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# CONRING on HISTORY

Even though I do not believe that everyone can be bent to the circle of reason, and my efforts suffice to excite only better minds, nevertheless I judge it to be my duty to inculcate again and again what is to the advantage of the commonwealth.

Opinion is a sacred disease. But nothing rules this world as much as it.<sup>1</sup>

FOR A LONG TIME the intellectual history of seventeenth-century Germany has been neglected. The reasons why this should be so are not hard to understand. With one generally acknowledged exception, namely Leibniz, famous thinkers like Luther, Kant, and Lessing seem to have avoided life in the seventeenth century, and those who did not, like Descartes, Hobbes, and Newton, preferred to be born outside of Germany. On the face of it, the cultural landscape of Germany in the period between the

1. "Etsi . . . haud existimem posse omnes in rationis gyrum flecti, et vel illa mea sufficienti meliori menti excitandae, nihilominus officii mei esse iudico itemtitem inculcare, quod reipublicae est commodum." 256.59-61. "Sacer scilicet morbus opinio est: mundus tamen hic nulla perinde re quam hac ipsa regitur." 262.51. Unless otherwise indicated, references are to pages and lines of volume 5 of J. W. Goebel, ed., *Hermani Conringii . . . Opera*, 6 vols. and index volume (Braunschweig, 1730; repr. Aalen, 1970-1973). In quoting from Conring's writings, j has been replaced by i.

Reformation and the Enlightenment thus appears barren.<sup>2</sup> But there are reasons to doubt such an impression. The cultural efflorescence of the eighteenth century seems to presuppose a period of growth, subterranean growth perhaps, but nevertheless something different from the aridity usually ascribed to the terrain. Perhaps the presumed infertility of the seventeenth century is merely an optical illusion created by an unconscious but concerted effort of a later age to forget a debt it owed its forbears.

This is not the place to settle the question whether or not the prevailing opinion is correct. It has merely been brought up in order to establish the context in which the present study should be seen.<sup>3</sup> Its focus is narrow. It is limited to a single individual, to a particular aspect of his thought, and it makes no claim to treat even that aspect exhaustively. Still, there are good reasons to hope that it can make a contribution which at least by implication has more than limited significance.

Hermann Conring was born in 1606 and died in 1681. His professional life was spent teaching and writing at the University of Helmstedt, where he came to be the dominant figure. In its time, Helmstedt was a premier institution of higher learning in Protestant, perhaps in all of Germany. He thus takes a commanding place at the center of our subject, and it is reasonable to suppose that an understanding of his thought may shed light on the transformations which resulted in the Enlightenment.<sup>4</sup>

At present no such understanding exists. To be sure, there is a small body of scholarly literature devoted to him. But it is easy to show that his reputation is subject to a kind of illusion similar to the one alluded

2. For a typical view, see Hajo Holborn's assessment of the effects of the Thirty Years' War on German civilization in his *History of Modern Germany* (New York, 1964), 2:123.

3. The time for reexamining the seventeenth century from such a point of view seems to be ripe. In recent years scholars in growing numbers have devoted their attention to that part of the history of Germany. Since references to the secondary literature have been kept to an absolute minimum, the names of Michael Stolleis, Horst Dreitzel, Arno Seifert, and Notker Hammerstein, whose work is most closely related to the topic of this article, as well as those of James Vann, Marc Raef, Robert Bireley, and the many publications sponsored by the Herzog-August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel may stand in place of a fuller bibliography. Much more guidance than the title suggests can be found in H. U. Scupin, U. Scheuner, eds. *Althusius-Bibliographie*, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1973). For more recent information, see the *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung*, esp. H. Dreitzel, "Die Entwicklung der Historie zur Wissenschaft," *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung*, 8 (1981): 257-84.

4. The article of D. Willoweit, "Hermann Conring," in *Staatslenker im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert: Reichspublizistik, Politik, Naturrecht*, ed. M. Stolleis (Frankfurt, 1977) and the contributions to *Hermann Conring (1606-1681): Beiträge zu Leben und Werk*, ed. M. Stolleis (Berlin, 1983), cited as *Beiträge*, have recently established a new basis for all future work on Hermann Conring. The

to above. This is no slight on the historians concerned. It is rather a testimony to the power of tradition. Conring is best remembered for three achievements: as a pathbreaking historian of German law, a political thinker of note, and an early proponent of systematic *Quellenkritik*.<sup>5</sup> Memory is right to point to those aspects of his work which have withstood the test of time particularly well. Perhaps, for that reason, they are indeed the most significant. But memory fails to give a faithful picture of his work as a whole. Many of his writings were dedicated to medicine, natural philosophy, theology, and moral theory, to mention only the broadest possible categories in which his other interests can be organized.<sup>6</sup> By giving a place of honor to three particular achievements and forgetting the rest, existing treatments of his thought cannot do it justice. They seem rather to reflect the prejudices and specialized interests of later ages: the eighteenth century's disdain for Aristotle, the nineteenth century's preoccupation with the history of laws and constitutions, and the specialization of the historiography of our own time.

There seems to be agreement among students of Conring's works today that no real understanding of the conceptual framework uniting his thought exists and that this situation deserves to be remedied.<sup>7</sup> There is less agreement about how to do it. Given the sheer mass of his writings, amounting to more than 6000 folio pages in the standard edition, not to mention his voluminous unpublished correspondence, it is obviously necessary to build up understanding gradually. Yet to begin by studying Conring's concept of history might seem to some a questionable proceeding. Chronologically, and perhaps intellectually as well, Conring was a doctor of medicine first. One needs merely to remember how important biology is for an understanding of the thought of Aristotle—that physician's son whose philosophy exercised so formative an influence on Conring's mind—in order to suspect that Conring's medical writings hold important, possibly the most important, clues. But the concept of history with which we are here concerned was not what it is today. In the sense in which it is

older literature can be found through these works. N. Hammerstein, "Die Historie bei Conring," *Beiträge*, 217-36, approaches our subject in a different manner.

5. Cf. Willoweit, "Hermann Conring," 129.

6. See the bibliography of Conring's published writings in *Beiträge*, 535-67.

7. See for example D. Willoweit, "Hermann Conring," 129, and N. Hammerstein, "Die Historie bei Conring," *Beiträge*, 217.

employed by the professor from Helmstedt, history, as will quickly become apparent, is central to a theory of all knowledge, and not only the knowledge of human affairs. A look at his thoughts about history may thus not be the only way to begin, but it does promise to lead to the comprehensive understanding we are seeking.

