

Historicism and its Critics

Claes G. Ryn

THE 1980s ARE SEEN by many as a period of ascendancy for conservative ideas. Arguably, intellectuals of that disposition have seized the initiative in some areas. Whether the conservative resurgence of the last several decades represents major and lasting change in the United States and the Western world or will prove to have been a mere eddy in the stream remains an open question. One of the signs that contemporary intellectual conservatism may be less a deeply penetrating cultural movement than a transitory phenomenon is its growing preoccupation with issues of public policy. That large numbers of intellectuals should take an interest in practical politics is hardly surprising and is potentially of great benefit to politics, but increasingly this interest may be due to a belief that it is current politics rather than the life of the mind that most fundamentally shapes society. Even in conservative academic circles the belief seems widespread today that being in the intellectual center means being able to affect the politics of the day. The result is neglect of more philosophical questions that, while they may seem distant from political practice, are decisively important to the long-range development of moral, intellectual, and aesthetical culture. What is not understood, or understood poorly, is that it is from these sources that politics ultimately receives its shape. In keeping with the focus on politics, intellectual conservatism is still giving some attention to political philosophy, but that subject too is usually discussed in rather narrow terms and in theoretical generalities. Keeping ideas vague has its advantages from the point of view of political coalition-building, but behind the theoret-

ical generalities serious philosophical problems are festering.

The reluctance to deal in depth with philosophical issues is partly due to an old prejudice. For example, it has been common in the Anglo-Saxon countries to disparage what is called "German philosophy." The German philosophers of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century are often seen as indulging in pretensions, unprofitable, impractical, or dangerous obfuscation. Eric Voegelin's indictment of the "egophanic" element in Hegel has provided American conservatism with a welcome reason not to explore the forbidding intricacies of German idealism, at the same time that it has concealed from many Voegelin's own indebtedness to Hegel. The prejudice against the more complex, "technical" forms of philosophy has perhaps protected American conservatism against some pernicious currents of modern philosophy, but it has not been conducive to a thorough treatment of the fundamental issues of modernity.

Many conservative intellectuals are suspicious of "systematic" philosophy, as if serious philosophy could be left unsystematic and did not have to explore with care the interrelationship of all major philosophical questions. The fact that *some* efforts at systematic philosophy, including Hegel's, have approached a claim to final knowledge has been used as an excuse for philosophical vagueness. Contrary to a common belief, systematic philosophy need carry no assumptions of omniscience. Indeed, it is good systematic philosophy that best reveals the extent of man's intellectual finitude. Even the very best philosophers fall far short of definitive, comprehensive knowledge,

but, as Eliseo Vivas has insisted, philosophy is systematic as far as it goes.

The disinclination to pursue the most demanding philosophical questions has made it difficult for intellectual conservatism to discriminate clearly between the different and sometimes opposed potentialities of modernity. Besides obvious dangers, modernity offers some promising opportunities for strengthening the classical and Judaeo-Christian traditions. There is sometimes a striking discrepancy between the concrete needs presented by life in the modern world and the conservative-leaning affirmations of universal values that have gained some influence in the universities. The pervasive modern realities of individualism and pluralism would seem to require careful reconsideration of the old problem of the One and the Many, not least in social thought. What is the relationship of universality and particularity? Is man required to choose between them, or is a synthesis possible? Edmund Burke is one modern political thinker who suggested the latter. The issue was treated extensively by German philosophers. Within contemporary intellectual conservatism the subject has received little philosophical attention. By contrast, conservatives have written a great deal about the dangers of modernity. One of these is subjectivism. Whether of a Lockean, romantic, or existentialist cast, subjectivism stresses individuality at the expense of universality. Individualism working itself free of the moral and other prejudices of the older Western tradition becomes an increasingly radical revolt against universal values. But what is the alternative to these developments? Is it a rejection of the modern claims of individuality and personal freedom? Some conservatives have sometimes seemed to reject modernity, leaving the impression that a defense of universal values requires some kind of return to premodern ways of life and thought as represented by Plato and Aristotle or Thomas Aquinas. Most conservative intellectuals actually assume the value of some form of individuality and particularity. They vaguely imply a

blend of ancient, medieval and modern ideas. Many are drawn in the direction of Edmund Burke, who combines a belief in universal values with an appreciation for the importance of individuality and particularity. But without systematic philosophical explication this synthesis of the old Western traditions and elements of modernity must remain largely a matter of intuition.

