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BIBLICAL CRITICISM PROPER: THE TRUE CRITICAL ATTITUDE

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IN a previous issue of this Review* the present writer submitted some observations on the critical process. The purpose of the present paper is to recur to a matter but slightly touched on in my former discussion and give it the fuller treatment that its importance demands. I refer to the spirit in which the critical process must be conducted, the subjective attitude that the critic himself must take up towards the evidence upon which the issue is to be decided, and towards the results of the decision itself. The importance of this matter lies in two considerations. One is that neither correct critical principles, nor a sound critical method, nor a just conception of the nature of the critical process, nor all three combined will be sufficient of themselves to insure valid conclusions, a really trustworthy decision of the issue to be adjudicated. The reason is obvious. Behind the principles, the method, and the process is the critic himself. Principles, method and process are after all mere instruments. The critic is the user of them. And as in all other cases the results produced in the use of instruments is largely determined by the subjective state of the person using them, by his conception of the material upon which he is engaged, his own attitude towards the outcome of his work. What, then, should be the attitude of the critic towards the evidence upon which the decision of the issue before him hinges? And what should be his attitude towards the possible results of the decision? The other thing that gives importance to the subject is the fact that very different answers have been given to these questions.

There are those, for example, that in the historical and literary criticism of the Bible claim "the Christian critic" does and should come to his task with the assumption that "the Bible contains a revelation from God, and that its

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writers are inspired." This, as I understand them, is the avowed position of a numerous body of able scholars both of the critical "center" and of the critical "right." As I have elsewhere endeavored to show, it is untenable. In the case of scholars of the "center" its effect is to vacate the terms "revelation" and "inspiration" of all real meaning. And in that of those of the "right" its effect is needlessly, but none the less certainly, to cast the shadow of suspicion over the conclusions at which they have arrived. Without going again over ground already traversed, it will be enough here to add that by no means all scholars of the "right" are committed to this view of the true critical attitude.

More prevalent and more plausible, though equally untenable, is the doctrine laid down by Langlois and Seignobos. Speaking of historical criticism, and speaking of it quite generally—not as applied to any particular writing or group of writings—these scholars say: "Here, as in every other science, the starting point must be methodical doubt. . . Applied to statements contained in documents, methodical doubt becomes *methodical distrust*. . . The historian ought to distrust *a priori* every statement of an author, for he cannot be sure that it is not mendacious or mistaken. . . . We must not postpone doubt till it is forced upon us by conflicting statements in documents; we must *begin* by doubting." (*Introd. to the Study of History*, pp. 157f.) The importance which Langlois and Seignobos attach to their doctrine, as well as the pith and point of it, are well indicated by their italics. With them it would seem to be nothing less than a fundamental postulate of all correct scientific method that the investigator assiduously cultivate and persistently maintain an attitude of distrust towards the evidence with which he is dealing. The historical critic is to "*begin*," they tell us, by "disputing" the veracity and accuracy of the written document that he is investigating

This doctrine, on its face so startling, is nevertheless so widely prevalent that it calls for a somewhat detailed examination. And first of all we shall do well to give impartial and careful attention to the considerations that

are supposed to justify it. One of these, much stressed by Langlois and Seignobos, is the obvious folly and peril of yielding to what they assert to be our "first and natural impulse . . . to accept every statement contained in a document, which is equivalent to assuming that no author ever lied or was deceived." (*Op. cit.*, p. 155.) So high a "degree of vitality" does "this spontaneous credulity" possess that the investigator's only hope of escaping its pernicious effects is to form and fix the habit of "methodically *distrusting*" every single statement of the author under examination. Our peril from "this spontaneous credulity" is enhanced, they tell us, by our not unnatural tendency to ignore the distinction between scientific procedure and judicial procedure, scientific evidence and judicial evidence, scientific proof and judicial proof. Historical Criticism, if it desire recognition as a science must put itself upon a scientific basis. If it is to claim for its results the kind of certitude that science yields, it must reproduce in its methods the precise and exacting methods and standards of science. "The practice of the established sciences teaches us the conditions of an exact knowledge of facts. There is only one scientific procedure for gaining knowledge of a fact, namely, *observation*." (*Op. cit.*, p. 172.) Not only so, but science is not satisfied with "haphazard observation." It demands that the observations upon which it predicates knowledge of facts be made by a trained observer, for a definite purpose, under such conditions and safeguards as experience has proven to be necessary to avoid "mal-observation." Testimony, however, rarely rises above "haphazard observation." Nay, the case for testimony is worse even than that. For testimony is reported or recorded "haphazard observation." But, here again, experience shows that to report or record an observation in such a way as to invest the report or record with real value as a source of a knowledge of the facts to which it relates requires the same kind of mental training, the same favorable conditions, and the same conscious use of safeguards against error as are required in making a scientific observation. Hence in science a knowledge of facts "is not established by testimony," certainly