The best place to look for his definition of what history was, how it should be pursued, and what purposes it served are the three prefaces with which he introduced his editions of Tacitus' *Germania*.<sup>8</sup> The argument is set forth in full in the first of them, the preface to the edition of 1635. At the time he was but 29 years old, looking forward to more than four decades of prolific scholarly production. Fortunately for our enterprise, the later prefaces demonstrate that he continued to believe what he had written as a young man. To be sure, in the second preface, for the edition of 1652, he mentioned that parts of the first might deserve revision. But he decided against making any changes, not only because of the praise that he had received since 1635, as he was obviously proud to report, but also because "it may not be proper to balance the labors of youth on the scales of a more exacting age, and every blot that may be there should be left to its own times, so long as it does not bring on too much discredit. And thus there is no reason why I should alter anything."<sup>9</sup> This sentiment is subtle evidence for a remarkable sensitivity towards the autonomy of the past, one's own included. It also means that whatever changes he may have contemplated in 1652 can hardly have touched on the substance of his views.

The third and last preface was published in 1678, three years before his death. It contains the motto for this essay and thus confirms the continuity in his thought.<sup>10</sup> Far from considering the desirability of any

8. Goebel, *Opera*, 5:253-78. Cf. the judgment of N. Hammerstein, "Die Historie," 222f. Among the considerable literature on the reception of Tacitus, E.-L. Etter, *Tacitus in der Geistesgeschichte des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts* (Basel, 1966), K. C. Schellhase, *Tacitus in Renaissance Political Thought* (Chicago, 1976), and J. Ridé's massive three volumes on *L'image du Germain dans la pensée et la littérature allemandes* (Paris, 1977) may be mentioned. See also the article on Tacitus by R. W. Ulery, Jr., in the *CTC*, 6 (1986): 87-174.

9. "Ipsemet ego nonnulla quidem paulo aliter scripta malim: sed fortassis haud fas est, iuvenilem laborem omnem exactioris aetatis trutina expendere, et singulis temporibus suis aliquis naevus relinquendus est, modo non nimium dedecoret: ac proinde non est cur quidquam mutem." 278.17-20.

10. The relevant text in full: "Finem denique huic libro imposuimus repetita editione nonnullorum, quae ipsimet de usu peritiae veteris Germaniae status iampridem fuimus commentati. Nec

changes, he rather underlined his commitment to the original preface with that characteristic shift to a slightly stubborn bluntness which is one of the privileges of age. The text also nicely illustrates the qualities that were blended in his personality: scholarship and service to the common good, reason and piety, a sense of lonely melancholy issuing from having to disagree with the majority of men, and pride in belonging to those of "better minds."

Conring begins his account of history with a eulogy of the pleasure it provides. "Whoever denies that the highest pleasure can be obtained from histories . . . assuredly has either never read or heard of them, or he is utterly stupid and his mind not stirred by any pure and liberal emotions."<sup>11</sup> This is more than just a rhetorical topos<sup>12</sup> because there is a reason why history is so extraordinarily pleasurable:

Apart from the fact that the common people know it only by experience, philosophers are not unaware of the cause of that delight. Seeing that we human beings are evidently born with a desire to know, a desire which may be either fulfilled by external instruments of the senses or by a hidden working of the mind, history is a wonderful compendium of someone else's knowledge, a guide to someone else, as it were.<sup>13</sup>

History thus pleases because it fulfills a natural desire for knowledge. The pleasure it yields is like that which is produced when one obtains

vero nos fugit, quam haec omnia a paucis suo pretio aestimentur, imo quam haec a plerisque soleant contemni. Etsi enim haud existimem posse omnes in rationis gyrum flecti, et vel illa mea sufficient meliori menti excitandae, nihilominus officii mei esse iudico iteratim inculcare, quod reipublicae est commodum. Perinde atque nunquam omitti debent seriae ad pietatis cultum invitationes, etsi pauci velint arctam illam semitam ambulare. In iis autem, quae iam ante hosce quadraginta tres annos fui praefatus, non hoc tantum docui, sed etiam de universae historiae usu, et cumprimis de notitia reipublicae imperii Germanici, undenam sit petenda, prolixius disserere fui coactus, quia vulgo tunc temporis plane alia erant persuasa magno cum publico damno." 256.57-257.4.

11. "Voluptatem summam ex historiis qui negat capi . . . nae ille aut nunquam eas legit vel audivit, aut vero excors est nec sincero ac liberali quodam animi affectu commovetur." 257.25-27.

12. Cf. Hammerstein, "Die Historie," 220, note 6 with reference to E. R. Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter* (Bern, 1948), 340.

13. "Praeterquam enim quod vulgus experimento id habeat cognitum, causam eius delectationis philosophi viri non ignorant. Quum nimirum hominibus nobis ingentium sit sciendi desiderium, idque vel externis sensuum instrumentis vel arcana mentis agitatione expleatur, alterius notitiae mirum est compendium historia, alterius quasi manu ductor." 257.31-34.

knowledge for oneself either through empirical observation or by rational contemplation. But it is also different, because it is "a wonderful compendium of someone else's knowledge." It enables seekers after knowledge to extend the limits which nature imposed on their desire. What one might therefore call its preternatural function is why it pleases so preeminently.

The significance of these opening remarks is not merely that they justify the praise of history which Conring had chosen in order to open his treatise in the properly rhetorical vein. It is rather that they establish a definition of history which fits squarely into a general theory of knowledge. He goes on to describe that theory more precisely:

Beyond the one mentioned so far, there is another and nobler reason for history's charm. For all of the sciences and arts require as much experience of things as possible—excepting only the mathematical ones, which are called pure—and without such experience none of them can be acquired. History thus becomes a matter of the highest necessity inasmuch as it displays a broad grasp of every kind of experience. . . . History thus is a guide of the stricter sciences and yields as much delight as any of the sciences and arts bestow. But to reap this pleasure and this fruit of history is not for everyone. It is granted only to those who either know by their own ingenuity how to construct common laws and universal precepts from individual events, or at least have learned them from masters to the degree that nothing except experiments is required for an absolute knowledge of things in every detail.<sup>14</sup>

Conring thus affirms a fundamental distinction between experience on the one hand and "common laws and universal precepts" on the other. The latter are constructed out of the former. Knowledge properly speaking only exists where experience and rational principles are united. The

14. "Est vero praeter illam et alia nobiliorque amoenitatis istius causa. Quum enim scientiae atque artes omnes, solas si mathematicas, quas puras vocant, exceperis, experientia rerum ut quam maxime indigeant, neque sine hac ullam earum liceat assequi, hinc iam necessitas etiam summa historiae oritur, veluti quae exhibeat complexum aliquem experientiae cuiuslibet generis. . . . Manuductrix igitur severiorum scientiarum est historia, tantumque parit delectationis quantum scientiae atque artes quaelibet largiuntur. Sed hanc eius voluptatem atque hunc illius fructum percipere non est cuiusvis. Tantum enim iis id concessum est, qui communes leges atque praecepta universalis aut ipsimet suo ingenio norunt construere ex singularibus eventis, aut vero a magistris hactenus ea didicerunt, ut ad absolutam omnibus numeris rerum scientiam nil praeter experimenta postuletur." 258.1–14.

term he prefers for such knowledge is *scientia*.<sup>15</sup> When it is necessary to distinguish it from subordinate kinds of knowledge, consisting of mere familiarity with the empirical data without rational understanding on the one hand, or pure awareness of rational principles without empirical confirmation on the other, he may also speak of *absoluta scientia*, or *absoluta eruditio*.<sup>16</sup> At any rate he never tires of pointing out that to know means to be able to explain the phenomena, and to be able to explain means to know the reasons and understand the causes behind them.<sup>17</sup> His favorite illustration is the example of a doctor. Unless he knows both the actual condition of Socrates' body and the science of medicine, he cannot properly be said to know whether Socrates is healthy or not.<sup>18</sup>

With a few words Conring has thus established a basic definition of history. History is a record of experience, any kind of experience. "For whatever the senses have perceived, whether things of nature or human affairs, history puts them all before [our] eyes."<sup>19</sup> It is one of the two basic ingredients in knowledge. Universal laws and principles are the other.