The Burkean orientation is also under attack by some on the intellectual right who charge Burke with "historicism." These critics, most of them disciples of the late Leo Strauss, believe that the universal has nothing to do with what is individual, particular, unique, personal, historical. They assume that to affirm the possible value of history and individuality is to denigrate the universal.¹ Perhaps not surprisingly, these writers express admiration for the ancient Greek philosophers. Plato in particular associated the universal with an ascent from the world of change and particularity. In our own time of corrosive relativism and subjectivism, a revival of interest in Plato and Aristotle, if combined with the best insights of modernity, might have helped restore a sense of the One without neglecting the needs of individuality. But all too often the return to the Greeks, as in political philosophy, has been another detour around the more difficult issues of modernity. In general, modern American intellectual conservatism has not vigorously explored opportunities for developing classical and Judaeo-Christian insights with reference to what is best in the Western philosophy of the last two centuries. The resulting intellectual bottlenecks are everywhere to be seen, from political theory and economics to aesthetics.²

One of the main obstacles to a deepening of value-oriented thought is the confusion that surrounds the subject of history. A defining characteristic of modern conservatism has been its emphasis on the need to be guided by history. With Burke, conservatism has been critical of rationalistic attempts to define the good society in the abstract, apart from

concrete human experience and the circumstances facing particular peoples. It is a striking paradox that, at the time of conservatism's alleged ascendancy in American thought, some of its purported representatives are sharply critical of an historical approach to understanding man and society. This anti-historicism is most closely identified with the Straussian school. To consult history for moral or other guidance is said to prepare the way for relativism and nihilism. This critique assumes that history belongs to the flux and that history is inherently incapable of providing lasting standards. Real principles of good, it is thought, must be based on ahistorical reason. It is a measure of the philosophical bewilderment within the contemporary conservative intellectual movement in the United States that it should have become associated with a mind-set that has some profoundly anti-conservative implications.

For Burke there is a vital and necessary connection between man's historical sense and his ability to know and promote universal values. History contains evil as well as good, and progress is neither inevitable nor automatic. Still, man's grasp of higher values cannot be separated from experience. It is through civilization's concrete examples of the good, the true, and the beautiful that the individual is oriented to life's highest possibilities. The universal is not an ideational abstraction but becomes known to man in actual experience. Man's highest achievements in morality, art, and philosophy embody the universal, however imperfectly. The universal does transcend history; it is never exhausted by history and points beyond all particular circumstances. But only through its concrete manifestations does its nature become known to man.

Even at its best, tradition can only approximate the transcendent. Given the limits of human insight, this approximation is not a matter of copying a standard already at man's disposal but is a continuing discovery. Sound tradition is not mere repetition. Creativity is necessary to maintain and develop the sense of universality

in changing historical circumstances, some of which may be highly detrimental to the task. When tradition achieves its highest purpose it is a *living* past, which means that it joins past and present in a direct apprehension of universal values. From within that apprehension of the enduring good, society is continuously assessed. Stale and formalistic conventions can be weeded out in favor of ways of life that better articulate the universal. Sound tradition is simultaneously dependence on and autonomy from history.

The task of explaining how history and universal values can be intimately connected is today complicated by the fact that the inherited ways of Western society are increasingly fraught with tensions and contradictions. Because of the theoretical muddle on the subject of history, even elementary points need clarification. One such point is that an argument for the potential union of universality and history does not amount to an endorsement of all specific traditions. Some who are looking today for a firm standard of judgment react to the contradictions and the changeability of history by opting for purely abstract principles. While this reaction may come naturally to a radical temperament, it is alien to the conservative mind.