not by the kind of testimony relied upon in judicial procedure. The judicial maxim that "the burden of proof rests with those who reject undiscredited testimony" has no standing in science, unless science itself be permitted to fix the standard of "valid testimony." For from the point of view of science neither the good faith of a witness, nor his personal knowledge of the facts to which his testimony relates constitute a sufficient basis for a scientific knowledge of those facts. For, despite good faith and personal knowledge on the part of a witness, the circumstances under which he observed the facts to which he testifies, and the circumstances under which he reports his observation alike conspire to insure an inaccurate knowledge of those facts. Hence scienes, like history, which are dependent upon testimony for a knowledge of the facts with which they deal, must necessarily *begin* with "methodical *distrust.*"

But the case for "methodical *distrust*" is stronger still. "Events can be known in two ways only: by direct observation while they are in progress; and indirectly by the study of the traces which they leave behind them." (*Op. cit.*, p. 63.) Obviously, "the facts of the past are only known to us by the traces of them which have been preserved." (*Op. cit.*, p. 64.) But such traces are of two kinds, namely, material traces, such as the effects left by a volcanic upheaval, and psychological traces, that is, a record in conventional symbols of the impression made by an event upon the mind of the person originally witnessing and narrating it. Indeed, since the document under inspection by the historical critic is rarely penned by the person originally observing the events which it narrates, what the critic has before him is really a psychological trace of a psychological trace. Thus, the critic has for the starting point a psychological trace—or written document, but for his goal the objective fact that caused this trace. Consequently "to arrive at the original event" it becomes necessary for the critic "to revive in imagination the whole of that series of acts performed by the author of the document which begins with the fact observed by him and ends with the manuscript." (*Op. cit.*, p. 66.)

Accordingly, the critic's problem may be stated as follows: "Given a statement made by a man of whose mental operations we have no experience, and the value of the statement depending entirely upon the manner in which these operations were performed; to ascertain whether these operations were performed correctly." (*Op. cit.*, p. 161.) So that between his starting point—the document before him and his goal—the event that caused the mental operations visualized in the document, the historical critic "has to pass through a complicated series of inferences, closely interwoven with each other, in which there are innumerable chances of error; while the least error, whether committed at the beginning, middle or end of the work, may vitiate all of his conclusions." (*Op. cit.*, p. 64.) So very plausible may the doctrine of the propriety, or rather the necessity of "methodical distrust" to any really scientific criticism be made.

Fortunately this doctrine is merely plausible. From MM. Langlois and Seignobos's statement of the case confronting the historical critic, it would be quite as easy, but also quite as unwise and unwarranted, to infer the impossibility of obtaining any real knowledge of the past, as to infer the necessity for "methodical distrust" of the statements of the witnesses through whom we have whatever knowledge of the past we possess. Indeed, were "methodical *distrust*" possible, as fortunately it is not, we should have to resign ourselves to nescience of the past—our own past of yesterday, as well as the remoter past of bygone centuries. To say this is not to challenge the substantial accuracy of MM. Langlois and Seignobos' account of the task and the methods of Historical Criticism. Still less is it in any measure to challenge the necessity for, or to impair the force of, their none too urgent warning against the perils of the intellectual indolence and moral apathy that are the parents of credulity. It is simply to deny that the inference drawn by MM. Langlois and Seignobos is a necessary inference from their acount of the situation confronting the historical critic.

