

# *The Dependence of History on Philosophy*

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SEVERAL YEARS AGO, a publisher sent me a pamphlet which contained an account of an interview with a history professor at one of England's universities. In the course of the interview, the professor was asked what he considered the importance or significance of history. He said that, so far as he could make out, it had none. At any rate, that was not the reason for his interest in history. He liked to spend his time rummaging among old manuscripts, doing research, writing historical narratives, and, presumably, occasionally doing some teaching. He indicated that if he were independently wealthy these would be the sorts of things he would choose to do on his own. As matters stood, he considered himself quite fortunate that a university saw fit to indulge his fancies by paying him to do what he would prefer to be engaged in doing in any case.

Of course, he might have uttered these remarks tongue-in-cheek, but my impression was that he did not. He was only stating bluntly, if somewhat cavalierly, a con-

clusion which follows ineluctably from a position that has come to be rather widely held. Most American historians would probably attempt some kind of apology for the value of their discipline, one which would contain such ballast as that man does not live by bread alone and that there are values in history that the novice knows not of, etc., and etc.

The fact is that, generally, historians have fallen prey to a notion that undermines the central importance of history. This has come about by way of a casual, and largely unexamined, extension of the evolutionary outlook to every area of reality. This extension has gone on apace from the latter part of the nineteenth century to the present. The tendency has been to bring everything into the ambit of history but *to make history meaningless*. This paradoxical development requires some explanation.

That everything tended to become history under the impact of evolutionary interpretations can only be suggested here. Biology did, rather obviously, with the

presentation of Darwin's thesis, for the investigation into and the explanation of life came to be the story of how it had developed. (Of course, taxonomy still retains a place, if a subordinate one, in this field.) Geology was brought into the historical frame with the work of Sir Charles Lyell; it became the story of changes within and the development of the earth. Sociology—at least that branch of it that stems from Auguste Comte and Karl Marx in contrast, say, to that of Montesquieu and Edmund Burke—was born as history, as accounts of stages of social development. Similarly, some began to render economics into an historical context; the German historical school of economists—Schmoller, Knies, *et al.*—Marx; and the American institutionalists. Philosophy was reduced to impotence by Immanuel Kant and made into history by G. W. F. Hegel. The Higher Criticism made history the keystone for the study of religion and theology. So it has gone in discipline after discipline. Of course, there have been those who have held out against this historicizing tendency. There have been others who have continued to operate with one foot in the historical camp, as it were, and the other, rather insecurely in an older philosophical camp. Some have clung to the remnants of philosophy in such attenuated forms as pragmatism, existentialism, and logical positivism. But pragmatism and existentialism are eviscerated philosophy-as-history. Logical positivism is just eviscerated reason. Hence, the sway of history preponderates.

To the casual observer, it might appear that all of this would redound greatly to the advantage of history and the historian. Surely, if all is history, then history is the central discipline in the acquisition of knowledge and the historian is the kingpin of the academic undertaking. There was a time in the nineteenth century when the course of developments appeared, at least

superficially, to warrant such an optimistic conclusion. There was an era of construction of philosophies of history, of grand or grandiloquent formulations which would embrace past, present, and future in one masterful historical explanation. Such was the thrust of the work of G. W. F. Hegel, Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, Herbert Spencer, H. T. Buckle, Henry Adams, and Oswald Spengler, among others. The quest for the philosopher's stone had moved onto the historical plane. For Hegel, the key that would unlock the mystery of the universe was a dialectic of ideas; for Comte, there were various historical stages of development; for Marx, it was a dialectic of matter brought to the surface as a contest for the control of technology; for Darwinians, it was the contest for survival of prodigal life arrayed against limited means of sustaining it; for Adams, the law of entropy would provide the key; for Spengler, it was to be the rise and fall of civilizations on an analogy with the cycle of life for organisms, and so on.