Conservatism sees the "masses of universal history" (Goethe) as a necessary corrective to the idiosyncracies of particular generations or societies. It brings to the task of social reform an historically informed sense of the nature of man and of what lies in the realm of the possible. It is sensitive to the needs of time and place. Radicalism prefers to formulate its "ideals" in the abstract. To it, reminders of the actual experience of mankind or of the restrictions imposed by circumstance are unwelcome intrusions. These reminders tend to throw cold water on the wish to remake society according to some blueprint of justice. While Burkean conservatism looks up to individuals of rare virtue and wisdom, it rejects as not only superficial but dangerous the idea that one

could substitute for the insights and experiences of the human race as a whole the ahistorical rationality of some one individual or group. The radical, by contrast, believes that the ahistorical scheme of the enlightened is sufficient for guiding society. Unlike Burke, or Socrates, he has little awareness of the limitations of human reason. Even less is the radical inclined to piety before the accomplishments of his ancestors or to reverence before the mystery of life.

Modern conservatism has many and deep roots in the classical Greek and Roman heritage. It shares with the Greeks a belief in the ethical purpose of society and in the social and political nature of man. Man needs community for the perfection of his humanity. Conservatism also goes beyond the Greeks, partly by emphasizing that the human community extends not just across borders but across the generations. Man owes his well-being and understanding in very great measure to the efforts of his ancestors. The latter shape our lives, often in ways of which we have yet to become fully conscious. Plato and Aristotle were not without awareness of the influence of the past (although their epistemological doctrines did not recognize the historical dimension of human knowledge). Cicero had an even stronger intuition that the good society depends on historical experience and the gradual evolution of institutions. The Burkean notion of man's participation in and dependence on the historical human community was thus not entirely without precedents in the ancient world. True, Burke was to see wisdom as indistinguishable from the experience and reflection of our ancestors, whereas the ancient writers were prone, in their epistemological writings at least, to conceive of reason as operating independently of the past. Still, the actual reasoning of Plato and Aristotle on ethical subjects, for example, was not as starkly ahistorical as suggested by some anti-historicists today but relied quite heavily on experiential referents. To attribute to the ancient writers a belief in a purely ahistorical wisdom is anachronistic. They

had not discovered history in the modern sense and used the term quite differently from us. They could not exclude from their notion of reason something of which they were not fully aware. A purely abstract rationality presupposes a modern, self-conscious awareness of the historical dimension of human existence. Some modern forms of abstract rationality do bear a certain resemblance to aspects of Platonic or Aristotelian reason, but the former types of rationality reveal their true nature by also showing little or no affinity for the way in which the Greeks approached their central concern, which was ethical. Under the influence of modern rationalism, anti-historicism on the American right conceives of universality in a more radically ahistorical manner than was possible in the ancient world.

Anti-historicists who are sometimes called conservative in the United States today usually have been influenced by the classical outlook and tradition. But in proportion as anti-historicism carries out its own program and manages to dissolve the historical moorings of classical ideas, those ideas can be interpreted in the abstract, in isolation from their historical context. This context includes not only the external circumstances of time and place but the entire experience of life that the ideas express. Anti-historicism claims that by reading classical texts ahistorically it is protecting them against historical bias and, not least, modern prejudices. The meaning of the work is thought to be ahistorical and should be allowed to speak for itself. Yet, trying to detach classical works from the historical situation that they both articulate and react against must result in precisely the dangers of biased interpretation from which anti-historicism is supposed to shield them. As long as interpreters have some considerable understanding of the experiential referents of the ideas of Plato and Aristotle, the two thinkers are protected from anachronistic or otherwise implausible interpretations, but as the anti-historicist program begins to obscure the concrete, historical substance of their ideas, the range of possible

interpretations widens. With the deterioration of the historical consciousness, readers can be only vaguely aware of the possibly vast distance between the sensibilities of ancient Greece and those of their own century. They are also less likely to be critically alert to their own modern biases. To the extent that a reader's own intuitions of the meaning of a classical text reflect modern prejudices, he may discover in it his own image. Thus the Plato of the *Republic* may turn out to be a democrat, although a democrat in disguise. The aura of prestige still surrounding the great Greek writers becomes attached to modern ideas.³

Anti-historicist interpretations of classical works are allegedly expressive of humility before intellectual greatness. But interpreters who claim to discover the hitherto hidden meaning of classical texts are in effect placing themselves on par with the great minds and soaring far above earlier scholars whose learning did not keep them from misconstruing the works in question. Through initiation into the proper ahistorical way of reading texts, even individuals of little or no scholarly expertise can be made to feel that they are joining the ranks of the enlightened few.

