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THE HISTORY OF REASONABLENESS IN THE WESTERN TRADITION: AN ABANDONED APPROACH?

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Rick Kennedy, *A History of Reasonableness: Testimony and Authority in the Art of Thinking*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2004. Pp. 288. \$75.00.

According to Rick Kennedy, the study of reasonableness has become “a lost tradition.”¹ Championed by Aristotle and endorsed by Augustine, this grand tradition flourished in Western education for two thousand years, through the Renaissance, Enlightenment, and the nineteenth century. But in the twentieth century, modern critical thinking nearly abandoned this approach, and today it “remains gutted” (1).

For Aristotle, our information was derived from three basic sources: intuition, experience, and testimony.² The first two could be termed “reasoning,” while the third is “reasonableness.” Individual thinkers were able to reason by accessing their own intuition and experience. But the last item, testimony, was based on authority and hence socially derived, being properly gained by careful interaction with others (1-3). Since reasonableness is the “stuff” of history, attacks upon, or abandonment of, this approach threatens to undermine the very enterprise of historiography.

An Overview

Kennedy draws from John Locke’s parable of the King of Siam, who recoiled when told by a northern ambassador that water could grow so hard that an elephant could walk across it. The king accused the statesman of lying.³ Locke’s point is that the sole reliance on one’s own reason could highly distort the reception of strong testimony, even if it

¹ (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2004), 1. Page numbers from this work only will be supplied in the text.

² It should be mentioned that, of these three, Aristotle (18), as well as Cicero, Quintilian, and Augustine (54) all held that authority/testimony was more open to distortion than was pure reasoning. Still, authority/testimony could be a trustworthy source of information, and was accepted as such by virtually all classical commentators (56).

³ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, IV.15:5-6.

seems strange or highly improbable. Sometimes we simply have to check out and ultimately trust the testimony of others (1-2).

Kennedy's text presents the history of reasonableness in Western thought, as it was traditionally distinguished from reason. He follows this tradition through its heyday, through various modifications, and on to its demise. The chief heroes are Aristotle and Augustine. The sub-plot also focuses on the works of Cicero, Quintillian, Locke, and others who have followed this stellar tradition of reasonableness, as discovered in authority or testimony.⁴ Hellenistic curriculum, early Christian instruction, along with medieval education, could all favor a liberal arts tradition that elevated the import of authority. Up until Kant, this trend continued (Introduction).

The classical angle emphasized Aristotle's approach, which favored the instruction in Topics. In Greek and Roman times, the application of this schematic structure allowed for the mental organization, analyzing, storing, and retrieving of information. It descended in a triangular pattern, increasing in breadth and depth as required. It was best employed in diverse applications such as law, historical investigation, and checking religious claims. Various details were especially added by Cicero and Quintillian (Chapter one).

Many of the great Medieval teaching traditions also more or less followed this classical path. After the earlier emphases of Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria, Augustine continued this approach regarding authority, increasing its sophistication in areas like epistemology, psychology, and ecclesiology, developing this emphasis into a Christian approach to liberal arts education. While neither as influential nor technical, Boethius and Cassiodorus continued to encourage Topics and paved the way toward Medieval liberal arts education. Much later, Anselm and Thomas Aquinas manifested some similarities. Rather incredibly, especially from the angle of the part they played in Western philosophy, while Jewish, Arab, and Muslim scholars appreciated the crucial role of eyewitness testimony, they provided little support for the Medieval textbook tradition (Chapter two).

Renaissance writers returned to the classical tradition, especially those expressions by Cicero and Augustine. In this manner, while manifesting differences, scholars like Agricola, Ramus, and Phillip Melancthon all revived the discussions of authority and testimony, Topics, and encouraged the liberal arts textbook tradition (Chapter three).

With *The Port-Royal Logic*, which first appeared in French in 1662, some very influential changes emerged. Though synthesizing several classical strains, it rejected the long tradition of Topics. But scholars following these trends still expanded dramatically the role of testimony, even introducing in a fairly sophisticated way the subject of miracles, as an opportunity to apply the criteria. From both before and in the wake of the Port Royal discussions, highly influential commentators like Isaac Watts, John Locke, and Richard Kirwan applied these methods to the vindication of the historical claims of

⁴ Kennedy notes that during the first thousand years of this tradition, the term "authority" was preferred. Later, this approach was more frequently designated as "testimony" (5).

Christianity. The ensuing discussion found its way into major textbooks, leading to the eighteenth century debate, featuring the famous response by David Hume.⁵ One of the most incredible applications, introduced by the Port Royal argumentation, were the efforts to alternately defend or reject miracles in terms of probability calculus (Chapter four)!

