

# Whether history is an art or a science philosophy essay



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In answering the question of whether history is an art or a science, the very nature of the subject is at stake. Interpretations of what discipline history belongs to change over time, leading to a continuing re-evaluation of the subject, beginning in the 19th century. The end result is a debate that is controversial, never fading away in the absence of a finite conclusion. The first argument that emerged was historicism, which began this debate. This was quickly followed by the contrasting beliefs of positivism and idealism. Having looked at some theories which argue either art or science, it is imperative to look at the current status of the debate today. The best answer includes elements from both sides of the argument as an answer that tries to reach a resolution in favour of either side of the argument will almost immediately be disproved. What is evident from this is there is no clear answer to the question, no conclusion will please everybody. Therefore there is a continuing need to give this question plenty of attention to try to solve it.

Defining what is art, and what is science is important, before discussing the number of theories that have emerged. In the Oxford English Dictionary, art is defined as ' the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as a painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty and emotional power'[1]. Some of what was said is relevant, especially the part that relates to creativity and imagination, a point relevant to idealism. The third definition given is however much more relevant; art is ' subjects of study concerned with human creativity and social life, such as languages, literature and history (as contrasted with scientific or technical subjects)'[2]The definition outlines what an art is in the context of the academic world,

inferring that art cannot be linked to science. This is shown in the parentheses at the end of the definition, seeming to justify why the historical debate has continued over time; it believes that art is unable to co-exist with science and other technical subjects. These definitions are recent in comparison to the one given in the 1890's by Croce. He states art is 'neither a means of giving and sensuous pleasure, nor a representation of natural fact ... but the intuitive vision of individuality'[3]. Croce begins his definition by outlining what art isn't, before explaining what it is in his opinion, the individual, specifically their intuition. What these definitions show is limited agreement on what an art is. It is a broad term, for which there are many meanings, which over time has changed. The dictionary definition is more recent than Croce's, and it shows in the differences of opinion they have. Croce argues the individual's importance, whereas the dictionary argues about creativity, something which today we have taken as to be the exact meaning.

The original meaning of science differs to what we believe it to be today, similar to how the definitions of art differ from what Croce thought. Formerly, science meant 'knowledge, or learning or any branch of it'[4]. It is an incredibly broad statement, from which it is possible to conclude that most things are science, since almost everything involves learning knowledge. The Oxford English dictionary defines science as 'the intellectual and practical activity encompassing the systematic study of the structure and behaviour of the physical and natural world through observation and experiment'[5]. From this, it can be inferred that when history is defined as science, they believe that history covers everything, the physical and natural world. Unlike

art, there are no further definitions included on science, so it is much simpler to define. It is perhaps this simplicity that leads to history being viewed as a science. One further point relates to definitions in languages beside English. Carr believes that definitions in other languages hinder the English interpretation of what history is; 'in every other European language, the equivalent word to science includes history without hesitation'[6]. He believes that the definition of science is broader than what English makes it out to be, if other languages include science, then that is something that should be looked at in English. Because of this, some historians especially those from Europe assume that what the definition says is what history is. Equally, this debate has been limited to English speaking countries for some time, so perhaps Carr has a point and that English is what is wrong; include history in the definition and it will become accepted.

Historicism was the philosophy that ignited the debate over whether history is science or art, at the start of the 19th century. Before this theory emerged, 'history was viewed as a branch of literature'[7], so there was a close link between the two. Historicism is the beginning of a shift away from literature, with the introduction of scientific methods. Popper defines historicism as 'an approach to the social sciences, which assumes that historical prediction is their principal aim'[8]. The definition clearly shows the acknowledgement that science was becoming increasingly important to the study of history. Scientific method is apparent from the assertion of 'laws', which help achieve the aims, set out in the first definition, which are 'attainable by discovering the rhythms or the patterns, the laws or the trends that underlie the evolution of history'[9]. Whilst these definitions come from

Popper, a critic of historicism they explain what historicism is, showing how it moves away from previous beliefs of literature, and the shift towards science, which began this debate.