Most of the pioneers of American post-war intellectual conservatism have had a strong sense of the historical nature of human existence. Russell Kirk and Eric Voegelin are prominent examples. Even the economist Friedrich von Hayek, although he was not prepared to accept the idea of ethical universality, had an almost Burkean appreciation for how much of the civilized order is not the result of deliberate design by a particular group or generation. However, this early stress on life's historical dimension, while it inspired many writers, did not occasion extensive and systematic philosophical exploration. The lack of attention to historicist epistemology in particular permitted some uncritical habits of mind, which made possible the curious phenomenon of anti-historicist advances within a conservative movement. The Straussian anti-

historicists were viewed sympathetically because they seemed to side with the classical philosophical tradition against positivism and naturalism, this at a time when intellectual allies were needed. Their critique of Burke was partly veiled and not much noticed by writers looking for broad consensus. Besides, the anti-historicists were not alone in criticizing Burke. It was not widely perceived that their intellectual agenda led far beyond reservations about a particular conservative thinker to a general attack on the historical consciousness that is integral to modern conservatism.

The definition of historicism employed by anti-historicism is essentially arbitrary and reductionistic, forcing great philosophical complexity into simple categories. It shows no awareness of the possibility of simultaneous synthesis and tension between the universal and the historical. For that reason the anti-historicist critique of Burke misses or misunderstands much of what is new and important in his thought. Burke, it is true, does not work out all of his insights with philosophical clarity, and he neglects some significant subjects. For example, he does not, at least not explicitly, provide an alternative to the kind of abstract, "metaphysical" rationality that he rejects. But others have contributed to the philosophical development of what may be called value-centered historicism, that is, historicism that sees universality as potentially both immanent in and transcendent of history.⁴

The widespread confusion about historicism raises questions regarding the intellectual vitality of American conservatism in the closing years of the twentieth century. An intellectual and cultural movement that lacks philosophical maturity in an area so central to its own self-understanding and to understanding the modern world could hardly become fully responsive to either the dangers or the constructive opportunities of modernity. In recent years, however, a growing number of younger scholars have felt the need for greater theoretical rigor on the subject of history. Some of them have ac-

tually taken a serious interest in German historical philosophy and related currents of thought.

A notable example of intellectual reinvigoration in this area is a new book by Paul Gottfried, *The Search for Historical Meaning: Hegel and the Postwar American Right* (1986), completed under a grant from the Guggenheim Foundation. The book is a welcome contribution toward a broadened and deepened understanding of American conservative thought. It expands considerably the historical and theoretical context for interpreting this movement. It draws much needed attention to gaps and blind spots in the movement's self-understanding and analyzes some of its weaknesses. As it examines and evaluates the postwar American right, Gottfried's book both exemplifies and encourages a serious examination of the problem of history.

Conservative writers in the last four decades have often criticized "liberals" for having mindless, knee-jerk responses to many issues. But some conservatives have knee-jerk responses of their own. One is their reaction to the name of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Even persons having little or no familiarity with Hegel know that the appropriate attitude toward him is one of righteous abhorrence. That there are in Hegel some questionable and even dangerous elements need hardly be repeated, but the conventional conservative reaction is not really a philosophical stance. It often has about it more of a ritualistic incantation. So widespread is this negative reaction to Hegel that it will come as a surprise—shocked surprise?—to many readers of Gottfried's book that Hegelianism has been a not insignificant ingredient of American postwar conservatism. Because of Hegel's reputation in conservative circles, due in part to the perception that he is closely related to Marx, some thinkers who were influenced by him concealed, in a few cases perhaps even from themselves, the degree of their indebtedness and stressed their disagreements with the bad German.