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a revived Aristotelian appreciation for testimony was manifested in several major universities. The representatives included influential scholars like Thomas Reid, Richard Whately, and John Henry Newman. However, Kennedy ends this discussion by arguing that the changing scene at Harvard provides an example of an emerging trend. In the beginning and middle of the nineteenth century, the teaching of logic gave a central place to the importance of testimony. But by the end of the century, "things were changing fast" (221) and the Harvard philosophy department lost its interest in the role of testimony as a valued part of being reasonable (Chapter five).

Building on the harbinger from Harvard, Kennedy's last chapter argues that the two thousand year teaching tradition in support of the value of authority and testimony came crashing down during the twentieth century (Chapter six). Kennedy traces these trends largely to the far-reaching influence of Immanuel Kant and his denigration of historical testimony to a lesser subset of one's own personal experience. Thus, the Aristotelian concept that had ruled through classical, Medieval, Renaissance, and Enlightenment periods, which held that knowledge had both a personal as well as a social component of authority and testimony, was reduced to a single, personal source. History was at least downplayed as a means of achieving knowledge (228-232).

The influence of these ideas is found in John Dewey and especially R.G. Collingwood, who probably wreaked the most havoc, especially in the discipline of history. This is especially the case in Collingwood's sustained attack on the idea that history is about investigating external events, favoring instead an internal reenactment in the minds of historians. Although there were some noteworthy exceptions in the writings of a few scholars such as L. Susan Stebbing and Max Black, Kennedy finds that, by the 1970s, Collingwood had won over the majority of historical theorists with his reconfiguration of historiography, minus the traditional testimonial basis. Kennedy concludes: "By the end of the twentieth century the only normal discussion of testimony and authority in textbooks was to warn students against them." (228)⁶ He ends his volume with the comment that scholars need to revive the traditional emphasis.

⁵ David Hume, "Of Miracles," in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section 10.

⁶ Kennedy ends Chapter 6 with a survey of twentieth century textbooks on logic and critical reasoning, to indicate that the general trend is either to ignore the topic of testimony altogether, or to denigrate it (240-46).

Interaction with Several Historiographical Features of this Argument

Kennedy's helpful overview of the crucial issue of reasonableness, as represented by the traditional emphasis on authority and testimony, has tremendous implications for the historical profession and the practice of historiography. For example, if he is correct that the classical approach is presently on the retreat, or worse, almost nonexistent, engaging or assuming the traditional historiographical process could be a miscalculation.

I will direct the majority of my comments to this envisioned state of historiography over the last century and a half. But I will begin with a couple of initial thoughts.

Kennedy remarks that while the New Testament authors embraced testimony in their arguments for the truth of Christianity, "the early church fathers did not." He immediately supports this by recounting the "fideist rejection dialectic" of Tertullian and Jerome, along with the overly "rationalist embrace of scientific logic" in the Platonic ideas of writers like Clement of Alexandria (44-45). Although one might quibble with or even dispute some comments regarding the New Testament (43-44), or the summary of these scholars' views, my chief concern here is that Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Jerome are significantly removed from the earliest church. They date from the late second to the early fourth centuries, so that, at the very minimum, they are 170 years removed from the end of Jesus' life and a full century after the last New Testament book, with Jerome's death coming about two more centuries beyond that.

It is true that far larger gaps in ancient historians do not necessarily condemn those writers. For example, perhaps the best known of Alexander the Great's biographers wrote about four centuries after Alexander's life⁷ and Livy spoke of purported events from hundreds of years before his time.⁸ But the further problem with Kennedy's comments here is that a number of rather important early church fathers fit rather nicely into this large time gap between the New Testament and 200-400 AD. Clement of Rome, Ignatius, and Polycarp wrote nine small books between 95 and 110. A few important fragments from Quadratus and Papias date from just a few years later. And the more massive writings by Justin Martyr and Irenaeus still date from 20 to 50 years prior to Kennedy's earliest source. But the most crucial point to make here is that *each* of these earlier writers makes significant use of historical testimony, in the manner of the New Testament authors.⁹ It seems that this would build an important bridge between the New Testament authors and early Christianity that would augment significantly Kennedy's thesis in Chapter two.

⁷ Plutarch, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, "Alexander."

⁸ For instance, see Livy, *The Early History of Rome*, where this is especially obvious in Books 1-5.

⁹ For just a few instances, such as arguments from the historicity of Jesus and especially his resurrection to the truth of Christian theology, see Clement, *Corinthians 5*; Ignatius, *Trallians 9*; *Smyrnaeans 1, 3*; *Magnesians 11*; Polycarp, *Philippians 2*; Quadratus (cited in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History 4:3*); Papias (cited in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History 3:39*); Justin Martyr, *First Apology 50*, *Dialogue with Trypho 17, 108*.

