to find alternative ways to ground belief in the reality of past events, when there is no contemporary evidence for them. As a past student of history I believe in the importance of safeguarding historical memory and transferring it safely to future generations. This is a noble aim, but if such historical facts disappear from human record, then we are left with no way of verifying past real historical events.