The standard work on modern Ameri-

can conservative thought is George Nash's admirable historical survey, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*. Gottfried's book covers much the same period. Of the five thinkers on whom Gottfried concentrates as exemplifying the influence of Hegelianism, Nash deals at some length with four: James Burnham, Will Herberg, Frank S. Meyer, and Eric Voegelin. Only Karl Wittfogel is not accorded substantial treatment. And yet Nash's book, full though it is of names and intellectual references, barely mentions Hegel. He is cited only briefly as having contributed to the modern effort to substitute the collectivist state for divine meaning, an interpretation that is fairly typical of Hegel's reputation on the American intellectual right. Gottfried's *The Search for Historical Meaning* offers a very different perspective on the German philosopher.

The several writers who helped shape American conservative thought after the war who were markedly affected, directly or indirectly, by Hegelianism drew from it an understanding of the workings of the past in the present and a sensitivity to the interdependencies and dialectical tensions within reality. Their view of the uniquely Western heritage of freedom and of the value of social decentralization and diversity also owed a great deal to Hegel. Sometimes Hegelian ideas were expressed by individuals who were not fully aware of the origins of their own beliefs. Gottfried points out that a conservative Hegelianism has substantial historical roots in the United States. After the Civil War several intellectual centers vied for preeminence within an expanding Hegelian philosophical movement that, among other things, extolled the free society and constitutional government. Gottfried discusses the importance of the St. Louis Philosophical Society and anti-socialist writers like Denton Snider and William Torrey Harris. The leading academic outlet for Hegelian ideas, *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, became perhaps the most highly respected philosophical journal in the decades after the Civil War. As a major

force in leading American academic institutions well into this century, Hegelianism would influence thinkers of many different orientations, including the socialist-leaning John Dewey and many Marxists, but it is a mistake to think of the Hegelian legacy in the United States as pertaining only to the left.

In his treatment of Hegelian elements in modern American conservatism Gottfried felicitously combines broad historical scholarship with more detailed examination of the views and intellectual backgrounds of particular thinkers. Four of his subjects, Burnham, Herberg, Meyer, and Wittfogel, are erstwhile leftists who were exposed to Hegel via Marxist writings, Burnham also via Italian political thinkers. Gottfried shows convincingly how with time Hegelian intellectual impulses contributed to their rejection of Marxism as they moved closer to what Gottfried sees as the real Hegel, a conservative liberal who was equally opposed to revolution and reaction. Voegelin's intellectual formation did not follow this general pattern, but in his own way he was as influenced by Hegel as any of the other writers. Gottfried finds something to admire in each of his subjects. He seems especially attracted to Voegelin's historical understanding of spiritual order and to Herberg, who combines Hegelian historicism, Judaism, and respect for Christian revelation. Gottfried is also strongly drawn to Burnham's neo-Machiavellian political realism. While capturing some of the dynamics and uniqueness of the intellectual development of each thinker, the author effectively supports his general thesis.

Gottfried does not suggest that Hegelianism has been the sole or even the main force behind American conservative historicism in the postwar era. Some leading thinkers, Russell Kirk among them, derived their historical sense mainly from non-German sources, most importantly Burke. This is a point well worth making, but Gottfried might have added that the influence of German historicism has been so pervasive that no serious intellectual of our era could be untouched

by it. This is the case even though the particular thinker may not have made his own special study of German philosophical sources. A single example from Gottfried's book will illustrate the point. In a fine chapter he explains Hegel's effect on Will Herberg. Herberg's interpretation of Burke is clearly informed by Hegelian insights. Insofar as Herberg's view affected other Burke scholars in America, including Russell Kirk, Hegel entered their minds, whether they knew it or not.

Voegelin's American followers have liked his portrayal of Hegel as "a blasphemous megalomaniac who claimed to fashion reality within his own consciousness." This theme has appealed to American Christians who may also have been disinclined to venture into the mazes of German philosophy. Gottfried seems not to reject entirely this Voegelinian criticism of Hegel, but he takes exception to exaggerations in Voegelin's strictures and to the uncritical acceptance of these attacks by some of his disciples. Gottfried also demonstrates Voegelin's obvious and profound indebtedness to Hegel. Gottfried can here cite plentiful evidence, most generally Voegelin's notion of history as an unfolding vision of order. Many Americans resist a view of Voegelin that has been virtually inescapable to Europeans familiar with both Voegelin and German idealism. Helmut Kuhn observes that "of all the historical thinkers of our age who are known to me, it is Voegelin, the sharpest critic of Hegel and of his philosophy of history, who stands closest to Hegel." Gottfried also quotes the theologian Thomas Altizer who asks the rhetorical question whether Voegelin's attack on Hegel is not "an attempted Oedipal murder of his father." Gottfried recognizes important differences between Voegelin and Hegel, some of which are to Voegelin's credit, and he takes note of Voegelin's indebtedness to other German thinkers, most especially Schelling, but he is also disappointed that intellectual prejudices and educational gaps have made it difficult for Voegelin's American disciples to grasp the full significance of Voegelin's

