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THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY AND THE HISTORIAN

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Professor McNeal's paper calls our attention to a crucial point for any useful discussion of the question posed for this colloquium: that the term "philosophy of history" is commonly used to refer to very different sorts of intellectual constructions. McNeal himself would distinguish between *metahistorical, theological* and *critical* enquiries about history, and I take it that he has invited — if not, indeed, incited — me to say something further about the approach of the so-called "critical" school. This I shall be glad to do, not only because it is something which has especially interested me, but also because, as McNeal has implied, it is the approach which will probably be the least familiar to this audience. I should like, too, at the end, to hazard a few remarks — as much as I dare — about what I think should be the historian's interest in critical philosophy of history, leaving to Professor McDougall the task of commenting on what has been said about McNeal's other "live" school. But first I should like to say something about the threefold division itself, as our first contributor has presented it, since our understanding of it is bound to provide landmarks for the discussion that is to follow.

Let me begin with the contrast that is drawn between the metahistorical and the theological. I must confess that the term "metahistorian" has always bothered me a little. It is, of course, a technical term devised by historians themselves — at least in part for the purpose of abusing each other; and I do not want to suggest for a moment that historians are not free to make it mean whatever they please. As I generally find the term used, however, it seems to denote an historian who rises above the specialized, piecemeal enquiries of his more cautious colleagues, and takes the whole of the human past as his subject. What he seeks to discover is *the pattern of that whole.* Now there are, of course, many professional historians who will say that this simply cannot be done: the scale of such metahistorical operations is too vast; the demands upon the learning of the enquirer too heavy. It is no part of my present concern to challenge such a view — still less to dispute Professor McNeal's more moderate conclusion that the job has at least never yet been done satisfactorily. What I do want to point out is that a metahistorian, so described, even if he succeeded, would not be doing *philosophy* at all, in any ordinary sense. For he would be asking himself exactly the same sort of questions about the whole that the more usual historian asks about a selected part; and he would be seeking answers, so far as he

could, by ordinary historical methods. Professor McNeal, I notice, in urging historians not to neglect such enquiries, seems to accept the identification of "metahistory" with "universal history". But that is exactly my point; universal history is *history*.

The contrast between the metahistorical approach, so understood, and the approach of McNeal's theological school is sharp — perhaps sharper than he made it appear. For a theological philosopher of history is not, except accidentally or derivatively, an historian. His aim is not to discover "what happened", even at the most general and comprehensive level of description. It is rather to discern *the meaning of it all* — to evaluate the historical process as a whole, in the way the pure philosopher evaluates reality as a whole, and by so doing to understand, if possible, the place of that process in the general scheme of things. Some so-called metahistorians — Toynbee, for example — have certainly ventured into this rarefied region. But if the distinction Professor McNeal has drawn is to promote clear thinking about the value of various "approaches", I think we should be prepared to say that insofar as they do this, they cease to be mere metahistorians; they join forces with theological philosophers of history. When Toynbee, for example, tells us that history consists of the careers of thirty-odd interconnected civilizations, and that mankind has achieved increasing spiritual insight through the experience of their rise and fall, he speaks as a metahistorian. But when he draws the further conclusion that the *purpose* of the rise and fall of civilizations is to bring man gradually to a knowledge of God through suffering, he rises to issues of a different order. He gives a religious interpretation of what, as metahistorian, he has discovered.

It should perhaps be added that, from the standpoint of the distinction between enquiries into *pattern* and enquiries into *meaning*, there is no important difference between theological philosophy of history and those approaches to history taken by the great metaphysicians, which McNeal rightly regards as now somewhat out of fashion. The chief difference is that the metaphysicians find their answers in the deliverances of speculative reason; the theologians in the affirmations of religious faith. For a Hegel history is meaningful because it displays the dialectical self-development of the World Spirit in time; for a Butterfield because we can see in it everywhere the workings of the providence of God. Clearly both theological and metaphysical philosophers of history ask questions and give answers which transcend the verificatory powers of professional historians altogether. The metahistorian, by contrast, goes beyond the pale of professional history only in the scope of his interests and the rashness of his judgments.

What I have said so far has been intended to clarify the notion of "metahistory" by pushing to its logical conclusion what I take to be the basis of its distinction from theological and metaphysical philosophy