In setting "methodical distrust" over against "spon-

taneous credulity" MM. Langlois and Seignobos simply repeat the mistake of those biblical scholars who set "believing" over against "unbelieving criticism." To genuine criticism a presumption of error is as repugnant as a presumption of accuracy. From its very nature it must decline to be trammelled by either presumption. Its very purpose is to ascertain whether the claim—for in all testimony there is an implied claim—which it has under investigation is erroneous or accurate. Its conclusion must be controlled not by a presumption one way or the other, but solely by the evidence. To say this is truismatic. No doctrine regarding criticism is more fundamental, more elementary, more familiar. The true inference from MM. Langlois and Seignobos's statement of the case confronting the historical critic is simply that he needs to take most careful account of the delicate and highly complicated nature of the evidence which he is called upon to sift, test, weigh and estimate.

Further, MM. Langlois and Seignobos will be found to have given but a partial, not to say a superficial account, of what they call our "spontaneous credulity," and to have wholly overlooked its real significance. They are justified in saying that "Natural credulity is deeply rooted in indolence" and that "It is easier to believe than to discuss, to admit than to criticise, to accumulate documents than to weigh them." (*Op. cit.*, p. 70.) But in saying this they are very far from placing their finger upon the real origin of our credulity. For as hypocrisy is an unconscious tribute to virtue, so credulity is an unimpeachable evidence of the general trustworthiness and the sufficient accuracy of human testimony. How long does credulity survive misplaced confidence? Under the blighting influence of such misplaced confidence how quickly and how completely is credulity supplanted by incredulity? The very fact, therefore, that there is a prevailing tendency to depend upon testimony is itself conclusive evidence that men find that generally speaking testimony is dependable. *Ignavia critica* of itself is no more likely to produce credulity than incredulity. In which it will actually issue depends upon the experience of the individual. As a matter of fact,

credulity and incredulity are both abnormal, unhealthy states of mind. And suspicion is not a whit less prejudicial to the genuine critical process than credulity.

To what has been said must now be added the statement that taken at all stringently the doctrine of "methodical doubt," and still more that of "methodical *distrust*" is simply impracticable. This is certainly and obviously true in the sphere of daily life. Descartes, himself the father of the doctrine, expressly admits this. To begin with distrust in the intercourse of daily life would be at once to land ourselves in a bog and to keep ourselves floundering there forever. No order of mind is too low or too feeble to hopelessly entangle itself in doubts. The doctrine is equally impracticable in the sphere of philosophy, science and scholarship. As one reads Descartes' account of how he threaded his way through a maze of things that might be doubted to the undoubtable "*cogito, ergo sum*" one smiles. Descartes' reasons for his doubts seem artificial and far-fetched. And when at least he settles down upon his indubitable proposition, one wonders that his ingenuity has so soon become exhausted. It is as if Noah's weary dove had folded its pinions and settled down to rest upon a bright sunbeam. The fact is that Descartes' "*cogito*," his "*sum*" and his "*ergo*" have all been doubted, and may still be doubted by anyone who is so disposed. "All physical science," says Huxley, "starts from certain postulates. . . . The validity of these postulates is a problem of metaphysics; they are neither self-evident, nor are they, strictly speaking, demonstrable." (*The Advance of Science in the Last Half Century*, pp. 31, 33. Appleton, 1898.) We may not wholly agree with this statement, but there is no mistaking its meaning. According to Huxley, the very postulates upon which all physical science rests may, speaking abstractly, be doubted—"they are neither self-evident, nor are they, strictly speaking, demonstrable." The truth is, that this doctrine of "methodical *distrust*" is simply rational caution gone mad.

Finally, it is only fair to MM. Langlois and Seignobos to say that their statements touching "methodical *distrust*" should be read and understood in the light of their

