

Murphey Symposium

Comprehending Common Ground

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Some thirty-nine years ago, in the late spring of 1957, I found myself grousing at Tony Garvan, my first teacher in the University of Pennsylvania's American Civilization major. Why, I wanted to know, did I have to do a senior seminar with someone else after spending my junior year getting used to Garvan's view of the field?

Garvan struck a characteristic pose: hands in pants pockets, coat tails behind, body bent forward from the waist, chin thrust out, eyes closed, mouth in a compressed smile—the whole expressing something between kindness and condescension. Then, wagging his head, he told me not to worry, that I'd get a great deal from Dr. Murphey.

On that occasion, Garvan was quite right.

Many years later, in a conversation about the effects of studying with Murray Murphey, Jay Mechling remarked about how many of us had adopted the professor's mannerisms: fiddling with a watch before class; rolling shirt sleeves to a certain point above the elbows; planting elbows on the lectern and pumping forearms wrists and hands up and down to make points and energy; reading lectures from a tidy pile of plainly illegible notes; hissing sighs to signal doubt or maybe even doom descending upon a student's point; allowing narrowed eyes, a slow nod and the spread of a crooked smile to indicate that one had a point.

I did none of these, of course. The gestures of tallish skinny redheads do not look good on portly shorts. But I did adopt locutions—"Lo to say nothing of

behold” comes out of me upon occasion to this very day. And I did adopt a particular seminar strategy, a game if you will, that I think I named “Dumb Bastard.”

The game was invented in 1959 or 60 or so in a seminar on national character composed of a very cranky bunch of graduate students who could find nothing good to say about any of the assigned readings. Wearying of our carryings-on, Murray declared that, henceforth, criticism would have to be part of one’s response to a question: Why would someone as smart as So-And-So write a book as dumb as *Such-And-Such*? Ever inclined to play, I did, and found, lo to say nothing of behold, that it was most often the reader for whom the game was named.

It is in the spirit of “Dumb Bastard” that I want to open this discussion, albeit with a slight change of terms in the query: For me, the question is how anyone as reasonable as Murray Murphey could write a book as perverse as *Philosophical Foundations of Historical Knowledge*!

Murray’s reasonableness pervades the book: He systematically states proponents’ reasons for every position he discusses, his reasons for accepting or rejecting their views and for holding his own, and his reasons for taking the full set of his positions to be a coherent whole.

Why, then, call his book perverse? Well, in this age of antifoundational discourse he titles the thing “*Philosophical Foundations*” and produces 350 pages in which the lion of antifoundational thought is not mentioned once. And while the same 350 pages are said to be about historical knowledge, only 43 of them are devoted specifically to that topic. But these are small things. The big one has to do with confirming theories in history, and about it I want to be a bit more specific.

By “philosophical foundations” Murray means the ontological and epistemological arguments that define and justify positions on such basic issues as meaning and reference, intersubjectivity, causation, explanation and prediction, truth and reality. His treatment of these issues delineates and defends a kind of pragmatic realism, derived from Pierce and Dewey, against various takes on Hempel’s and Carnap’s positivisms, on Quine’s Underdetermination Theory, and on an assortment of relativist, pluralist and narrativist views.

A rough summary of Murray’s line of argument as it pertains to history might run something like this: The data of history are remains of the past that exist in the historian’s present. Inquiry, the pursuit of historical knowledge, begins with the historian’s experience of those data. “Experience is not a pure ‘given’ independent of all conceptualization. But it is that from which inquiry starts” (220), that which the historian tries to explain by positing the existence of past objects and events that generated the experienced data, and by formulating theories to account for the posited entities’ actions. Inquiry then proceeds by specifying what else should be found among the remains of the past if the theories are correct. Finding what theories lead us to expect serves to confirm them. Since

it is often possible to propose different theories for the same data, confirmation often involves trying to choose among alternative theories by deriving from them different expectations and then seeing which are met by fresh data.

Ultimately, the quest is for the best confirmed theory—the theory that has the highest likelihood of being always confirmed. Since new data are always possible, certainty about a theory's truth is not possible. The best confirmed theory is, at any time, then, our best estimate of a true theory. Those things that are posited in a true theory are real. It is in this sense and within these limits that historical accounts tell us truthfully what really happened in the past.

For 299 pages we are led by sweet reason through a meticulous and elegant examination of the philosophical foundations of this view—foundations which make it overwhelmingly clear that the whole thing rests on confirmation. It is on page 299 that perversity enters with the observation that “[w]hat poses a problem, and a serious one, for [this] position is the difficulty of confirming theories about the past. If . . . our knowledge of the past is a theoretical construction developed to explain present data, then the critical issue is whether or not these theories can be confirmed or disconfirmed. . . . The answer to that question is less clear than one would like” (299-300).