A brief historical note might be made regarding Kennedy's rather amazing discussion of the thinkers who followed in the wake of the Port Royal ideas, who applied probability calculus to the issue of miracles (156-167). Kirwan's assigning mathematical estimates to a variety of situations, including the approximate values of certain kinds of testimony (163-165), was intriguing. Strangely enough, this seventeenth century dialogue manifests some intriguing similarities to recent research. Present developments especially surround the application of Bayes Theorem to historical evidence for miracles, with influential philosopher Richard Swinburne even arguing that, given the range of evidential data, the resurrection of Jesus is 97% probable!¹⁰ Although not this specific, many recent studies have attempted to apply some mathematical parameters to the relevant issues.¹¹

In Kennedy's last chapter, he argues that the two thousand year teaching tradition that supported the value of authority and testimony came to a fairly abrupt halt between the late nineteenth through the twentieth centuries. He argues that by the 1970s, skeptics like R.G. Collingwood had won the day (233).

Here I would offer my largest number of caveats, which I can only mention briefly. In general, Kennedy's line of influence from Kant to Collingwood would seem to point us in the proper direction. Still, serious gaps in the historical process exist in the discussion here, unlike some of Kennedy's earlier, more detailed treatments.

For example, an entire progression of similar influences needs to be interspersed here, beginning from well before Kant. Thus, throughout the predominant trends of the *studia humanitatis* and the pursuit of historical testimony, which dominated the late Medieval, Renaissance, and certain Enlightenment trends, a lesser but still very influential streak can be traced through many influential thinkers.¹²

Further, between Kant and Collingwood, an entire historical debate had taken place. Scholars such as Leopold von Ranke (d. 1886), Auguste Comte (d. 1857), Henry Buckle (d. 1862), and Karl Marx (d. 1883) had championed the positivistic historical position. The cold, hard facts of historical data could be derived in an objective, calculating, and unbiased fashion, just as in the sciences.

¹⁰ Richard Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), especially the Appendix.

¹¹ For some examples, see Rodney D. Holder, "Hume on Miracles: Bayesian Interpretation, Multiple Testimony, and the Existence of God," *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, Volume 49 (1998), especially 60-2; George N. Schlesinger, "Miracles and Probabilities," *Nous*, Volume 21 (1987), especially 219, 230-32; George N. Schlesinger, "The Credibility of Extraordinary Events," *Analysis*, Volume 51 (1991), 125; John Earman, "Bayes, Hume, and Miracles," *Faith and Philosophy*, Volume 10 (1993), especially 293, 305-06.

¹² I have argued at length that there were many related precursors to Kant that take us back centuries before his time. For examples, see Gary R. Habermas, "Averroes: An Influence on Early Western Rationalism," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Philosophical Society*, Vol. 4 (1981), 12-22; Habermas, "Lessing, Kant, and Kierkegaard: An Analysis of the Leap of Faith," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Philosophical Society*, Vol. 2 (1979), 9-29

Towards the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, idealists like Wilhelm Dilthey (d. 1911) and Benedetto Croce (d. 1952) heatedly disagreed with these positions, arguing that the historical enterprise was not a science and utilizing a more subjective methodology. As forerunners of Collingwood, they argued vigorously that the process of historiography required historians to visualize and relive the past.¹³

This is not to say that Collingwood agreed totally with thinkers like Dilthey and Croce.¹⁴ But it is crucial to note that many of the key ideas that Collingwood propagated were borrowed at least in part from the idealistic forerunners who preceded him in this debate. Moreover, other contemporaries, such as historians Charles Beard and Carl Becker, continued some of these influential ideas.¹⁵ Thus, although he was very influential, Collingwood was not the fountainhead for many of these trends.¹⁶

Since his work concerns the history of ideas, key trends like these would add to the force of Kennedy's thesis in his final chapter, as did the more detailed treks in some of his earlier discussions. But more importantly, Kennedy may have over-emphasized the influence of these skeptical ideas. Initially, it is crucial to note that each of these skeptical scholars, at least in part, approved the careful study of testimony, which sometimes needs to be extracted from their critical diatribes!¹⁷ Further, Kennedy's oft-repeated comments that during the twentieth century reasonableness virtually died (7, 221-222, 228, 248, 252) and that, by the 1970s, these skeptical trends dominated the discussions of testimony (233) seem to be at some odds with the evaluations by other scholars, especially historians.