Three important consequences must be noted. First, the equation between history and experience gives the concept of history a much wider connotation than it has today. Its subject matter, in fact, is universal. It includes not only phenomena in the realm of human affairs but everything that is subject to empirical observation. One way of putting this is to

15. But note that for Conring, as for his teacher Aristotle, *ars* and *scientia* are both knowledge, the difference being only that *ars* is knowledge which can be used for practical purposes.

16. See the texts quoted in notes 14 and 42.

17. "Atque nobis quidem id paucis expeditum dare animus est; prius tamen in memoriam revocandum fuerit, ad eiusmodi aliquam scientiam non eventorum duntaxat aut aperte gestorum sed et causarum latentium notitiam pertinere. Habet videlicet et hic suum aliquem locum Aristotelis illud: *scire esse rem per causam cognoscere*." 264.30–33. Cf. 258.14–19; 259.13–15.

18. "Tum vero deum credimur medici naturam omnem nostri Socratis perspexisse, quum didicimus omne illud, quod in eo est sive sanum sive morbidum sive ambiguae inter haec conditionis: id quod est, nosse originem atque causas omnium illorum, quae ad valetudinem Socratis quoquo modo pertinent. Non enim satis est scire, quam ille naturam materno ex utero produxerit, aut quantum ab illa post recessum sit, quidque pristino etiamnum sese modo habeat: sed et causas affectuum omnium, sive illi secundum sive praeter naturam sese habeant, oportet notas esse: ut pateat, quidnam corrigi queat aut respuat medelam. Simili prorsus ratione igitur rerum imperii vere consultum decuerit non scire tantum quasnam in leges illud consenserit (quod pene genium est conditioni nativae Socratis) aut vero, quantum iis hodierni mores vel adversentur vel congruant: sed et origo occasioque et legum latarum et eorum quae contra fiunt, intelligenda est." 263.10–20; cf. 258.48–49; 260.1–12; 262.61–263.10; 266.49–54.

19. "Quaecunque enim sensus percipiunt, sive illae res sint naturae sive negotia humana, isthaec omnia exponit oculis historia." 257.35–36.

say that there is not merely one history, but as many kinds of history as there are kinds of empirical data. "It is wonderful how much light that history which corresponds to each branch of learning brings to it, as natural history does to the natural philosopher, heavenly to the astronomer, political to the political thinker, medical to the doctor, and to each his own."<sup>20</sup> The only exceptions to this scheme, as was observed in the quotation above, are the "pure" sciences. Because they have nothing to do with empirical data at all they leave no room for history.

Second, even though the meaning of history is so wide, it does not extend to knowledge properly speaking. History is merely a prerequisite for knowledge. There may be a strong temptation to consider this as proof that Conring shared with modern historians the conviction that human affairs are not susceptible of scientific explanation. But unless one were to maintain that his concept of science was identical with the modern one, that would be a mistake. He certainly considered history "unscientific," but only because by definition it had to be distinguished from rational principles. That is no reason to believe that he denied the existence of rational principles by which experiences in the realm of human affairs could be "scientifically" explained.

It is, in fact, not difficult to show that he conceived of the study of human affairs as a science in precisely the same terms as those he had set forth for *absoluta scientia* in general. Its ingredients are explicitly discussed in his account of what is required for the study of the history of Germany.<sup>21</sup> On the one hand, there are the empirical data. They consist of "what has been done and decreed" and are found in the various kinds of histories.<sup>22</sup> Because of his overriding interest in the commonwealth, that is, the Empire, he usually concentrates on facts related to political history. But on occasion he stresses that there is more to human affairs than that. In the third preface he expressed a clear preference for documents describing "the lands, the customs, the commonwealth, and the differences between the various peoples," rather than tales of war and battle.<sup>23</sup>

20. "Igitur mirum est, quantum adferat lucis doctrinae cuilibet ea, quae illi respondet, historia: ceu naturali philosopho naturalis, astronomo coelestis, civili civilis, medica medico, singulis sua." 258.7-9.

21. 264.26-265.17.

22. "Est autem hoc, scire quid actum aut decretum aliquando sit in reipublicae nostrae, adeoque imperii huius Romani, quod appellamus, negotiis." 265.9-11.

23. "Illa igitur duntaxat hic congesta sunt monumenta, quae terras, mores, rempublicam et

On the other hand, the study of the history of Germany also presupposes a knowledge of "common laws and universal precepts." They are taught by several disciplines, all of which belong in the sphere of practical philosophy. The most important among them is *civilis prudentia*, corresponding roughly to "political science," but best left untranslated and rendered as "civil prudence."<sup>24</sup> In addition to civil prudence, the historical scientist must also know natural law and morals.<sup>25</sup> In order to appreciate in full the kind of thinking which is here at issue, one must emphasize that this includes another kind of general principle. "Perhaps there are good grounds indeed to expect such an historian, or someone who is trying to walk this road towards history, to have a profound knowledge of revealed Christian doctrine."<sup>26</sup> The reason is that religion, along with natural law and morals, is the basis of all prudence. Conring insisted on the essential unity of these disciplines and deplored the didactic customs by which they were torn apart.<sup>27</sup>

Conring in other words had a well-developed concept of a science of human affairs, exactly parallel in its structure to science in general. It should be noted that there is a terminological difficulty in referring to it. "History" cannot really be used because it has already been defined as the record of empirical data of any kind. It is doubly confusing to use the same term to refer to a science, rather than to the facts it explains, and to restrict it to human affairs. But since no other term is available, confusion can hardly be avoided altogether. Conring himself clearly did not use history only in the strict sense which he gave to it in his systematic introduction. Thus the best one can do is to speak of "historical science," and defend

populorum varia discrimina recensent, suntque adeo reliquis omnibus hactenus praefenda." 254.28-30.

24. 264.26-50.