The difficulty, in essence, is that the past cannot be observed directly, and its remains that can be observed are fragmented in multiple and often unknown ways. Most of the established methods of inquiry into human affairs—interviewing, experimentation, participant observation, sampling and so on—are either totally useless or of doubtful applicability to historical cases.

Why develop and defend a view of historical knowledge as something that requires confirmation if confirmation is so elusive? Why would someone as reasonable as Murray write such a perverse book?

Three things occur to me that also tie the book to important issues in American studies—limitations and uses of the knowledge we produce; interdisciplinarity as a way of dealing with such limitations; common ground: (For a recent statement of these issues see A.S.A. 1,3.)

1. Inherent in the argument that we can have true knowledge of past reality is a compelling explication of the conditions and, therefore, the limits of such knowledge. On these limits, rooted as they are in the infirmities of our data, we need all the clarity we can get. For attention to the limited nature of our knowledge of the past is precisely what gets lost in disputes about matters historical—matters like museum displays, textbooks, and school curricula that can deeply affect our collective life. Indeed, the durability and vitality of such disputes makes one wonder: Would we argue so long and so forcefully for our particular accounts of the past, would we want them to carry much weight in the present, if we considered each account weak by virtue of its basis in data? If yes, wouldn't we be indulging a perversity that puts our professor's in the shade—allowing the elusiveness rather than the possibility of confirmation in Murray's sense to justify

advancing strongly put claims about the past as bases for strong actions in the present?

2. Inherent in Murray's formulation of the nature of historical knowledge is an indication of what is required to get beyond its limits. Regarding the sampling problems associated with fragmentary data, for example, he proposes combining "... types of data which have different and offsetting biases [because a] theory that can integrate a wide range of data types . . . has a better claim than one that is based on only one kind of data" (300-301). Or regarding the problem of missing data, he argues that we must either find it or "... find other data from which the missing data can be inferred, [a feat which] depends upon establishing theoretical linkages between types of data, such that from one type certain characteristics of the other can be inferred" (302).

Because these theories and data types occur in a wide range of disciplines, Murray's remarks make clear both the purpose and the process of interdisciplinary work. Indeed, his book is not just a call to such work. It uses a remarkable range of fields—philosophy, history, psychology, anthropology, sociology, linguistics, cognitive science—to show that the more fully we integrate what's known in various of the social sciences about processes of human action, the better able we'll be to make inferences from fragmentary data about how those processes operated in the past. In this sense, the book is an exemplar of what interdisciplinary work looks like when it is done right. But, again, one must wonder—this time whether many historians' posits about the past were, are, or ever will be informed by the breadth of knowledge and integrative causal imagination that Murray's work presents and that his proposals require.

3. This feature of the book has a particularly important connection to the issue of common ground—"how Americans of diverse backgrounds, past and present, have sought or experienced a common ground or shared identity. . ." (A.S.A., 3). The issue invites several basic questions:

Can members of different cultures understand each other correctly, even across language barriers?

Can past understandings be understood accurately in the present?

Can such understandings, past and/or present, be explained?

These are among the questions Murray considers fundamental to the pursuit of historical knowledge, which obliges us to understand earlier and often very different states of our own language and culture. (x) The disciplines to which we must look to handle these questions are, in general, the social sciences—the same disciplines to which Murray would have us look to solve the problems associated with fragmentary data in history. In keeping with his acceptance of Quine's "naturalized epistemology," Murray treats these fields as showing us how it is that we humans have knowledge of other humans. In effect, we access and develop understandings of each other, even across linguistic and more general cultural

divides, by means of certain pan-human cognitive and affective functions—assignments of identity to objects and causation to happenings, for example, or attributions of mental and emotional states to self and to others.

Such understandings are theoretical constructs made to explain our experiences of each other. In the science game, constructs are to be evaluated systematically in terms of further data. But the same is not necessarily true in the case of ordinary interactions among ordinary mortals. Our understandings, then, can just as readily be a foundation for mischief as for anything nicer. The common ground of cross-cultural understanding can be a basis for amicable cohabitation, but it can also be a basis for conflict and worse. Under what conditions do these different outcomes occur? Murray's book offers us a reasoned basis for addressing this question about our past and present, and, importantly, for evaluating the answers we reach.

- A clear sense of the limits of a kind of knowledge that is notoriously misused.
- A clear sense of how to move beyond those limits.
- A clear sense of what human knowledge of humans must be like if it is to guide our quest for common ground that isn't bloody ground.

These three make reasonable the hope that we humans can improve both our knowledge of humans and the behavior we base upon it. That hope is reason enough for writing Murray's book.

A little perversity, it seems, goes a long way.

Still, such virtues do not entirely vouchsafe Murray's views. One is left with questions. Let me follow one of mine a bit further (Bailis, 1974).

What if the problems of fragmentary and missing data that so beset the confirmation process in history affect the rest of the social sciences as well? They do, I think, and consequently they affect Murray's proposal that integrated versions of theories well-confirmed in the social sciences can be applied to the confirmation problem in history.