For example, writing in the same decade, David Hackett Fischer listed a set of rules that generally governed the historical profession, several of which pertain to the gathering

¹³ Wilhelm Dilthey, "The Understanding of Other Persons and their Life-Experiences," in Patrick Gardiner, editor, *Theories of History* (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1959), particularly 220-222; Benedetto Croce, "History and Chronicle," in Gardiner, especially 227, 233.

¹⁴ See Collingwood's critique, "Croce's Philosophy of History," in R.G. Collingwood, *Essays in the Philosophy of History*, edited by William Debbins (N.Y.: McGraw-Hill, 1965), Chapter 1.

¹⁵ Charles Beard, "Written History as an Act of Faith," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 39 (1934), 219-229; Carl L. Becker, "What are Historical Facts?" *The Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 8 (1955), 327-340. Both essays are included in Hans Meyerhoff, editor, *Philosophy of History in Our Time* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959).

¹⁶ For an overview of these nineteenth and twentieth century trends in historiography, see Gary R. Habermas, "Philosophy of History, Historical Relativism, and History as Evidence," in Michael Bauman, David Hall, and Robert Newman, editors, *Evangelical Apologetics* (Camp Hill, Penn.: Christian Publications, 1996), 91-118.

¹⁷ Dilthey, 223-25; Croce, 227-29; Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1956), 246-49, 252-68; Beard, 147-50 (for a scathing critique of historical relativism!); plus Charles Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1935); Carl L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932), especially Chapters 1-2.

of testimony.¹⁸ Several years later, C. Behan McCullagh wrote a volume expressly to help historians establish criteria for their ongoing research in warranting historical investigations, filled with evaluations of human testimony.¹⁹ After a discussion of skeptical historiography during the twentieth century, Ernst Breisach concluded that “history’s relativistic phase was brief.”²⁰ He also notes that, in the wake of Collingwood’s thought, subjective aspects of studying testimony were recognized, but historians still held to an objective and accessible historical reality. Breisach thinks that it remains very much the same as we enter the twenty-first century, and that the presence of subjective elements still failed to overpower the results of four centuries of developed historiography, which is largely concerned with the sifting of testimonies.²¹ John Tosh notes that “few are prepared to join in a rejection of the truth claims of history as usually practiced.” Current historiography occupies a middle ground between objectivism and subjectivism, standing on time-honored principles of research reminiscent of those enumerated by Fischer, including the judging of testimony.²²

It should be carefully noted that the point of these preceding citations is *not* to deny that these more skeptical scholars were highly influential, because this would definitely be mistaken, even seriously so. Nor am I simply arguing that some differ from Kennedy’s thesis, for scholars who do not share one’s views are often numerous! But my point is that, in the views of these scholars, *the* predominant historiographical trend among their colleagues over the last three decades actually indicates that the views of thinkers like Croce, Collingwood, Beard, and Becker have failed to win the day. If this is true, then those who deny the import of testimony and reasonableness, while certainly being influential, may not hold the upper hand as we enter the twenty-first century.²³

¹⁸ Fischer, *Historian’s Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1970), 62-63.

¹⁹ McCullagh, *Justifying Historical Descriptions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), Preface and Chapter 1. Interestingly, McCullagh cites Collingwood as a likely proponent of the “most popular theory” regarding historical inferences—that of argument to the best explanation (16), which is relevant for our present considerations.

²⁰ Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern*, Second edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 333.

²¹ Breisach, 334-35, 407-08.

²² Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods, and New Directions in the Study of Modern History*, Third edition (Essex, England: Longman, 2000), 129-33.

²³ Kennedy’s overview of twentieth-century textbooks that variously ignore or give a place to reasonableness (240-46) mentions a number of books that fail to treat the subject. But it should be noted that this is not necessarily the same as rejecting reasonableness. For instance, one of the books he lists in this category is Antony Flew’s *Thinking Straight*. Yet, in our three dialogues, far from rejecting the importance of testimony, Flew has made it quite clear that he accepts the traditional concepts of testimony, even taking them for granted. See, for example, our latest volume: Gary R.

I have noted a few differences with Kennedy's thesis. Still, it is easy to pick around the edges of a good volume such as this one. In my opinion, Kennedy's overall thesis stands, even rather impressively so. From start to finish, he has produced a strong, helpful, and timely discussion, tracing the subject of reasonableness over more than two thousand years of scholarly interaction. Along the way, the author exhibits rare humility and circumspection. Students of the history of ideas have much to gain from digesting this fascinating overview and critique.

Habermas and Antony G.N. Flew, *Resurrected? An Atheist and Theist Dialogue*, edited by John Ankerberg (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005).