25. "Praeter hanc vero, etiam morum iurisque naturalis prudentiam recte eundem ob finem requiri, haud difficile iudicatu est. Intelligo autem illam scientiam quae, quemadmodum vitam suam homo cum erga semetipsum, tum erga alios, maxime vero erga Deum (nam et hoc iustitiae opus est) debeat gerere exponit; omnia enim haec artis unius sunt, si intra connata menti nostrae praecepta maneamus, licet hodie varias sit in partes docentium consuetudine discrepta. . . . Quir enim ita sentiamus, in promptu est docere. Quoniam nimirum sapientia civilis, quod alias probatur, fundamenti loco religionis, iuris, morumque omnium prudentiam habet, super quam sua magnam partem exstruat atque aedificet; eadem profecto necessitate ad hanc addiscendam astringitur historicae illius nostrae affectator scientiae, qua tenetur prudentiam civilem sibi comparare." 264.51-61.

26. "Quin imo haud inane fortassis fuerit, doctrinae Christianae revelatae non proletarium scientiam, ab illo historico aut eo, qui ad hanc historiam affectat viam poscere." 264.55-57.

27. See the text quoted above in note 25.

this combination by pointing out that, even though according to his own conceptual scheme this is almost an oxymoron, Conring himself used it at least once.<sup>28</sup>

This concept of a science of history also deserves to be stressed because of the gulf that has since come to separate history from science. It focuses attention, not only on Conring's view of the nature of the study of human affairs, but on his understanding of science in general. There can be no doubt that to give the distinction between an "unscientific" knowledge of human affairs and a "scientific" knowledge of the realm of nature the same importance it has in modern thought is to misrepresent his convictions. In the last analysis it may be necessary to qualify the basic pattern. But it first needs to be stressed that in his mind all of the "arts and sciences," including the study of human affairs, had an identical structure.

The third, and by far the most important, consequence derives from a prominent characteristic of history. History is after all not simply experience, but experience recorded by others. It can therefore not be taken at face value. "For there is no author whose truths are not injured by some area of error. Hence there is need for historical judgment, among the principal canons of which is that in history we should not be too credulous."<sup>29</sup> If one asks how lack of credulity is to be replaced by an ability to distinguish between the trustworthy and the not-so-trustworthy evidence, one gets a decided answer. The solution resides in those "common laws and universal precepts" mentioned above which are the other main ingredient in the formation of "absolute knowledge of things in all details."

A few passages may be quoted to support this observation. The strongest reason he adduces to show why the study of human affairs, like any other, cannot do without rational principles occurs in his description of the requirements for the study of German history:

The third requirement, however, [in addition to a knowledge of the rational principles of civil prudence on the one hand, and of natural law, morals, and religion on the other] which must now be touched upon, is proper and native to German history. It is to know what has been done or decreed at any time in the affairs of our com-

28. He speaks of "historicae illius nostrae affectator scientiae" at 264.60.

29. "Nullus enim est autor, cuius veritates non aliquod erroris laesit confinium. Hinc iudicio historico opus, inter cuius principes est canones; ne in historia nimis simus creduli." 271.13-16.

monwealth, that is, of this so-called Roman Empire. For this now is the essence of our historical effort, *even though it cannot be accurately done without the help of those disciplines which we have mentioned.*<sup>30</sup>

Rational principles are thus considered necessary in order to assure the accuracy of the gathered data.

A slightly different problem is posed by gaps in the evidence. In the context of discussing the poor quality of the sources for early medieval German history, Conring makes a remarkable claim for the power of the same rational principles to produce knowledge even beyond what the data seem to warrant:

For in the case of most events our ancestors' primitive ways of writing will not prevent a reader of this kind from grasping even purposes which were passed over in silence. Just as an experienced doctor easily realizes what is not mentioned in what uneducated people tell him and supplies what is missing from the narration with the help of his medical knowledge, while someone less learned would only understand it with considerable effort, so a reader who knows public matters and human life recognizes by slight indications what has not been said and exposes the concealed reasons of things openly, relying for assistance on the powers of his prudence and natural ability.<sup>31</sup>

An intelligent and well-trained reader, he says, that is, a reader who knows civil prudence, morals, etc., will at least in part be able to make up for the incompleteness of any given evidence. The parallel with medicine is important since it shows once again Conring's belief in the similarities between the study of human affairs and the study of nature.

There is another, still more basic difficulty which may be mentioned here because it, too, requires the use of rational principles in order to prepare the data for scientific explanation. It is the fact that the available evidence

30. "Tertium vero, quod nunc tangendum, Germanicae historiae proprium atque domesticum est. Est autem hoc, scire quid actum aut decretum aliquando sit in reipublicae nostrae, adeoque imperii huius Romani, quod appellamus, negotiis. Hoc enim ipsissimum iam opus nostrum historicum est: *etsi accurate fieri nequeat sine eorum quae diximus, adminiculo.*" 265.8-12. My italics.

31. "Nam ne rudis quidem illa maiorum scriptio obstat huiusmodi lectori, quo minus in plerisque eventorum consilia silentio etiam praeterita ille adsequatur. Scilicet ut peritus medicus ex plebeia narratione facile intelligit et illa quae tacentur, supplente defectum narrationis medici peritia; quae tamen indoctor aliquis ne magno quidem nisu perceperit: Ita et reipublicae vitaeque humanae prudens lector, ex levibus indiciis cognoscit non dicta, abditasque rerum causas exponit in apri-cum, in subsidium prudentiae naturaeque viribus advocatis." 266.49-54.

is almost infinite. A rational criterion is needed in order to make a selection of data possible, even before the issue of their trustworthiness can be addressed. That in itself represents a task the magnitude of which he by no means underestimates. At one point, he criticizes the kind of knowledge which results when no other principle than pleasure governs the selection of the data. He grants that historians who adopt that standard will write interesting history, because in the absence of anything else to guide them they will seize on what is most pleasurable to relate. But he leaves no doubt as to his contempt for the result, which he calls *curiosa vanitas*.<sup>32</sup> Elsewhere, he considers the predicament of a novice who approaches the available literature for the first time and finds himself in danger of being overwhelmed by it. That danger can be avoided, thinks Conring, provided only that the reader is "prudent." He grows almost rapturous in describing the lightning speed with which the eye of a trained researcher is capable of sifting the relevant from the superfluous.<sup>33</sup>

In sum, there are two distinct problems, and perhaps more, which need to be solved even before the empirical data can be used for "scientific" explanation. The first is the impossibility of handling an infinite amount of data. That requires the definition of a criterion of selection. The second consists of the unreliability and incompleteness of the data. Canons of historical judgment and principles of interpretation must be formulated to remedy such defects in the evidence.