idealist affiliations. As an example of the effects of these shortcomings one might mention the surprised, not to say startled, reactions to Voegelin's treatment of Christian dogma in Volume IV of *Order and History*, although the earlier volumes, viewed in their philosophical context, should have prepared the reader for at least some of what was to come.

The concluding chapter of *The Search for Historical Meaning* addresses the present state of the American intellectual right. Gottfried examines the growth of anti-historical sentiment. He sees this development within the conservative movement as coinciding with a decline of serious philosophical and academic interest. Gottfried analyzes at length the attack on historicism launched by Strauss and his followers. He criticizes this attack as based on questionable theoretical assumptions and flawed historical scholarship. To a large extent, the anti-historicist argument is directed at a straw man. Strauss's critique of Burke is tendentious and poorly supported. Burke did not, as Strauss alleges, exalt convention above transcendent standards. Neither did he favor historical processes unguided by reflection. Strauss's belief that Burke and the historical school in Germany represented a more radical form of modernity than did earlier thinkers criticized by Strauss shows not only the anti-traditional impetus of Strauss's thought but the limitations of his interpretive repertoire.

Gottfried also disputes Strauss's view of classical political thought as having no historical dimension and as centering on the singularly wise philosopher or lawgiver as the founder of the best regime. In forming their ideas of the good political order, ancients like Aristotle, Polybius, and Cicero did weigh historical evidence and precedent. They also had a sense of the importance of ancestral ways, filial piety, continuity, and circumstance. While Gottfried is right to object to Strauss's attribution of a purely ahistorical mind-set to the ancients, he may be overstating his critique. After all, the epistemologies of Plato and Aristotle treated historical particularity as un-

knowable and without meaning. Only universal forms are subject to *epistēmē*. Even those later ancient writers who developed a kind of historiography and became quite elaborate in the recording and the tracing of events were far from possessing the kind of modern historical sense that characterizes a Burke or a Hegel, a self-conscious awareness of oneself and one's society as a synopsis of the past.

Because some modern thinkers have used history to relativize values, Strauss seeks to do away with historical consciousness itself. According to Gottfried, the implications of this program are "radically antitraditional." Strauss's notion of ideal standards of reason divorced from history is so abstract that it offers no real guidance in the world in which humans have to act. "Like Kant's mystical body of moral absolutes removed from any empirical context, Strauss's ideal state relates to the world of flesh and blood like a disembodied wraith." Gottfried argues that the effect of the critique of the historical consciousness on Strauss's disciples typically has not been a resurgence of the classical spirit. On the contrary, seeing the distance between ancient ideal justice and modern practice, most of them have rather easily reconciled themselves with the modern world. Anti-historicism has in fact prepared the way for an uncritical presentism. Gottfried goes as far as to say that the Straussians "have no more respect for ancestral custom and the virtue of *pietas* than do the 'value-free social scientists' whom they often berate." Instead of inspiring a Platonic contemplation of the good, anti-historicism has led to "celebrating Lockean materialism, without even the older American leaven of Protestant moral theology," a development with which Strauss himself would have been uncomfortable. The invocation of Plato and Aristotle has concealed from the less discerning that the ideas advanced in their names are often far removed from classical thought. Whatever the original intent of Straussian anti-historicism, it has become one of the ways whereby radical

modernity neutralizes and co-opts the conservative challenge. Gottfried speculates that with the destruction of the conservative historical consciousness "conservatives may soon find themselves without any vision except that of dehistoricized persons who seek to enrich themselves and the gross national product through the tireless pursuit of self-interest."

