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1. The Philosophy of History and the Historian

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THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY AND THE HISTORIAN

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However, one defines that protean term "philosophy of history", it is amply clear, I think, that this subject has been developing at a remarkable rate in recent years. Its general attraction is demonstrated by the imposing number of paperback books that have appeared lately, published by market-wise firms. Its status as a recognized academic specialty is indicated by a substantial number of monographs and by the establishment in 1960 of the journal *History and Theory*, edited by an imposing board of philosophers and historians. And even without statistical data I feel safe in saying that an increasing number of universities are offering and sometimes requiring various courses in this field. The importance of this development seems to me to transcend the proliferation of intellectual specialties that one finds on every side today. It is an implicit or explicit challenge to the great majority of professional historians who normally tend to avoid philosophical commitment or to limit their interest to the more technical side of historical craftsmanship. The historians seem to be not so much divided into contending schools as they are inwardly divided as individuals in their confrontation of this challenge. Increasingly we are ready to recognize that philosophy of history is an important subject, even one that every graduate student in history must study; at the same time a distaste for metaphysics remains, and I think that there is a tendency in the required philosophy of history courses to review the best known schools of the past with a view to dismissing them, so that one may get down to research, content that one is not troubled with the abstractions so dear to St. Augustine, Vico, Hegel, Comte, Croce and Toynbee. At least I do not think that historians are teaching their students to accept any of these philosophies as acceptable theoretical foundations for the working historian. To some extent I agree with such an approach. The bland optimism of Comte's conception of scientific history does not seem justifiable in the twentieth century, and Hegel's Idea and Dialectic do not strike us as relevant to our time. The case of Marxism is superficially different. A vast and wealthy academic establishment produces tons of what purports to be Marxist historical writing, and is at best very fine research. But this exercise in applied philosophy seems to suffer more from its dogmatic assumptions than it gains from any dialectical materialist insight. The unhelpfulness of Marxian philosophy in historical practice is perhaps best illustrated by the inability of Soviet historians to agree readily on the periodization

of Russian history, even though dialectical materialism asserts that the revolutionary transition from one era to another is scientifically demonstrable. Worse still is the inertness of Marxist philosophical thought with reference to history. Plekhanov's book *The Development of the Monist View of History* (1895) is probably the last Marxist study of the philosophy of history published in Russia that has any reputation as philosophy. Even though the present generation of Soviet historians and philosophers has escaped the dead hand of Stalin's turgid essay "Dialectical and Historical Materialism", they have published almost no philosophy of history. If there is any sign of revival it is I. S. Kon's book *Philosophical Idealism and the Crisis of Bourgeois Historical Thought* (1959), which is a well-informed critique of such writers as Dilthey, Spengler, Croce and Collingwood. However, no counter-blast could be written about "the crisis of Marxist historical thought" simply because it is impossible for an intellectually moribund movement to experience a crisis.

Whatever the present status of the various philosophies of history of previous generations, I should suggest that there are three tendencies or schools in contemporary philosophy of history that are very much alive and deserve the attention of historians who conceive their profession as a branch of humanistic learning and not only as a craft or technique. One of these schools, which is often called metahistorical, includes an increasing number of writers, of whom Toynbee remains the best known. Partly because these writers deal in specific historical detail and partly because they explicitly challenge the ordinary academic historian, they have received a goodly share of attention, mostly negative. I am inclined to agree with the consensus that we have yet to see the metahistorical work that can satisfy the historian in terms of its general conceptions and its analysis of particular epochs. However, it is my impression that we have not given enough attention to the epistemological problem that the contemporary metahistorians raise. Do we really rest our case along the lines of H. A. L. Fisher's oft-quoted manifesto describing history as "one emergency following another"? If so, is even his narrative *History of Europe* a logical possibility? If not, how far are we to attempt to go?

In the light of this question one may suggest that our interest in Toynbee should not be so much in his main arguments as in the methodological questions that are suggested in his twelfth volume, *Reconsiderations*. Granting "the inadequacy of our means of thought", which Toynbee discusses, and granting the great problem of mastering oceans of data, which Toynbee approached in an individual, unmechanized way that might have been expected to endear him to historians, it seems clear to me that one cannot ignore his brief on "the need for simultaneous cultivation of panoramic and myopic vision" in history. Surely we do

not want to continue the Malthusian output of monographs without some hope that this knowledge can be synthesized sometime on a panoramic level. At the same time it would appear that it is becoming increasingly difficult to prepare a satisfactory panoramic synthesis; the *New Cambridge Modern History* is less well received than Lord Acton's edition, and such multi-volume general surveys as the University of Michigan or the Soviet Academy of Sciences histories of the world seem to be pretty pedestrian summations. Probably Toynbee's warnings on the limitations of the committee approach to intellectual endeavor are relevant to these signs of weakness but can we hope that individual scholars are physically capable of tackling the continually-increasing body of knowledge?

In sum, it seems to me that the field of metahistory cannot be dismissed as erroneous on *a priori* grounds or irrelevant to the work of the ordinary historian. It would be sad to think that the practicing historians are doomed to become less and less competent to deal with universal history while the latter field increasingly drifts off into other hands. Before this goes very much further I should think that historians would want to reconsider what level of generalization their mode of thought can support and what practical aids, beyond the four-by-six file card, may be available to assist historians in dealing with the deluge of data that threatens to drown panoramic thinking.