It may be obvious that such convictions have profound implications for Conring's concept of a historical science, and indeed for his concept of knowledge in general. They require the presence of rational principles before the evidence can be used. The theory of knowledge which has been discussed above, on the other hand, explicitly demands that rational principles are to be constructed out of the evidence. Conring thus finds himself

32. "Haec adeo causa est, quor multi nulla aequae re capiantur quam hoc studio: non quod fructum aliquem hinc ferant, sed quod animus incredibili voluptate semel illectus, suavissimo hoc pabulo nequeat saturari. Sed illorum hic labor fortassis non caret iusta reprehensione, etsi in illo soli liberalis ingenii homines occupentur, adeoque videri possit decere quemvis libera natum conditione. Facile quippe in iis, quae ad vitam aut necessaria non sunt aut non perinde utilia, non minus quam in aliis, intemperantia laboratur: desinitque tandem saepenumero haec diligentia in Appionis aut Dydimi curiosam quandam vanitatem. . . . Habet scilicet in huiusmodi rebus locum illud, quod de philosophia minus recte olim Neoptolemus Emilianus pronuntiavit: *Philologandum est* (licet ita nunc loqui) *sed paucis; nam omnino non placet.*" 257.44-56. See also below, note 39. The quotation from Ennius on which Conring is punning can be found in Cicero, *Rep.* 1.18.

33. The problem and its solution are discussed at length at 266.26-267.28.

confronted with the problem nowadays referred to as the hermeneutical circle. Since the two elements of knowledge presuppose each other, it is impossible to see how he can escape from the circle. The neat conceptual scheme according to which knowledge consists of empirical data in conjunction with rational principles is thus exploded by a contradiction.

This contradiction between, on the one hand, the brief and systematic statement of the nature of historical knowledge which Conring gives in the opening paragraphs of his preface and, on the other, his detailed account of the difficulties inherent in the study of history, is the most important feature of the preface to the *Germania*. Nowhere does he address the issue as such. Perhaps that is a reason to deny him the status of a truly great thinker. But on the other hand, it is only fair to acknowledge that we have at this point encountered one of the central difficulties, perhaps the central difficulty, in the theory of knowledge which has occupied thinkers since ancient times. Moreover, even though Conring failed to turn his attention explicitly to it, his treatise contains numerous hints at possible alternatives. They make for most interesting reading and deserve to be studied with careful attention because they suggest that he himself was not quite satisfied with the state of affairs. Both the intrinsic difficulty of the subject and the short space available here make it impossible to give anything like a complete account of what he has to say about the matter and the implications of his position. But an outline of his views, schematic as it necessarily must be, is certainly worth the effort. It will suggest that a different theory of history is barely hidden beneath the surface of the text, a theory which takes on remarkably clear contours as soon as the contradiction in Conring's ideas is taken seriously.

Three ways can be imagined in principle to resolve the difficulty that rational principles are necessary to interpret the evidence out of which they are to be constructed. All three of them are in some fashion represented in the text. They shall be dealt with in order.

The first is to argue that at least a few rational principles are innate in the human mind and thus do not need to be taken from the evidence. At some points Conring seems to put his trust in that way out. He does believe that there are innate ideas. "About the life and morals of humanity and their relationship to mankind's true happiness, the best and greatest God has established many things in such a way that our mind itself im-

mediately condemns everything opposed to them as iniquitous and dishonorable."<sup>34</sup> In other words, there are universally valid ideas of right and wrong. That is undoubtedly why he considered religion to be the foundation of civil prudence. But he immediately disqualifies innate ideas of this kind as sufficient foundations for a knowledge of human affairs in general, much less of natural events. For he goes on to point out that politics are mostly concerned with a mere earthly felicity. "By far the greatest part of the matters which pertain to the commonwealth of our Empire is situated beyond the power of honor and dishonor. They are thus not controlled by such eternal laws of nature, but rather accept their laws and rights from those who have the arbitrary power of creating them."<sup>35</sup> What may have seemed a promising way out of the quandary must be discarded as a merely partial solution at best.

The second way out consists of accepting the contradiction as it stands and facing the necessary consequence: all hope of true knowledge must be abandoned. Occasionally it seems as though Conring felt an attraction to this kind of skepticism. In support, one might adduce the surprising ease with which he substitutes "faith" for "truth" as the cardinal virtue of the historian, as though there were no difference between statements merely believed and statements proved to be true.<sup>36</sup> "For it is not given to [those] born human beings to explore everything by themselves, but many things must be accepted on the considered testimony of others. What has already been attested to by the consent of better men, furthermore, only the impudent would call into doubt."<sup>37</sup> In the absence of any reliable standard by which to establish the value of "the consent of better men," it is hard to see what would distinguish faith in it from faith in the opinions of anyone at all. But on the other hand Conring vehemently con-

34. "De vita quidem moribusque omnis in universum humani generis, quatenus illa spectant veram omnibusque propriam beatitudinem, multa sic constituit ac sanxit Opt. Maxim. Deus, ut ipsa mens nostra ista quae contra fiunt iniquitatis statim atque inhonesti titulo infamet." 266.9-12.

35. "Ergo et eorum quae ad nostram pertinent imperii rempublicam longe maxima pars extra honesti atque inhonesti vim est sita, adeoque huiusmodi aeternis naturae legibus non astringitur, sed leges atque iura sua ab iis accipit, quos penes ferendi ista arbitrium ac potestatis est." 266.16-19.

36. "Tres enim sunt historici virtutes: veritas, prudentia, atque eloquentia." 259.11-12. The parallel enumeration at 263.35 substitutes "fides" for "veritas." Cf. the use of *fides* in the text quoted in note 42 below.

37. "Neque vero datum est hominibus natis omnia per seipsos explorare, sed multa certis aliorum testimonii accipienda sunt; quae porro consensu meliorum iam sunt contestata, illa vocare in dubium non nisi impudentis fuerit." 257.5-7.

demned opinions as a "sacred illness."<sup>38</sup> Hence there is no doubt that he took the idea of absolute knowledge seriously and did not subscribe to pure relativism.

The reasons which permitted him to do so bring us to the third way. It consists of turning attention away from the theory of knowledge which was outlined above and towards the development of a critical method capable of accounting for the difficulties presented by it. If the analysis given so far is correct, a successful solution needs to do at least two things. It must provide a principle for selecting the evidence and it must establish criteria by which the evidence can be assessed. Elements of such a solution can be found scattered in several places in Conring's preface. Nowhere are they combined in any systematic way, and it may be thought foolhardy to do here what Conring did not do himself. But given the importance of the question, it is worth bringing ideas to the forefront which are undoubtedly there and bear directly on the issue, even though Conring himself did not explore their significance as far as one might have liked. But in order to avoid misrepresentation, one must insist on the hypothetical nature of this reconstruction.

To take up the principle of selection first, one may point out that, having just condemned the kind of history which results from unprincipled journeying through the data in search of nothing but entertainment, Conring turns to history that is governed by a consideration of the common good.<sup>39</sup> This suggests that the idea of the common good might supply the desired principle. There are two excellent and closely related reasons

38. Speaking of mistaken notions of Roman law: "Verum etsi nondum quidquam detrimenti attulisset haec opinio, quis tamen non videt quam in futurum fuerit noxium, si improvidae mentes aut rerum novarum cupidiae huiusmodi erroribus imbuantur? Sacer scilicet morbus opinio est: mundus tamen hic nulla perinde re quam hac ipsa regitur. Ita et fuit nonnunquam sententiae fascinant animos, et usque adeo iudicii aciem obfuscant, ut ne clario quidem meridie veritatis solem contemplanur." 262.48-53.