Disciplinary specialization, not the inaccessibility and ravages of time past, produces problems with fragmentary and missing data in the present-oriented social sciences. Perhaps in the belief that complex phenomena can only be mastered by analytic subdivision, scholars have long been dividing the domain of human affairs into numerous dimensions, levels, aspects and functions. During the past two centuries, the general domain has come to be studied through several major specialized disciplines, a host of subspecialties, and, in recent years, through a potentially unlimited number of fields that are rooted in perspectives derived from the life experiences of specific groups—women's studies, for example, and the variant forms of ethnic studies.

Specialties tend to form their own conceptions and methodologies, through which they generate their own bodies of empirical knowledge. Not surprisingly, therefore, we now have several discrete bodies of knowledge about human behavior that are different and often incommensurable. The elements of disciplines—their conceptions, methodologies and empirical results—have been separately developed, after all, and they have guided thought, inquiry, communication and instruction within each field. By controlling the questions practitioners ask and the answers they accept, the elements of a discipline effectively define its boundaries—even to the point of excluding representations of human behavior based on criteria other than its own standards of meaning, validity, reliability and truth.

To be sure, all the specialized disciplines are about human behavior, and each of them makes some substantive assumptions about factors that others actively investigate. But the findings of one discipline are seldom brought systematically to bear upon the assumptions of another. In effect, each specialty asserts both the uniqueness of its vision and the correctness of investigating the world in its terms.

It is this general state of affairs in the social sciences that gives rise to the problems of fragmentary and missing data; fragmentation occurs because data generated within a discipline are concerned with, even confined to, the significance of factors of behavior identified by its own conceptions and established according to its own methodology. Data so generated are rarely about relationships among factors of behavior that are studied separately and differently in different specialties. Information about the properties that such factors might display if they were examined in relationship to each other is what's missing.

These problems suggest that there is a difference between Murray's notion of "well-confirmed" and the way that term is used in a specialized field. For Murray "[c]onfirmation is a process of testing a theory against alternative theories, and that theory is the better confirmed that makes all the known evidence more probable than do any of its rivals" (234). Under disciplinary specialization, "alternative" and "rival" theories" and "all the known evidence" tend only to be theories and data within one specialty. In this context, I suspect, "well-confirmed" means something like "supported by what my discipline requires me to be willing and able to see." This is narrower than what Murray intends, and not adequate for his integrative purposes.

Moreover, there is not much concern with these problems under disciplinary specialization. The training and reward structures of specialists stress the use and evaluation of concepts and methods put forward within their own disciplines. By allowing confirmation to be thus narrowly done, specialization supports the belief that different realities presented by different disciplines are all real in the sense of being posited in well-confirmed theories. Little wonder that pluralisms and relativisms are accepted by so many scholars as describing what they experience in the pursuit of knowledge.

In defending his views on truth and reality, Murray argues that so long as inquiry proceeds, yielding fresh data and forcing the disconfirmation of some

theories while supporting or inviting others, we can eventually come to a theory that is confirmed. Combining this argument with his contention that even incommensurable theories can be made mutually intelligible and comparable (233-245), we come to the notion that neither piecemeal theory and data, nor divided practice, rule out the possibility of eventual integration and, with it, a basis for deciding which among a set of more holistic claims is best confirmed. That is the basis for his hope of using the social sciences to solve the confirmation problem in history.

But what Murray hopes for will not happen if the process is left to the conventional practice of social science. A large number of those producing our knowledge do so in the belief that they need not look beyond their established ways of seeing for confirmation of their views. So persuaded, they have no need to contribute to, much less to pursue, the goals of integration. Too many players in the game to which he looks for help are not playing the game he has in mind.

Murray's game can and should be played. But it is a game that requires, ironically, players specialized in the pursuit of integration. That is, of course, one of the things that American studies is supposed to be about. In Murray's hands it has been, and is. Whether it is for the rest of us is an interesting question.

For Murray's game extends the perversity of his book, offering a logically compelling case for handling the problem of historical confirmation as historians seldom do, by doing social science as social scientists usually don't. And that creates a quandary: Why pursue such an ill-favored case? How to ignore such a compelling one?

Great teachers show us what is wrong with what's considered right, hence where necessities and possibilities lie in a field of knowledge. They and their showings stay in our minds, where we find ourselves still arguing with them, from time to time, to the end of our days. Such a presence is a gift that Murray Murphey's students have been given. It can be gotten, as well, through a serious reading of his book.

References

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- Stanley Bailis, "The Social Sciences in American Studies: An Integrative Conception," *American Quarterly*, Vol. XXVI, August 1974, 202-224. I have borrowed language and ideas freely from this paper for the next to last section of the present essay.
- Murray G. Murphey, *Philosophical Foundations of Historical Knowledge*, (Albany, 1994)