Such philosophies of history did not succeed in a universal integration of scholarship and learning under their sway. They can be thought of as efforts to take up the slack that occurred with the breakdown of philosophy, but they met with indifferent success. One obvious reason for this is that very shortly, as has been indicated, there was not one but several different schools of the philosophy of history competing with each other. Of equal importance, there was an attractive and potent counter-tendency afoot. The decline of philosophy as a generally accepted integrative discipline left other areas of study apparently free, each to go its own way. There was a tendency, then, for those within the various disciplines to declare their independence of the others—or, to act as if they were independent.

Ostensibly, most American historians—

such Marxists as there were excepted—have been highly skeptical of all philosophies of history in the twentieth century. This skepticism, however, has frequently been no more than skin deep. Historians have, wittingly or unwittingly, had their thinking colored by nineteenth-century philosophies of history. For example, the outlook of most of us has been to some degree tinged by such Marxist conceptions as the determinative role of technology, the class struggle, the alienation of the worker, and theories of colonialism-as-capitalist-exploitation. Moreover, evolutionary theories have left a residue of ideas which evinces itself in historical writing as futurism, a mode of thinking particularly prominent in textbooks. Futurism views the past as prologue to the present and the present as only an interlude on the way into the future. The tendency of such history is to use it as a basis for prophecy about the shape of things to come by finding out the lineaments of recent and current trends.

## I

AN ARRAY OF preconceptions entered historical writing from evolutionary philosophies of history. These have taken such varied shapes as may be suggested by such terms as Marxism, historicism, Darwinism, progressivism, or futurism. These tried to fill history with meaning. But it should be emphasized that such meaning as was given it arose from philosophical premises that had been surreptitiously brought in. The major premise, usually left implicit, is that the past determines the future, that there are forces at work which move things in a particular direction, and that current trends will continue on their present path until they reach their fruition. The minor premise is that men must or should adjust to the direction in which "history" is moving.

Even so, this baggage of largely untested assumptions from an inchoate philosophy tended to divest history of the importance it formerly had, as much as would history cut loose from any moorings in philosophy, the latter variety frequently avowed but seldom practiced. The major import of history is the lessons that can be learned from it. Such a didactic purpose of history is dependent upon an enduring order in terms of which historical events occur and from which we may deduce lessons applicable for our time, or for all time. That is, history is dependent upon metaphysics. Ironically, those who undercut the didactic content of history did so usually by way of the claim of making history scientific. Such an undertaking had to ignore the metaphysical underpinnings of science. This was not difficult to do, for the ignorance of many historians of the metaphysical basis of science has only been equaled by that of most scientists themselves. Indeed, "metaphysics" became synonymous for most academicians with some vague and imprecise speculations about reality. Whereas, metaphysics is concerned with the only order of reality which can be precisely apprehended. Be that as it may, and in whatever manner they did it, historians disavowed or ignored the framework from which lessons could be learned.

From the early twentieth century on, some historians began frankly to avow that history had no didactic purpose. One of the most outspoken for this position was James Harvey Robinson, advocate of a New History. On the matter of lessons in history, he said:

It is true that it has long been held that certain lessons could be derived from the past. . . . But there is a growing suspicion . . . that this type of usefulness is purely illusory. The present writer is anxious to avoid any risk of being regarded as an advocate of these sup-

posed advantages of historical study. Their value rests on the assumption that conditions remain sufficiently uniform to give precedents a perpetual value, while, as a matter of fact, conditions . . . are so rapidly altering that for the most part it would be dangerous indeed to attempt to apply past experience to the solution of current problems.<sup>1</sup>

Harry Elmer Barnes was equally emphatic about the didactic uses of history. He declared that the "past has no direct lesson for the present in the way of analogies and forecasts." Moreover, he denied that there was any wisdom from the past to be acquired. "The fact that every civilization prior to our own has ended up in a hopeless wreck should be fairly proof of the frailty of patristic wisdom in all ages of men."<sup>2</sup> He concluded in the following manner:

Therefore, in our efforts to solve contemporary problems on the basis of the wisdom of the past," we are somewhat more absurd in our attitude and conduct than the animal trainer who would strap his pet anthropoid in the seat of an aeroplane on the ground of his prior mastery of the technique of the tricycle. Not even a Texas Methodist Kleagle would think of taking his car to Moses, Joshua, Luther or George Washington to have the carburetor adjusted or the valves ground, yet we assure ourselves and our fellowmen that we ought to continue to attempt to solve our contemporary problems of society, economics, politics and conduct on the basis of methods, attitudes and information which in many cases far antedates Moses.<sup>3</sup>

In his much more subtle fashion, Charles A. Beard struck at the basic justification of didactic history. He denied that cause and effect can be isolated in history. He maintained that no group of complications can be "isolated from surrounding

and preceding complications. Even 'simple' events are complex when examined closely. 'George Washington accepted the command of the American troops.' What 'caused' that action?"<sup>4</sup> He went on to say that it is impossible to draw a conclusion with certainty about the answer to the question he posed. In so complex a matter, say, as the American Revolution, he claimed, the attempt to assign causes is futile. His reasoning was this:

To apply the physical analogy of "cause and effect" we should be compelled to think of the American revolution as an entity, like a ball, set in motion by impact of other entities. The latter are the "causes" and the motion of the ball is the "effect." The impossibility of making such analogy conform to the recorded facts of the Revolution is apparent to anybody who employs historical knowledge in the effort. We know that thousands of events took place in time, and that thousands of personalities were engaged in them, but we cannot find chains of cause and effects in them.<sup>5</sup>

However obtusely he had done so, Beard had singled out the crucial issue for the didactic use of history. If it is impossible to discover cause and effect, it is not possible to know what action produced what results. Without this information there is little to be learned from the past.

Currently, Henry Steele Commager has joined the lists with those who say that the study of history will not yield precise lessons. He has stated his position rather strongly:

That is a question which recurs again and again: What use is history? Let us admit at once that in a practical way history has no use, let us concede that it is not good for anything that can be weighed, measured, or counted. It will

not solve problems; it will not guarantee us against the errors of the past; it will not show nations how to avoid wars, or how to win them; it will not provide scientific explanations of depressions or keys to prosperity; it will not contribute in any overt way to progress.

Regarding laws and cause and effect in history, Professor Commager informs us that "Perhaps the most useful lesson the student of history can learn is to avoid oversimplification, and to accept the notion of multiple causation or to resign himself to the fact that as yet we do not know enough to explain the causes of things."<sup>7</sup> Actually, he gives us several options here, but greatest weight should probably be attached to his statement that we "do not know enough to explain the causes of things."

None of those persons quoted should be understood to be saying that there is nothing to be learned from history. Each in his own way would claim something to the contrary. What they are all saying is that there are no lessons to be learned from a study of the past. However loosely they may have reasoned and however poorly they may have explained their reasons, there is a logic to their position. They have accepted the conclusions following from the belief that there is no fixed order in the universe, that things do not have a basic nature, that all things are changing or in a state of flux. James Harvey Robinson argued in this way explicitly. Everything is changing; therefore, there is nothing fixed to which the lessons of history could apply. Harry Elmer Barnes implied that changes occur in every area as they do in the realm of technology. Charles A. Beard held that the historian cannot make the analyses which would provide him with conclusions about cause and effect. His is the historicist position which sees history as a great web of events inextricably commingled. Professor Commager retreated from the field without doing battle.

## II

THESE HISTORIANS were operating upon some relics from philosophy. Indeed, it is an ontological impossibility to sever history from philosophy. It is possible, of course, to reduce the philosophical content of the premises upon which one operates to the point where only that is premised which everyone accepts without question, which enables the practitioner to ignore them. More to the point, however, these historians were attempting to base history on history, or a philosophy of history. Their framework is an evolutionary one, though it has long since lost its sharpness as an ideology to become a mythology. It could most aptly be described as a progressivist mythology.