One debate from the middle of the 19th century was the idea of positivism, which was quickly opposed by idealism. Positivism is a philosophy of knowledge, which uses the secrets of the natural world to help understanding of science and knowledge. Collingwood has described it as a 'philosophy in the service of natural science'[10]. It is clear that positivism supports ideas linked to science in history, given its closeness to the definition of science outlined above. Positivism is highly dependent on the use of facts, which influence the study of the past. In terms of its method, it is close to a scientific investigation, critical of everything. Tosh comments facts are 'verified by applying critical methods to primary sources'[11], highlighting the thoroughness that is similar to scientific technique, if facts are verified in their context. This obsession with facts led Comte, one of its founders to believe 'historians would in due course uncover the laws of historical development'[12]. The very belief that there are laws in history is confirmation of the positivist's belief that history was a science, and if they believe that laws would work in the same way that laws in science worked, then history would be changed forever. In some ways, there is similarity between this idea and historicism, which believes in the existence of laws in history. Positivism continues the discussion.

However, this idea is in contrast to Idealism, which rejected the entire principle on which their argument was based. Idealists argue history 'must be carefully distinguished from natural events because the identity between <https://assignbuster.com/whether-history-is-an-art-or-a-science-philosophy-essay/>

enquirer and his/her subject matter opens the way to a fuller understanding'[13]. It dismisses the idea of positivism on the basis of its link to natural sciences. The key beliefs of idealism include empathy and intuition, emotions that the historian themselves can bring to study. Tosh comments, the 'reality of past events must instead be apprehended by an imaginative identification with the people of the past'[14]. Methods in idealism are more about the individual historian, how they feel, how they make judgements based on the available evidence and furthermore, how they engage with the past. The basis of idealism is the opposite of positivism, it does not look at scientific method, and rather it believes more in imagination and things that shape interpretations. In that respect, it meets the definition that Croce set out at the end of the 19th century, being concerned with the individual and their response.

In the present day, this debate continues to have relevance to historians and philosophers alike. The main cause of this is the imperative need to know. History is based around facts, therefore there needs to be a matter of fact judgement that says what discipline history belongs to. Until this happens, the issue will be highly relevant to all in the historical profession. A new theory has emerged in recent decades; Postmodernism. It values the 'priorization of language over experience'[15] suggesting art and its associated ideas are today, much more important than any scientific ideas from the past. Southgate argues the incompatibility of postmodernist thinking with history. She describes it as a notoriously elusive concept, one which she feels is 'seen as an alien and hostile force', which she believes historians fear[16]. A working historian, Keith Thomas, reveals his methods

are in line with has been construed to be art. He believes that his work is a literary construction, shaped by his 'moral values and intellectual assumptions'[17]. He raises the contrast of lumpers and splitters, believing himself to be a lumper, as his work contains 'a broad-brush impression of beliefs and behaviours over a long period of time'[18]. It is apparent he prefers to cover a wide time period rather analysing a fragment of that, probably because of the amount of research he does and collects, which makes it difficult to be selective with the facts.

In conclusion, so much attention has been given to this question of what discipline history belongs to, because it matters hugely to historians. This is obvious from the scale of the debate that has occurred from the mid 19th century, as theories are challenged and counter-challenged. What is evident from all of this is the absence of a single solution to the problem, nobody is able to say 'History is science' or 'History is art' with confidence. In the absence of this, historians are left to discuss the idea, and are still unable to agree. This is because the subject matter is highly delicate to the historical profession, concluding that history is science or art will upset a large number of people who argue against that conclusion. Therefore perhaps the best outcome would be to say that history is neither singularly art nor science, rather is a fusion of the two disciplines. History needs to be interpreted therefore opinion on subjects matters, however there is also a need for close analysis of source material, to critically look at sources. Good methods of studying need to be encouraged, and if they are in style of a scientific investigation that is no bad thing, seeing as scientists are thorough in their working methods. Similarly, empathy and intuition should also be spoken of

as good qualities to have in a historian, the ability to empathise with the past and use one's own initiative are vitally important. Arguments collapse because historians do not look at them critically enough, and therefore have no evidence to back up their opinions. This debate is a dynamic subject, as been shown theories can develop almost overnight; surely the next idea is just around the corner. In this argument, facts are few and far between, and that is the reason for debate, the need for intuition. With no finite concluding statement, the question of whether history is art or science will continue for some time yet.