discussion as a whole. Thus, speaking of "the critical investigation of authorship," or "analytical criticism," while insisting upon the necessity of distinguishing between documents and cautioning against a credulous acceptance of "traditional ascriptions," MM. Langlois and Seingobos are careful to remind their readers that "The extreme of distrust in these matters is almost as mischievous as the extreme of credulity." (*Op. cit.*, p. 99.) Again they say: "The whole of criticism thus reduces to the drawing up and answering two sets of questions: one for the purpose of bringing before our minds those general conditions affecting the composition of the document, from which we may deduce general motives for distrust or confidence; the other for the purpose of realizing the special condition of each statement, from which special motives may be drawn for distrust or confidence." (*Op. cit.*, p. 164.) From this it is evident that in the actual prosecution of a critical investigation the critic must maintain an open mind and neither distrust nor accept a statement apart from good reasons. This is obviously a far remove from *beginning* with distrust. To distrust for cause is, of course, entirely legitimate critical procedure. Commenting further upon the first of the two series of questions mentioned above, MM. Langlois and Seignobos say: "This first series of questions will yield the *provisional* result of enabling us to note the statements which have a *chance* of being mendacious." Here both the statement, and the italics employed in it, show how far MM. Langlois and Seignobos are from laying the rein upon the neck of "distrust." Similarly they say: "The second series of questions will be of use in determining whether there is any reason to distrust the accuracy of a statement." (*Op. cit.*, p. 172.) Here also we find them invoking "the rule of reason," as against an initial, unreasoning "distrust." In expounding and applying their doctrine of "methodical distrust," therefore, MM. Langlois and Seignobos themselves so qualify it as completely to transform it. As fully expounded by them, it amounts simply to the doctrine that in the case of documentary testimony the critic is to be sedulously upon his guard

against distrusting or trusting such testimony without sufficient reason. That, of course, is sound doctrine.

Over against both of the extreme views so far considered may be set the following statement of the correct critical attitude. It is from the pen of the late Dr. Willis J. Beecher.

"To be truly critical," says Dr. Beecher, "one must avoid undue assumptions. Genuine critical method takes nothing for granted save the subject under observation, the observing mind, the evidence and the laws of evidence."

"When you enter upon a critical study of the Bible, it may be that you already have a fixed opinion of its truthfulness and inspiration, an opinion in which you either accept or reject the common views on these subjects. Critical method does not require you to divest yourself of these opinions antecedent to examining the evidence. Persons sometimes misstate the law and say that it requires this, but such a requirement would be idiotic. What it requires is that you perfectly refuse to admit your preconceived opinion as a part of the case, that you exclude it from among the premises of the investigation." (*Reasonable Biblical Criticism*, p. 76.)

This clear and illuminating statement is so obviously just and so obviously in accord with the nature and aim of the critical process that it ought at once to commend itself to our acceptance.*

It is true that in this statement Dr. Cave does not dis-

*That this is the position of Dr. Alfred Cave is implied, when he says:

"Is the Old Testament historically veracious? That is the very question into which we are to inquire; and we mustn't therefore dogmagize upon the point at the outset. Does the Old Testament afford crucial evidence of the supernatural? A conviction upon the matter is to be the goal, and cannot be the starting point of our inquiry. Are the miracles of the Old Testament capable of a purely rational explanation? The question is to be discussed. Can the phenomena of Old Testament prophecy be attributed to a Shemetic genius for religion, and are they explicable therefore by natural causes? The answer is to come after investigation. When the Old Testament professes to guide our beliefs concerning God, sin, retribution, salvation, and a future life are such momentous doctrines of religion credible? In the sequel only does our method permit us to reply."

(*Inspiration of the Old Testament*, p. 25.)

criminate as sharply as he should have done between historical and literary criticism upon the one hand, and Biblical criticism proper on the other. But his first statement by itself makes it plain that in the case of the former, no less than in that of the latter, he would regard it as improper to start with the assumption that the books of the Old Testament "have a character peculiarly their own, as a revelation from God." He indicates clearly that he looks upon such assumptions as in the very nature of the case alien to the genius of genuine criticism.

And we find Dr. Orr saying:

> "Thus far we argree with Kuenen, that we must *begin* by treating the religion of Israel exactly as we would treat any other religion. Whatever our personal convictions—and of these, of course, we cannot divest ourselves—we must, in conducting our argument, place ourselves in as absolutely neutral an attitude of mind as we can."
> (*Problem of the Old Testament*, p. 14.)

For the purposes of this discussion it will be desirable to add to this general statement of Dr. Beecher some additional detailed statements touching other important elements in a correct critical attitude.