This may need a little explanation. The nineteenth century was an age of ideologies, of "isms" formed by taking some abstract idea and weaving an explanation of reality around it. The twentieth century, for Americans at least, is an age of mythologies, of mythologies which remain as deposits from unavowed ideologies. Professor Commager's position is rather clearly of this character. He tells us "that as yet we do not know enough to explain the causes of things." What can he mean by a statement such as this? Does he mean that we do not know what causes an object to fall to the earth within its gravitational field? Does he mean that we cannot predict the effects of innumerable actions? Does he mean that we do not know what caused Alexander Hamilton to die? Does he mean that while we do not yet have any such information we may someday discover some? The most generous interpretation to be made is that this historian who has provided us with some excellent historical works means none of these things. He is surely much too well informed to seriously voice any such conclusion. In all kindness,

let us say that Professor Commager has lapsed into mythology, that he has brought forth a statement which he has not examined but assumed to be so from a mythology upon which he operates. He was operating upon a mythology rooted in an ideology of evolution. So is this whole notion that history has no didactic content.

The point for historiography can now be spelled out. When history is cut off from metaphysics, nothing of moment can be learned by the study of history. The effect is the same if there is an attempt to interpret history from the framework of a philosophy of history. If this itself is not based on the enduring features of reality, then nothing more is being done than to interpret history in terms of history, or deal with change in terms of change. This can be likened to building a house upon sand, not a new figure of speech. The house will be torn apart in time by the shifting configurations of the sand. In like manner, a history written in terms of history loses its meaning as soon as new changes occur or new patterns take shape, which they are continually doing. Many have affirmed just this by declaring that each generation writes its own history. This is but to affirm an insulation from the past. Such history is surely little more than "a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing."

History, if it is to be meaningful, is dependent upon philosophy. That is, the interpretation of events and developments must be made from the vantage point of non-events and non-developments. It must be viewed from the perspective of that which does not change or develop. Indeed, movement itself can only be measured correctly by relating it to something stationary. In like manner, historical events have their significance in the context of the unchanging.

There is no more carefully cultivated and nurtured illusion in our era than the one

that everything is changing. It is an illusion maintained by constantly focusing upon the ephemeral side of things and ignoring the enduring. The ideological bent to do this arose from evolutionary theory. This particular viewpoint has been supplemented, and in some ways altered, by the claim that we live in an open universe, one which is plastic and can be shaped to our heart's desire. A mythos now prevails regarding the constancy and universality of change which bears, at best, only the most remote and tangential relation to the theories of biological or geological evolution. These theories relied for their claims to validity upon slow, gradual, and even glacial changes taking place over hundreds of thousands or millions of years. Such notions simply have no direct applicability to the historical framework within which we work. They tell us, for example, nothing about the validity of ideas promulgated, say, 187 years ago at the Constitutional Convention. One hundred and eighty-seven years ago was not even yesterday, in the time framework of the evolutionists; it was only a few minutes ago. Indeed, the time of the Hebrew prophets or of classical Athens involves no significant geological or biological changes from our own day.

The success of this mythology depends almost exclusively on an analogy with technological developments. It is true, of course, that amazing developments have occurred in the arena of mechanical invention and the utilization of fuels. But how these have altered, or should alter, the conditions of life is not a matter to be decided under the sway of mythology. That, too, must be assessed in terms of that which has not changed. Indeed, these very mechanical inventions depended and depend upon laws in the universe, in coming to know them, and in learning to predict the behavior of materials under given stimuli. If man could not know cause and effect, he could not

utilize such plasticity as materials have to arrange them to his ends. If Professor Commager were right, if we did not apprehend any laws, these developments could not, themselves, have taken place. Few of us would be so foolish as to take a ride in a jet plane in an "open universe." We want a reasonable certainty that it can be made, "caused," not only to take off from the earth but also return to it, that there are laws at work within which this can be controlled. The technology by which an evolutionary myth has been fostered, when viewed correctly, tells us not only of changes that have been made but also of the fixities in terms of which they have been made.