of history. I should now like to try to sharpen our conception of the metaphysico-theological sort of enquiry itself by distinguishing it, in turn, from something else which is often called philosophy of history, and which I think Professor McNeal may have had in mind at certain points. For want of a better name I shall call this *theory of history,* since it aims at a general account of the nature of historical change. In particular, it seeks to elaborate *theories of causation,* which lay bare, as it were, the *mechanism* of history. The Marxist philosophy of history, McNeal would claim, has been tested by countless historians as a "working hypothesis", and found to be inadequate. What he means by "philosophy of history" here, I should think, is almost certainly not Marx's metaphysical beliefs — although it is usually argued that he had them; for these are not the kind of thing we could sensibly expect historians to test. Nor is it likely to be the strictly metahistorical conclusions Marx drew — the contention, for example, that all history can be organized as a five-stage progress from primitive communism to socialism. What most of us would think of in this connection is rather Marx's theory of the causal primacy of substructural factors — a species of economic determinism. And such a theory is philosophical, it should be noticed, in neither the metahistorical nor the metaphysico-theological senses; it is concerned with neither pattern nor meaning. Indeed, if such theories warrant the designation "philosophy" in any sense, I suggest that it can be only in the now archaic one in which theoretical physics was once called "natural philosophy" — the philosophy of any domain being, in this sense, simply its most theoretical part. What is important, of course, is not settling the purely semantic issue; what is important is our recognizing the distinctiveness of the questions raised by what I am calling theory of history. The attempt to answer such questions is neither history nor philosophy, as we ordinarily understand those terms; it is part of a generalizing science, and its success should presumably be judged by the standards appropriate to such a science.

The three kinds of enquiry I have so far considered have one important feature in common: they are all concerned with history as the actual course of events. All aim to say something true about that process itself; either that it has a certain *pattern,* a certain *meaning,* or a certain *mechanism.* What distinguishes the *critical* philosophy of history from all of these, as Professor McNeal has indicated, is its not being concerned with the historical *process* at all, but rather with the historian's study of it. The critical philosopher's subject matter is not events, but enquiry or knowledge. His interest in history is logical and epistemological.

The best known work in this field in English is, I should imagine, R. G. Collingwood's *The Idea of History.* In this work, it is Collingwood's aim to show both what makes historical knowledge *historical,* by contrast, for example, with scientific, perceptual or artistic — and what makes it

knowledge, by contrast with mere opinion or unwarranted belief. And he traces the gradual recognition of historical knowledge as both genuine and peculiar in the consciousness of Western man from Herodotus to the present day. What makes Collingwood a critical philosopher of history is not, of course, his doctrines, which might be characterized as idealist and anti-naturalistic — some might even say "anti-scientific". What makes him a critical philosopher is his interest in analyzing the nature of historical thinking. This interest, although not his conclusions, he shares with many contemporary positivists and logicians, who usually come to the study of history from investigations of the natural sciences. Unlike Collingwood, these latter tend to claim that there is nothing distinctive about historical enquiry, apart from a lamentable theoretical backwardness, and a dearth of really strong arguments for most of its conclusions — these of course, being features of its *practice* rather than its *idea.* According to most positivists, history is, in idea or concept, the application of our general knowledge of society — ideally, the laws of the social sciences — to the problems of determining and explaining the course of past events. Of these two contending groups, it seems to me that the positivists are to be admired for their logical techniques and their clarity of expression, while the idealists seem the more sensitive to what historians actually do. What the latter, unfortunately, seldom offer, is any precise logical characterization of what makes history a peculiar — Collingwood would say "autonomous" — discipline.

In recent years, the most significant development in critical philosophy of history has been the attempt by philosophers of both persuasions to get down to the *details* of such precise logical characterization. There has been a "shredding" of the general problem of the idea of history, and much vigorous debate on such matters as the sense in which historians aim at explanation, the meaning of causal judgments when human action is involved, what is contained in the notions of historical fact and interpretation, the sense (if any) in which it is proper to expect "objectivity" of an historian, and the relation between the claims historians make about individuals, on the one hand, and institutions, on the other. In the course of this work, the division between idealists and positivists has tended to dissolve into another one, which expresses, I think, the most serious difference of opinion among critical philosophers of history today. What is at issue is really the proper role of the philosophical analyst himself. Is it his task, out of the general resources of logical and epistemological theory, to provide basic concepts and standards valid for any rational enquiry, and then to apply these *a priori* to history as a special case? Or should he rather try to *elicit* such concepts and standards from what is already being done in the field? In other words, is it the philosopher's job to tell the historian *what he should be doing?* Or is it his job to tell him *what he is doing* — to clarify the idea of the enquiry already implicit in his own best practice? These contrary trends within

the critical "school" might be called the *prescriptive* and *descriptive* approaches respectively. Without being able to develop, in this short statement, certain qualifications that would be needed, let me at least register my own sympathy with what I have called the "descriptive" approach.

Now it is more than a little embarrassing, having said all this, to have to admit to this audience that, to date, critical philosophy of history of neither approach has really got very far. A course in the subject at a university, for example, would at the present time be largely dependent on a rather spotty article literature, most of it having appeared over the past two decades, and a monograph or two on special problems. The bibliography contained in a recently published collection of readings entitled "Theories of History", edited by Patrick Gardiner, gives a good indication of what there is available. This much can be said for this literature: it raises fruitful questions and it is highly discussable. No one prepared to wade through it conscientiously can fail to think hard about the nature of historical enquiry. In particular, he will have to think about the conceptual apparatus historians use, both in the process of their enquiry and in the presentation of their results. And this I think you will agree is not something which professional historians are by nature especially inclined to do.