This is to suggest that the importance of Toynbee lies not in his interpretation of the historic influence of the seas in Holland or the soil in New England but in the challenge that he has issued to reconsider the potentialities of historical thought. Such a suggestion leads toward the second contemporary school of philosophy of history to which I should like to call attention, the critical philosophy of history. Although a number of eminent practicing historians, such as Marc Bloch, Carl Becker, E. H. Carr and Allen Nevins, have commented on the nature of historical thought from the point of view of the historian, and have received considerable attention from their colleagues, the present generation of critical philosophers of history has been substantially ignored by historians. In my opinion this is unfortunate, for the critical philosophers of history bring to the analysis of historical thought a discipline in which few historians are skilled. The possibilities for fruitful collaboration of the historian and the critical philosopher of history seem especially promising because the historian will not find these philosophers condescending, in the manner of Comte or Toynbee, because the ordinary historian has not quickly unravelled the inner mysteries of the ages.

As a start, communications should be improved between historians and the critical philosophers of history. For example, historians could read with interest Professor Dray's book *Laws and Explanation in History*, attempting to decide whether or not they depend in their own work on

something like a "covering law model", as Professor Dray calls it. According to him this theory maintains that historical "explanation is achieved by subsuming what is to be explained under a general law", and on the basis of extended analysis he concludes that such a model ought to be abandoned. In a way this is very easy advice for most historians because they have paid little or no attention to this theory or the considerable philosophical combat that has been going on around it for some years. On the other hand, it seems to me that a number of practicing historians might, upon reflection, say that much of their explanatory writing does rest on some kind of generalization — perhaps some assumption about human nature — which might be called a covering law. At any rate, neither the critical philosophers of history nor the historians themselves seem to have attempted any kind of extended pragmatic inquiry into the matter.

In general I am somewhat puzzled that such philosophers of history as Dray, Gardiner, Hempel, Nagel, Walsh, and White seem to be so non-pragmatic in their approach to the analysis of historical thought. One can read pretty long stretches in this literature without seeing much evidence that these writers have read any history; on the whole they are inclined to illustrate their points with artificial verbal examples or abstract symbols rather than reference to historical writing. Undoubtedly these scholars really have read history and undoubtedly they do need to have recourse to symbolic logic, but I would suggest that they have been arguing with one another too much and with historians too little. One unfortunate result of this isolation seems to be the assumption that history is necessarily a single mode of thought. Even if there are some common denominators applicable to the method of all historians, I should think it quite likely that there are other methodological peculiarities within the various species and levels of historical thought. At any rate I doubt that there has yet been any adequate investigation of the assumption that historical thought is all of a piece and would suggest that a more pragmatic approach to this particular question is especially needed.

Quite a different sort of problem is posed by the contemporary Christian theological philosophers of history, which I should consider the third active school in contemporary philosophy of history. The least that can be said of this school is that it is engaged in vigorous discussion, showing far more vitality than any other traditional school of speculative philosophy of history, certainly more than contemporary Marxism. Naturally such diverse writers as Nicholas Berdiaev, Father D'Arcy, Christopher Dawson, Mircea Eliade, Jacques Maritain, Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich do not present a single point of view, but I think that it is safe to say that they all raise, explicitly or implicitly, the same basic question: "Is the prevailing academic approach to history compatible with Christianity?" In varying degrees they offer a negative verdict, which should

be an important consideration for historians who are adherents of some variety of traditional Christianity. Perhaps it is not too crude a summary of the Christian theological philosophers of history to say that they deplore the unwillingness of contemporary historians to find any divine significance in the past. Mircea Eliade, whose *Cosmos and History* is to my mind the most penetrating contribution to this branch of the philosophy of history, makes an interesting case for the view that it is humanly untenable to go on writing history from what amounts to an agnostic point of view, which he considers inadequate before "the terror of history". At the same time it appears to me that most of these writers are rather hesitant to state clearly the more positive side of their case, the need for Christian philosophers to reinstate some kind of providential view of history. Since the time of Voltaire, the secular view of history has triumphed to such a degree in professional circles that few persons today are willing to reassert the providential view in plain language. But it is hard to see how one can accept traditional Christianity without a providential view of history in some fairly literal sense, for history is the study of the life of man. If the historian says that he is unable to perceive with any sense of certainty the hand of God in the life of man, he would seem to be accepting a deist or agnostic assumption. Or if he attempts to segregate matters of faith and matters of reason, asserting that the study of history is relevant only to the latter category, it seems to me that the historian is coming very close to admitting that faith and reason are not mutually consistent, which is contrary to at least a great part of the Christian intellectual tradition. Surely it is far more plausible to maintain that natural science does not bear directly on Christianity than to maintain that history does not, for history, more than the natural sciences, is intimately involved in the study of man as a human being in much more than a biological sense. This opinion is accepted by Herbert Butterfield, one of the few Christian philosophers of history whose writing does not suffer from lack of familiarity with historical literature. His book *Christianity and History* at least deserves respect for having faced the problem of providentialism, but to my mind Butterfield's solution to this problem only provides a particularly painful demonstration of the dilemma of the Christian historian, especially when he cites the defeat of Germany in 1918 as evidence of God's hand in history.

In sum, I think that the present trend in favor of philosophy of history is justified and desirable, but in need of closer ties to history itself. The development of scholars who are competent to a fair degree in both history and philosophy seems to be the most pressing need; I am thinking not only of my teaching schedule when I suggest that such scholars should relieve amateurs like myself who, in history programs, seem to be doing most of the philosophy of history teaching at present. In other words, I should like to see philosophy of history a basic requirement in graduate programs in history and I should like to see it taught

by persons whose specific competence to handle the subject is as definite as the competence now expected in let us say Canadian or English history. Moreover, I should like to see a good proportion of the weight of this teaching placed on the major problems of the past seventy-five years or so rather than on the earlier classics. The latter certainly deserve their place in the general history of ideas, but it seems to me that the contemporary problems are most relevant to the task that has become basic in this realm: to persuade the historian to look up from his documents and recall that history is not only a series of specialties but also a branch of humanistic learning.