There is, then, an order in this universe. There are fixities which endure, or have endured since the memory of man cannot prove the contrary. This universe is held in precarious but firm balance by the law of gravity. The earth does make its annual revolution around the sun and daily rotation on its axis. The seasons do alternate in more or less predictable fashion. The tides do go in and out under the spell of the moon. Falling bodies do accelerate at a uniform rate. Like does beget like in the order of nature. Even variations within species follow definite patterns. Man is still mortal, bifurcated, bilaterally symmetrical, given to self love, capable of reason, and so on. Governments today, as they were 2,500 years ago, may be by one, by several, or by many, or some combination of these. Human nature is still such that where power is concentrated and its exercise not counter-balanced by other powers, tyranny is waiting in the wings, if it has not already made its appearance. Moreover, this world and its inhabitants are such that if the money supply is increased, prices will rise, and the converse is equally so, other things remaining the same. These, and many others, are the fixities within which we must all operate.

It should be made clear, however, that this order, these fixities, and these laws are not discovered by the methods of historians. If Professor Commager had meant that the historian has discovered no laws, he would have been correct. Certainly he has discovered no laws of history. The order within which there is fixity is metaphysical. The discovery and statement of laws and principles belongs to the normative disciplines. History is, of course, descriptive. But the major import of history lies in making descriptions within this given—and normative—context. When the historian does this, he can perceive cause and effect operating in history; he can describe not only acts but also their consequences. He can assign responsibility and allot credit. Contrary to what Professor Commager says, the historian can delineate the causes of depressions when he operates in this context. Before he can do so, he must know what he is trying to find out, of course. If by depression he means a decline in prices, the reason is not far to seek. He knows in advance that the cause is in the decline of the money supply. His task is to find how this came about. If he means unemployment, then he might first seek the causes of this in any inflexibility which will not allow wages to adjust to the reduced money supply. He may, of course, find perverse combinations of these things at work—reduced money supply coupled with attempts to raise wages, a situation such as existed in 1938. It would be an immense hindrance for the historian to carry with him in his search the *a priori* assumption that multiple causation is always at work. There is simple causation; there are instances of multiple causation. The only reasonable rule on this would be that the cause should be sufficient to produce the result.

History, then, is important. What can be learned from history rightly studied is quite practical, and is of great concern to

everyone. Great principles are not discovered in history; but their validity can be demonstrated with flesh and blood examples. History is philosophy teaching by example, as Bolingsbroke said, though I would hasten to add that it is more than this. There are values peculiar to the study of history, that reside in the study of the unique and unusual as well as in the recognition by analogy of the common features of things. We may learn much from history, too, which belongs in the prudential realm as much as that in the area of precise knowledge. Even prudential learning, however, is dependent upon philosophy, upon an enduring human nature which makes

the experience of others relevant to ours. History lies athwart the diverging paths of the arts and sciences, deals always with the existential but has its profoundest meaning in the context of the essential. That is why history is dependent upon philosophy. This dependence neither narrows nor demeans history. Rather, it is a liberating dependence, for it enables the historian to draw conclusions which would otherwise be denied him. More, it draws him into the integrated circle of humane and scientific scholarship where he can serve his appointed task of providing concrete examples of what would otherwise be abstract truths.

<sup>1</sup>James H. Robinson, *The New History* (New York: Macmillan, 1912), pp. 17-18.

<sup>2</sup>Harry E. Barnes, *The New History and the Social Studies* (New York: Century, 1925), p. 588.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 589.

<sup>4</sup>Charles A. Beard, *The Discussion of Human Affairs* (New York: Macmillan, 1936), p. 90.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>6</sup>Henry S. Commager, *The Study of History* (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill, 1965), p. 73.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 88.