This leads me to the question that Professor McNeal really wants us to get to: the question why the Professional historian, by contrast with the professional philosopher, should pay any attention to what critical philosophers of history have been doing. Now as I have already said, I am myself deeply interested in such studies. I should like nothing better than to be able to stand here and argue that the future of historiography is at stake; that historians up to now have simply muddled along, not really knowing what they were doing; but that the future is bright because at last philosophers are making their talents available to straighten out their conceptual tangles. I am afraid that I cannot honestly say anything of the kind. The descriptive emphasis of the kind of critical philosophy I would myself advocate makes it especially difficult to defend such an extravagant claim, since it really takes as its datum what historians unreflectively do. I cannot even argue with conviction that a self-conscious grasp of what critical philosophers discover will necessarily help historians to do any better what they are already doing. The relation between theory and practice is a tricky one, and it is just as conceivable that thinking too much about what they are trying to do, rather than just doing it, may lead to a deterioration of their historical work — I simply do not know. I am myself fortunate enough to teach a fourth year class in the subject, into which only honour students in modern history are admitted. At the risk of losing my franchise, let me confess that more than one of them has told me that in the following year, due to a heightened aware-

ness of certain logical problems associated with them, they found themselves breaking into a sweat about using such simple, and just about indispensable, terms as "fact" and "cause". This was not, of course, the purpose of the course. And I cling to the hope that they were not permanently damaged by it.

My reluctance to claim any direct *practical* value for the critical analysis of historical concepts may perhaps come into sharper focus if I call your attention to still a fifth sort of enquiry which is sometimes referred to as philosophy of history — which, in this case, it is important to distinguish especially from critical philosophy of history. This is *historical methodology* — by which I mean a study of the principles, and perhaps the strategy, of historical research. Whether historical method is something that can formally be taught is, of course, a matter which historians themselves dispute; and I should be sorry if Professor McNeal's use of the words "historical method" and "methodology" in very justly chiding critical philosophers for their insensitivity to the *varieties* of history, gave the impression that these philosophers claim any special capacity in this direction. I should myself want to draw a fairly sharp distinction between the study of the *methods,* and the study of the *idea,* of history, and argue that the requirement of a practical justification for the one is not necessarily appropriate for the other. The chief justification for the conceptual sort of enquiry, I should say, is like that of most philosophy; it is of interest for its own sake. The value of critical philosophy is humanistic; it is offered simply as a contribution to the historian's own self-knowledge. It helps to give him perspective on what he is doing, helps him see its logical structure more clearly, and also its relation to other enterprises. If an historian lacks such humane curiosity about his activities, I do not think that any very convincing case for his studying critical philosophy of history can be made out.

There is, I suppose, one slightly more utilitarian argument for the study which is worth a mention. It too is really an argument for philosophical studies in general, as well as in this particular case. The argument is that philosophical reflection on what we are doing simply cannot be avoided by most of us. Historians who have never studied philosophy, or who have studied it only casually, manage nevertheless to raise questions about the nature of their enquiry for themselves — as the contents of so many presidential addresses and inaugural lectures (not to mention Toynbee's *Reconsiderations)* bear witness. Since this reflection is generally unsystematic, to say the least, it is seldom of a high order, and sometimes very bad indeed. In this very academic year I have heard eminent professional historians, in "off duty" talk about their enquiry, apparently driven by their uneasy awareness of philosophical difficulties, saying things that are patently false. I have heard it seriously claimed for example, that it is impossible to distinguish between history and propaganda. And

I have had it put to me that there is no need to raise the difficult question of what is meant by casual connection in historical writing, since historians (appearances to the contrary) never seek the cause of anything. As in many other fields, good philosophy seems to be required, if for no other reason than to drive out bad.

This brings me to my final point: the question how good philosophy of history is to be generated. I agree wholeheartedly with Professor McNeal that, up to now, far too much has been written about history by philosophers who (as he puts it) give little evidence of having read any history. If there is any significance in the fact that he makes this point immediately after mentioning a monograph of mine, I accept the implied rebuke; what I am doing now is preaching. Whether or not there is such a thing as *pure* philosophy — an independent discipline employing the faculty of reason upon the subject matter of "things in general" — is nowadays often questioned by philosophers themselves. But even if there is such a discipline, I think it is clear that critical philosophy of history, as I have tried to represent it, is no such thing. The philosophy *of* something is stuck with its object. Critical philosophy of history ought to be *about* historiography. Ideally, I suppose, such enquiry would be carried out by philosopher-historians like R. G. Collingwood, just as some of the best philosophy of science has been done by philosopher-physicists. In fact, however, if we really want the subject to develop, I suggest we shall have to settle for philosophers and historians working closely together — perhaps even giving joint courses in the subject, and doing joint research. The two requirements of such co-operation are as obvious as they are rare. Professor McNeal has one of them in mind when he complains that critical philosophers of history talk to each other too much and to historians too little. The other, of course, is that historians be willing to talk back — with the full realization that critical philosophy of history is philosophy, not history; and that philosophy — even what might be called "applied" philosophy — is a difficult and sometimes necessarily technical discipline.