Gottfried sees a connection between the decline in conservative theoretical scholarship and the increasing attention given to questions of public policy. The two developments have begotten each other. "By the late seventies, the setting and criticizing of government agendas became the *raison d'être* of most conservative enterprises in America." In academia the lure of well-funded public policy institutes, of journalistic visibility and political power distracted young scholars from the task of serious theoretical scholarship. Many began to take their cues from individuals of journalistic prominence who were also influential in the foundations and in politics, which gave a new meaning to the term intellectual leadership. Gottfried speaks admiringly of the journalistic abilities of a "neoconservative" like Irving Kristol, but he also refers to "the theoretical thinness" of the movement of which he is a leader. Unlike older American conservatism, neoconservatism "gropes awkwardly for historical and philosophic roots." Its ideas are "largely hand-to-mouth," often provided by disciples of Strauss who, contrary to their master, promote Lockean natural rights. The neoconservatives seem to Gottfried conservative only in the trivial sense that they are defending the United States of today against more radical attacks. They identify with the present "secularist, pluralist, and democratic-capitalist West." Like the Straussian anti-historicists, they do not seek the guidance of history in assessing the here and now. They are inclined to see the past as "the bad old days." They are more comfortable with contemporary utilitarian and egalitarian ways than with the aristocratic beliefs and tastes of historical conservatism.

Gottfried will be criticized for being too harsh and too indiscriminate in his indictment of Straussians and neoconservatives. In his defense he may argue that as an intellectual historian he is less interested in the complexities of individual intellectual positions than in the long-term significance of the larger intellectual orientation that they represent. In addition, currents of ideas that undermine the historical consciousness are attacks not just upon the foundation of all genuine conservatism but on some of the highest achievements of Western intellectual culture and should not be taken lightly. Yet the writers criticized by Gottfried are not systematic philosophers, like Hegel transforming the Western mind, who must be held to the most demanding scholarly standards. Also, few Straussians and other anti-historicists are as consistently anti-historicist as might appear from their terminology and interpretive canon. Strauss's own anti-historicism is a rather loosely developed position that contains divergent elements. Strauss's argument against Thomistic natural law, for instance, actually brings him in proximity to value-centered historicism, although in the end his epistemological assumptions do not enable him to formulate an alternative to an abstract, formulaic conception of ethics.⁵ If some anti-historicists have knowingly or unknowingly drifted far in the direction of radical modernity and trace their lineage more from the French Revolution than from ancient Greece, there are others who are genuinely trying to defend older Western ethical and cultural values without simply rejecting modernity. These efforts may not have the scholarly sophistication desired by Gottfried and others, but it seems reasonable to welcome partial insights while at the same time rejecting simplistic arguments about historicism. One suspects that some of the harshness of Gottfried's critical remarks about Straussians and neoconservatives is a reaction to the propagandistic elevation of writers of modest intellectual accomplishments.

Gottfried's assessment of the state of

contemporary intellectual conservatism contrasts sharply with the kind of euphoria that has marked celebrations of presumed conservative advances in recent years. He sees the wide acceptance of an anti-historical mode of thought as a bad omen for the United States and the Western world. Still, the future does not seem entirely bleak. Gottfried presents considerable evidence to show that conservative historicism, a decisive impulse behind postwar American intellectual conservatism, remains a significant force, although one whose merits go largely unappreciated by an increasingly superficial intellectual culture. Among the many active senior scholars are M. E. Bradford, Russell Kirk, John Lukacs, Forrest McDonald, and Robert Nisbet. Through the efforts of a number of younger thinkers cited by Gottfried, conservative historicism is also undergoing major intellectual renewal and development. Much of this work does not follow the beaten path and is not accompanied by the applause of already existing schools. The adherents of the more fashionable currents on the right may be too self-absorbed to recognize work of importance outside of their own circle. At a time when many measure intellectual achievement in visibility, patient scholarly efforts outside of the journalistic spotlight are easily overlooked, but from the point of view of the life of the mind they are no less important for the longer run.