39. "Quum enim immensa quaedam historiae amplitudo sit, per omnes scilicet res mortalium porrecta, alii ad omnem feruntur sine discrimine, alii hanc aut illam sibi seorsim addiscendam sumunt, reliquam contemnentes. . . . Accuratus tamen rem omnem intuentibus facile apparet, si voluptatis solius gratia sit tractanda historia, perinde fortassis esse ad quamnam feraris dummodo delectet. Quamquam id valeat cumprimis ea quae et varia maxime est et res narrat multum a vulgari consuetudine remotas; talia enim iucunda sunt maxime. At qui per historiam ad prudentiam atque rempublicam affectant viam, iis liquet delectum aliquem observandum esse. Non enim quaevis pari ad illam ratione est utilis." 258.40-45. "Unde et ante omnia consequens est, historiam eius reipublicae, cui praest quis sive auctoritate sive consilio, esse omnino necessariam in republica versanti homini, negligi certe haud posse sine publico detrimento." 258.62-64. Cf. above, note 18.

why this could be so. First, the common good is a practical idea, rather than a theoretical one, and thus does not need to be constructed out of the evidence. It is given by interests. Second, it has objective validity for all of the members of the community whose good is concerned. Because it poses questions interesting for everyone, attention to the common good permits a reasonable beginning in discriminating among pieces of evidence. Motives of this kind clearly shaped Conring's own particular path to history. As he points out, his study of the history of Germany and German law was provoked by his fear of the damage which might be done to the common good by those who argued that Germany was subject to the Roman law and thereby threatened public peace.<sup>40</sup>

The difficulty inherent in giving such a central role to the common good, however, cannot be ignored. Even if it could be allowed the function of providing the study of human affairs with an acceptable starting point, it is doubtful whether it could do so for natural science, too. It thus inevitably raises the question whether there is a fundamental difference between the study of nature and that of human affairs. It focuses attention on the relationship between practical and theoretical reason in the formation of knowledge. To insist on it would mean giving priority to practical reason. Such a conclusion may not be entirely unwarranted. It will be remembered that Conring's favorite example of the man of knowledge, the doctor, has also a practical concern in mind, namely the health of the patient. For now, however, it is impossible to go beyond the bare suggestion that the idea of the common good is a possible, but problematic, candidate to fill one of the two gaps in Conring's theory of knowledge.

To turn to the other question, namely, how to acquire knowledge in spite of the fact that those theoretical principles which must be presupposed to examine the data cannot be presupposed, it is necessary to recall that Conring describes not merely one, but two ways to arrive at absolute knowledge. The first is that of the masters, who by their natural ingenuity "know how to construct common laws and universal precepts from

40. "Interest enim pacis ac salutis publicae, vel nihil loqui in vulgus de statu publico, quod Platonis consilium est, vel certe non aliter de illo loqui quam sese res habet. Dubium autem nulum est, quin periculosae sunt illae quorundam sententiae: iustum esse ut secundum Romanas leges imperii respublica conformetur. Quum enim nostra haec longe sit diversissima maximeque ab illis remota, iniustitiae praesens status arguitur: quod motibus excitandis multum profecto valet." 261.6-11. Add the text quoted above, note 10.

individual events." The second is that of the disciples who "have previously learned [common laws and universal precepts] from their teachers, so that nothing except experiments is required for an absolute knowledge of things in every detail."<sup>41</sup> Conring himself describes the first way as difficult, but not impossible. He considers the natural gifts required to follow it as rare, but he seems to think that they do exist. The question is whether we may leave it at that. If it is true, as he says elsewhere, that no one can even begin to study the data if he does not already dispose of some general principles, then it is not merely difficult, but impossible for the masters to do what is asked of them. The fundamental contradiction from which Conring's thought suffers is nowhere more manifest than at this point.

If it is impossible to study the data without already having acquired a knowledge of general principles, then the principles inferred by the masters from the evidence can have no absolute validity. The difference between the masters and the disciples thus turns out to be merely superficial. The former, to be sure, derive their knowledge of general principles from direct observation, whereas the latter base it only on the authority of their teachers. But in either case such knowledge is provisional and requires some other means of confirmation. The way of the disciples supplies precisely such a means. Even though it might hitherto have seemed merely an insignificant elaboration of the way of the masters, it thus acquires far greater importance than Conring seems to be giving it.

A central text may be quoted to elucidate the matter:

To judge the trustworthiness of what the masters pronounced in a more universal manner by comparing it with the historical evidence, which is the second step [after having first learned the universal principles from the masters], not only is free from great difficulty, but is also absolutely necessary for a perfect and exact knowledge of all things. . . . Or who would dare to declare that he knows with certainty what he has not yet grasped with the senses, but only been persuaded to accept by the master's authority? But it makes very little difference to its reliability whether one has seen the matter with one's own eyes or accepts it on the certain narration of others who have so seen it. For such a disciple, therefore, history is like a Lydian stone or a kind of ruler, inasmuch as it is a compendium of ex-

41. Cf. above, note 14.

perience against which anyone who pursues absolute erudition must test all laws, all precepts, and all universal propositions.<sup>42</sup>

A few remarks about this text are in order. First, it decisively shifts the emphasis in acquiring a "perfect and exact knowledge of all things" from the construction of universal precepts out of history to testing them against history. The crucial step is now the "experiment" by which a general statement is applied to the data. Conring thus decidedly prefers to argue from principles to the data, rather than the other way.<sup>43</sup> It would nevertheless be a mistake to infer that the role played by history in his thought is restricted to supplying examples by which to illustrate the principles of prudence. On the contrary, history continues to furnish the raw material out of which universal precepts are made, and thus remains "of the highest necessity because it embraces experience of every kind."<sup>44</sup> The point is merely that the grounds on which such precepts are accepted before they have been tested against the evidence are purely hypothetical. The reason then why he prefers the road from the general to the specific, rather than the reverse, is that in coming full circle the former completes a process begun by the latter.<sup>45</sup>

Second, history is now given another definition which has so far been purposely ignored. It is no longer merely a storehouse of empirical data, but also a "ruler" which makes it possible to test the validity of general

42. "Fidem autem eorum quae ab magistris ita universalis fuisse pronuntiata, exigere ad historiam, (quod secundum erat) id vero ut magna caret difficultate, ita ad perfectam exactamque notitiam rerum quarumcunque per est necessarium. . . . Vel quis ausit profiteri, certo sese id scire, quod hactenus nullis usurpatum sensibus, sola magistri auctoritate fuit persuasum? Parum vero interest ad fidem, tuisne oculis rem videris, an ab aliis visam certa acceperis narratione. Tali ergo discipulo historia quasi lapis est Lydius aut amussis quaedam: ut quae experientiae compendium sit, ad quam omnes leges omniaque praecepta ac pronuntiata communia explorare quemvis absolutae eruditionis affectatorem oportet." 258.19-27. On Beatus Rhenanus as the source for the "Lydian stone," see Hammerstein, "Die Historie," 222, note 15, 230, note 43.

