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In “Is History a Science?”, Eugene Goodheart argues that, while history has access to scientific tools, it is not itself a science. History cannot and should not be consistently modelled with laws and generalizations, trademarks of science; in the pursuit of scientific history, important but smaller entities like individuals or short timeframes – important components of history – are often neglected in favor of broader motions and theories. This leads to problematic concepts like determinism and lack of free will.

In “On Agency,” Walter Johnson argues for a rethinking on how the term “agency” is used and applied in the study of slavery, and more broadly, oppressed people of history. Historians often ask whether slaves have agency or not; Johnson proposes instead to ask about the condition of enslaved humanity, and not to make abstractions that are inherently posed in resistance to slavery so as not to conceal questions on how enslaved people adapted and changed in their resistance. Johnson believes that scholarship that attempts to “give slaves back their agency” paint the past with broad brushstrokes of the present in a way that is not only not needed anymore, but obscures nuanced discussion.

One of the key critiques Goodheart raises in treating history as a science is that science seeks to find laws and generalizations, whereas history is full of aberrations. *True* history lies on the fundamental building block of human experience, Goodheart argues, which is incredibly subjective to the point of being impenetrable. While I agree with many of Goodheart’s other

points and that if history must be marked as a or not a science, it should be considered not so, I do not believe that this is a sound critique. I argue that Goodheart makes this critique because he does not believe subjectivity to be an effort towards objectivity. “Unlike science,” Goodheart writes, “history does not aim at singular explanation that triumphs all other explanations.”¹ Under this assumption – that science rejects any multiplicity in explanation and thus rejects any subjectivity of interpretation – he develops a complete critique: modelling history with laws of a scientific nature is bound to bulldoze over important individual experiences and shorter time frames. However, I assert this assumption is not quite true, because science is very often a synthesis of explanations rather than a selection of one, and that this faulty assumption causes him to arrive at an incomplete conclusion. Multiple well-evidenced sets of laws or theories can exist simultaneously; for instance, classical physics is best suited to model the macro world and quantum physics is to model the micro world. They hold fundamentally different theories² to explain the truth of the world, but both *together* provide a better explanation than only one, since each is useful in different contexts. The ultimate scientific theory is really a set of theories, continually being amended as more data is discovered. Similarly, multiple well-evidenced theories on history – what Goodheart would consider *subjectivity* – collectively form a better grasp at objectivity. Although it may practically be achieved in a different way than a science like biology, history is continuously in pursuit of perfecting the rules and laws of the human condition and experience, which Goodheart highlights himself as the subject of history³⁴. Historians – as they analyze and piece together historical data – form an interpretation. Collectively these interpretations all form a greater understanding of the history, since

¹ Eugene Goodheart, “Is History a Science?” (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 487.

² Theories so different they are, by technical terms, contradictory.

³ Goodheart, “Is History a Science?”, 487.

⁴ Goodheart, “Is History a Science?”, 481.

subjectivity is really objectivity with missing information. Some interpretations will be more useful in certain contexts – for instance, considering slavery’s role in the Revolutionary War is important in light of the following decades – but nevertheless it is not true, in history or the ‘rigorous’ sciences, that one theory or law can explain all of the truth of the world.