One of these is open-mindedness. As opposed to a "believing" or an "unbelieving," a credulous or an incredulous attitude—each of which implies a prejudgment—open-mindedness consists in an alert, but waiting, and, in a measure, passive attitude that seeks to allow the witness himself either to accredit or to discredit himself. The photographer is content so to adjust his camera as to secure a true focus on his subject. That done, he leaves the person or thing being photographed to make its own impression upon the plate prepared to receive it. So the open-minded critic simply puts himself into a position in which it will be possible for the witness, or the evidence, to make its own proper and correct impression upon his mind. The "focusing" in his case will consist in reminding himself of the "laws of evidence" applicable to the matter in hand. In particular, it will consist in assuring himself that he correctly apprehends what the witness has actually said; that he correctly understands the meaning of what the witness has said; that he has an intelligent

insight into the relation of the witness himself to the matter concerning which he is testifying—his external relations, both local and temporal, to the matter, and also his internal or subjective relations to it, and the like. It is only as this "focusing" is carefully and intelligently done that the investigator is in a position really to apprehend the significance of the testimony, and, of course, it is only as the critic correctly apprehends the testimony that he can hope intelligently to sift, test, weigh and estimate it.

Impartiality, that is to say equal hospitality, to all the evidence, pro and con, is, of course, another essential element in a correct critical attitude. Equal hospitality to all the evidence, however, must not be construed to mean indifference to what may be the result of the critical inquiry. Such indifference as to the outcome of the critical inquiry is sometimes represented as the ideal state of mind for the critic. But that such is not the case will be obvious to the least reflection. In a judicial inquiry where a human life is at stake, the juryman who is indifferent to the outcome, so far from being in an ideal position to render a verdict according to the law and the evidence, is morally disqualified to sit on the case. Where high interests are at stake, and especially where these are moral interests, indifference as to the issue of the inquiry would of itself evidence a moral obliquity, or a moral obtuseness or apathy that would be fatal to intelligent insight into the testimony upon which the issue turned. It is said that one of the very few occasions on which General Washington gave outward expression to his emotions was when he signed the death warrant of Major Andre. His obvious regret over the outcome of Andre's trial was not only highly honorable to himself, but furnished conclusive evidence of his genuine impartiality in dealing with the case.

Still a third element in a proper critical attitude is a willingness and ability to construe and judge the evidence *as a whole*. In every inquiry the evidence presents itself at first as a multitude of details. Perhaps the greatest danger of the critic is that he will, as we say, lose himself

among these details, that he will fail to perceive the relation between them. As a rule, however, experience proves that the evidence, both pro and con, tends to organize itself around some central and dominant element or elements. And it is only as considered in their relation to these central and dominant elements that the true significance of the great body of details will become manifest. It becomes, therefore, a matter of the first importance that the critic should be able to recognize these central features of the evidence and organize the details around them.

This leads to the notice of yet another element in a proper critical attitude. All evidence rarely points to the same conclusion. Indeed, it is not infrequently the case that the evidence for and against a certain conclusion is pretty evenly balanced. Hence it becomes important for the critic to cultivate the disposition to recognize and submit to the *preponderance* of evidence.

Finally, there are cases where the evidence is so evenly balanced, or is so defective as to preclude the possibility of a well-grounded judgment either for or against the claim under investigation. But since it is of the very essence of a correct critical process that its conclusions be based upon the evidence, it is indispensable, where evidence is lacking, or where it is evenly balanced, that the critic be disposed and able to withhold a judgment upon the issue before him. So intolerant is the human mind of a state of suspense that, when confronted with such a situation, the critic is in grave danger of substituting conjecture for evidence. This is sometimes even praised as "critical boldness." It really deserves to be pilloried as uncritical effrontery. To say this, though, is not to affirm that there is no place for conjecture; but simply to maintain that conjecture ought not to masquerade under the guise of criticism. "Agnosticism," of course, has a bad name. But MM. Langlois and Seignobos are clearly right in saying that "when the 'testimony' is insufficient to give us the scientific knowledge of a fact, the only correct attitude is 'agnosticism,' that is, a confession of ignorance." *Op. cit.*, p. 159.

It only remains to add that if any one supposes that it is an easy matter either to attain or to maintain a proper critical attitude, it simply shows that he has but a slight acquaintance with the limitations and infirmities either of others or of himself. A very slight acquaintance with "critical" literature reveals the humiliating fact that "criticism" constantly tends to pass into "apologetic" or "polemic"; the "critic" to become "counsel for the defense" or "prosecuting attorney." "Eternal vigilance" is the price not only of liberty but of a pure and valid critical process.