43. "Caeterum quam expedita sit altera haec et posterior via, quae a prudentiae praeceptis ad historiam pergit, prae illa quae vulgo commendatur ab historiis ad praecepta ducens, quamque conveniat magis civilis sapientiae tyronibus, alias luculente ostendimus." 258.27-30.

44. "Nullum tamen est dubium quin historiarum peritia non dico utilis sit ad comparandam illam prudentiam, verum per etiam necessaria, quacunque tandem via grassari ad illam fuerit libitum." 258.30-32. Cf. the text quoted above, note 13. Hammerstein, "Die Historie," 225, seems to disagree: "Die Geschichte hat also immer nur illustrativen, beispieldhaften Charakter, keinen eigenen Aussagewert!"

45. This reminds one of the method of resolution and composition familiar from the scientific works of Galileo and others. It does not seem necessary to pursue this issue further at this point, but it may be worth suggesting that differences are to be expected when this method is consciously applied to texts, as it is in Conring's case, rather than to sensory observations.

statements. This double function of history alone, as both raw material and instrument of criticism, makes the pursuit of knowledge possible. At the same time it should be clear that the result of arguing from general statements to the evidence may not only be to confirm or to refute the former. It may also serve the opposite purpose of interpreting the evidence or filling gaps in it.

Third, there is no reason to believe that this procedure can ever completely remove the element of faith inherent in it from the beginning. Those who adopt it must rather continue forever to repeat the steps of accepting untested evidence, constructing hypotheses out of it, or learning them from the masters, performing the experiment of testing the hypotheses against the evidence, accepting the result, and subjecting it to new tests. The road towards absolute knowledge thus takes the form of an infinite circle gradually spiraling around a center which it never reaches. But because the formulation of hypotheses makes the historian "prudent," such repetition is by no means futile. It rather enables him to search the evidence methodically for an answer to a clearly formulated question.

Fourth, it may now be possible to understand why Conring found it so easy to substitute faith for truth in his references to the historian's cardinal virtue. Faith comes at the beginning, and truth at the end of his search for knowledge. The difference is thus by no means abolished. But absolute knowledge resides in infinity, and therefore faith and truth coincide in practice.

Fifth, attention should be drawn to the astonishing declaration that "it makes very little difference for its reliability whether one has seen the matter with one's own eyes or accepts it on the certain narration of others who have so seen it." It is astonishing because it belittles the difference between one's own observations and observations reported by others.<sup>46</sup> It implies the conviction that no evidence, not even that of one's own eyes, can ever be totally relied upon, or, conversely, that all evidence requires

46. A. Seifert, *Cognitio Historica* (Berlin, 1976), 133f., on the contrary insists on the importance of this difference for Conring's thought. He quotes from Conring's *De civili prudentia*: "Quae ex historia itaque eiusmodi singularium rerum lecta vel audita proxime quidem oritur cognitio, itidem non diversa est ab ea quae per experientiam accipitur, nisi quod aliena fide narrantium illa nitatur, experientia autem ipse (!) propius sensu perceptus inhaereat." (Seifert's exclamation mark). But even though reliance on "aliena fides" makes for complications, the fundamental point of this text seems to be the similarity of direct observation and history.

interpretation. History thus becomes, not simply *a*, but *the* empirical prerequisite for science. The consequence is that, insofar as "it is not given to [those] born human beings to explore everything by themselves, but many things must be accepted on the considered testimony of others,"<sup>47</sup> the model discussed above may be applied to all sciences, and not just to the study of human affairs. That is not to deny the difference between actual and reported observations. But it is to say that the former, like the latter, have to be critically analyzed in order to serve as a basis for knowledge.

Sixth, and finally, a more than conventional reason can now be suggested why Conring insists that the historian needs the virtue of eloquence in addition to truthfulness and prudence.<sup>48</sup> He needs truthfulness, or faith, so that he will report the evidence without intentional distortion. He needs prudence so as to interpret it rationally. But, given the finitude of the human mind, rational explanation never succeeds in accounting for the data without remainder. An element of faith continues to be left over. Perhaps it is too bold to attribute a place of systematic theoretical importance to eloquence in his thought. But it is just possible that eloquence is necessary because it alone is capable of uniting truthfulness and prudence in such a way that the two will be completely fused.<sup>49</sup>

The effect of forcing the contradiction in Conring's views to the surface is thus to recognize a theory of knowledge quite different from the one initially proposed. It is founded on the realization that the human mind is not equipped with any absolute standard by which to ascertain the veracity of any given evidence. All knowledge begins instead with an element of faith, faith either in untested evidence or in the doctrines of the masters. The capacity of human beings for attaining truth, in other words, is severely limited. On the one hand, the radical distinction between masters and disciples is thus abolished, and the role of magisterial authority undermined. This may be considered to be one of the roots of the Enlightenment. On the other hand, as it is impossible to build knowledge on an unquestionably firm basis, faith in the authority of a magisterial tradition, "the consent of better minds," is certainly not the worst in-

47. Cf. above, note 37.

48. Cf. above, note 36.

49. On the similarly central role attributed to eloquence by earlier humanists, see J. E. Seigel, *Rhetoric and Philosophy in Renaissance Humanism: The Union of Eloquence and Wisdom*, Petrarch to Valla (Princeton, 1968), especially the chapter on Valla, pp. 137-69.

dication where to begin the pursuit of knowledge, and in most cases probably better than faith in one's own natural ingenuity. It may seem paradoxical that what has just been called an enlightened way of thinking should thus replace knowledge with faith in a tradition. But the paradox is only superficial. The point of course is that one need not stop here. On the contrary, it is not only possible, but necessary to go on and to subject that faith to what Conring significantly calls "experiments." Conring's explicit theory according to which knowledge consists of general principles which explain the empirical data is thus challenged by an implicit one according to which knowledge resides in the infinite process of subjecting opinions to critical examination.

In order to illustrate how Conring conceived the systematic relationship between the common good, prudence, and history, a brief example may now be instructive. In the preface to the *Germania*, he asks if the Holy Roman Empire is subject to Roman law. The question is posed by his fear of the damage done to the common good by those who argue for a positive answer. Prudential principles suggest three possible reasons which would support his opponents' case. First, Roman law may be a part of justice itself. Second, Germany may have voluntarily subjected itself to Roman law. Third, there may be someone else who has the right to demand obedience to Roman law from Germany. There is no need now to investigate whether Conring had developed these possible answers on his own or taken them from some tradition. The point is that they serve as hypotheses to guide his investigation. In order to test them, he asks whether any one of the three applies to the historical evidence. In the course of searching the record, further distinctions turn out to be necessary. For example, tacit must be distinguished from explicit consent to Roman law. In this way, the original hypotheses are modified. In the end, he establishes that Roman law is not part of natural law, that Germany did not consent to it, and that no one had a right to impose it on Germany. These statements may now be called facts. But it is clear that their truth is predicated on the unproven assumption that no further evidence needs to be considered and that no reasons why Roman law might be binding on the Holy Roman Empire have been ignored. They are therefore not beyond question.<sup>50</sup>

Our results may now be briefly summarized. The most important feature

50. The relevant text can be found at 261.5-262.39.

of the views presented by Conring in his preface to the *Germania* is the tension between a simple and explicit theory according to which knowledge consists in empirical data in conjunction with rational principles and the apparent impossibility of arriving at such knowledge. The tension is never explicitly recognized. But it is implicitly present in contradictory statements about the manner in which truth is discovered. More important, an attempt to resolve it is embedded in the text. It consists of a different theory of knowledge. Instead of deriving knowledge from a firm empirical basis, the pursuit of knowledge, built on a concern for the common good, begins with the formulation of hypotheses from questionable evidence and enters on a circular and infinite process of testing the hypotheses against the evidence, and the evidence against the hypotheses. It may thus be no accident that in the mottos chosen for this essay opinion is said to rule the world, and "the circle of reason" and "the advantage of the commonwealth" are mentioned in one breath. Perhaps it is precisely their combination which best characterizes the goal towards which Conring's thoughts were tending.

At this point, our study of Conring's concept of history, which has long ago changed into a study of his theory of knowledge in general, must come to an end. It leaves more questions open than it has answered—if it has answered any at all. Its conclusions, whatever their merit may eventually turn out to be, are as hypothetical as the basis they postulate for his thought. But since a hypothetical reconstruction is at the heart of this essay in any case, it may be fitting to end with a few equally speculative remarks about a possible place for Conring's thought in intellectual history. Here, too, the purpose is not to answer, but to raise questions.

As may have already become evident, the theory of knowledge with which he began is taken directly from Aristotle. The initial emphasis on the natural desire of human beings for knowledge, the distinction between mere experience and scientific knowledge, the preference for the example of the doctor, and even the choice of Socrates as the patient, all appear in the opening pages of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. The primary role played by Aristotelian categories in Conring's thought is in fact too well known to need any further belaboring.<sup>51</sup> The other formative influence on his

51. A more important, but altogether different question is if Conring's Aristotle is the historical Aristotle.

mind, as is equally well known, is found in humanism, with which he became familiar during his student days at the University of Leiden. Humanist themes have not been insisted upon, but their ubiquity is obvious, obvious from the fact that the preface to the *Germania* itself is an introduction to an edition of a classical text, from Conring's insistence on good Latin style, and from his ideal of the *liber natus homo*. It is therefore extremely tempting to attribute the tension declared to have been fundamental for his thought to one between Aristotelianism and humanism.

One must be cautious not to misinterpret the nature of that tension. It is a mistake, as the scholar to whom this book of essays is dedicated has shown, to identify humanism with any particular doctrine. No such identification is here intended, nor is one necessary. Inveterate anti-Platonic empiricist that he may have been, Aristotle himself, after all, was forced to admit that the faculty of scientific understanding "enters [the body] from outside and is divine."<sup>52</sup> As has been pointed out above, reliance on innate ideas, or, in this case, the separate existence of *nous*, is one way of resolving the difficulty which Conring, like Aristotle, faced when asked how the phenomena can possibly be explained by principles which are yet to be derived from the phenomena. The contradiction in his thought thus exists in Aristotle's thought itself.

The point is rather that the difficulty, at least in the form in which it had been transmitted during the Middle Ages, was relatively comfortable to live with. Aristotle's model of knowledge was based on data conceived in terms of actual observations. At first sight, it seems so far-fetched to question the objective reality of what one has seen with one's own eyes that such data may continue to serve as a basis on which the whole building of scientific knowledge can be erected. The separate existence of the *nous* may almost seem an afterthought to an empiricist scheme which takes the data for granted.

Texts, on the other hand, are a kind of data whose reliability is not obvious. They have been created by human beings and may not be accepted without question. They can therefore not be incorporated in the Aristotelian model without raising the problem in an acute form. From this perspective, it may have been the most important effect of humanism's unprecedented attention to the study of texts to have lent new urgency

52. Aristotle, *Gen. Corr.*, 2.3, 736b27ff.

to a very old problem. A serious effort to derive knowledge from texts could only succeed if changes were made in the idea of knowledge. At the very least, it was necessary to add to Aristotle's views. But once it was recognized that the difficulties presented by texts were merely an exacerbated form of those raised by Aristotle himself, it became imperative to transform the theory of knowledge as a whole.

The achievement of Hermann Conring, and, perhaps, that of his seventeenth-century cohorts, may thus not only have been to have posed the problem in terms which forced a decision between abiding by the Aristotelian model or creating another one, but also to have adumbrated a view of reason that came to predominate in the following century. On the surface, Conring admittedly still conceived of knowledge in Aristotelian categories. But even though he had not yet made up his mind, he already had a remarkably clear idea of a different approach. Built on concepts developed for the study of texts, it abandoned the radical distinction between empirical data and rational principles in favor of a circular procedure which could be applied to all areas of knowledge.<sup>53</sup> It saw the pursuit of truth as founded on the critical examination of traditional opinions, collapsed the distinction between masters and disciples, and thus provided reasons to justify the enlightened assault on every form of authority. From there, it was not far to a philosophy which was explicitly founded on the certainty that all evidence includes an element of human creativity, which denied that there is any direct access to things in themselves, which concluded that criticism is the first task of those who desire knowledge, and which imposed stricter limits on theoretical than on practical reason. From there, in short, it was not far to the philosophy of Kant.

In general, the thought of Hermann Conring can thus be characterized as a response to the growth of written culture which humanism and printing had promoted. His humanist training and his familiarity with the difficulties inherent in searching texts for knowledge about the world forced an incipient recognition that the Aristotelian model could not be simply maintained. His response was neither fully developed nor was it the only possible one. One could have denied that what applied to texts also ap-

53. Cf. note 45 above. This view harmonizes with Dreitzel's characterization of Conring's achievement; see H. Dreitzel, "Die Entwicklung der Historie zur Wissenschaft," *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung*, 8 (1981): 264-69. But if it is correct, the crisis of Aristotelianism, which Dreitzel dates circa 1700, *ibid.*, 272-74, may have been well advanced at a much earlier time.

plied to the study of nature. Here one may perhaps find a root of the modern distinction between science and history. One could also have built all knowledge on innate ideas. Perhaps it is possible to forge a link to Descartes in this way. Conring, however, tried a different way. His thought may not only help to understand why the German word *Wissenschaft* still covers all areas of knowledge, from history to natural science. It must also enter into an interpretation of the profound transformation of intellectual life which led to the German Enlightenment and the growing conviction that reason is historically conditioned.

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