The Search for Historical Meaning is history in the higher sense of the word: study of the past for the sake of a better understanding of the present. Gottfried's observations about contemporary intellectual developments derive a special incisiveness from his breadth and depth of historical insight. His book is not the kind of pedestrian work whose claim to scholarship rests on elaborate and detailed narratives and a profusion of meticulous footnotes. Avoiding pedantry is for Gottfried not a difficulty. If anything, he may be overly prone to generalizations and unqualified judgments.

Gottfried's use of the term historicism

tends to become unwieldy. Burke and Hegel are called historicists. So is Auguste Comte. Historical currents that change the world assume many forms. They affect a great variety of thinkers and in diverse ways. For that reason a broad use of the term historicism has its place. The same can be said about words like liberalism and modernity. But the wide range of possible meaning makes the need for distinctions all the more acute. Gottfried is aware of the difficulty and provides many appropriate distinctions. A problem is that he does not go as deeply into some of them as he might have done. Especially in view of the present confusion about historicism, he could have pursued further a few distinctions that are essential to the proper delimitation of value-centered historicism.

One must insist, first of all, on the importance of discriminating between historicism that accepts and historicism that rejects, or obscures, the existence of a transcendent moral order. Value-centered historicism may be defined as centered in the transcendent. As historicism it draws attention to the immanent, historical dimension of universality, but this recognition of the concretization of the universal must not be confused with some kind of pantheist immanentism that denies the ultimate reality of evil and sweeps up all of the suffering and degradation of life into the progress of history. Hegel is strongly drawn in the latter direction. Burkean historicism recognizes the ineradicable ethical tension within human nature and is as immune to pantheism and sanguine progressivism as it is to any human claim to definitive knowledge. The "egophanic" propensities of Hegel are of understandable concern to Voegelin. Gottfried points to the centrality of will in some historicist philosophies. But it is essential to distinguish between thinkers who are sensitive to the cleft nature of the human will and to the need for ethical discrimination and responsibility and those who blur these tensions within man and are drawn to a will to power beyond good and evil. Gottfried is not oblivious of these considera-

tions. Among other things, he criticizes Giovanni Gentile's philosophy of will and the related glorification of the state. But he does not delve deeply into these issues in pursuit of philosophical distinctions. Thus, while Gottfried states his adherence to value-centered historicism, he never quite defines the criterion for separating it from other forms.

One detects in Gottfried's mind an uneasy coexistence between two strains of thought. On the one hand, Gottfried is attracted to thinkers like Voegelin and Herberg who give primacy to the religious and ethical order. These scholars are sharply critical of naturalistic views of life, including attempts to exempt politics from ethical scrutiny. On the other hand, Gottfried is an admirer of James Burnham, whose neo-Machiavellian political realism rests on a philosophical basis of positivism, although one influenced by historicism. Gottfried is able to maintain this intellectual coexistence, because Burnham's thought, like that of some other historicists of a naturalistic bent, is guided by authentic ethical sensibilities, in spite of his epistemological assumptions. Gottfried does not go into the important ethical-philosophical problems presented by political "realism." Granted that Machiavelli has not been adequately dealt with by moralist critics of an abstract or utopian cast, it needs to be shown how and to what extent Machiavellian insights are compatible with value-centered historicism. In the area of epistemology, Gottfried leaves largely unexplored the important differences between positivism and German idealism. These are difficult issues, to be sure, but important to a sound philosophy of historicism.

Gottfried sometimes connects thinkers without sufficiently explaining the similarities and differences between them, a practice which can create misleading impressions. For example, he couples Benedetto Croce with Giovanni Gentile, Italian contemporaries who had some early philosophical collaboration. What Gottfried does not mention are their important and deepening philosophical disagree-

ments that soon drove them apart. In the 1920s they differed sharply about political developments in Italy. In 1925 Croce published an anti-Fascist manifesto. At considerable personal risk he remained a leading critic of Fascism.

In general, Gottfried could have done more to define what he considers to be a tenable historicist position by going further in criticizing weak or indefensible theories of history. It is rather common to think of historicism as a fondness for metaphysical schematization of history. History is squeezed into some allegedly all-encompassing deterministic theory. This type of thought clashes with historicism that rejects reifying explanatory schemes as inappropriate to the complexities of human existence. Dialectic, to mention one historicist term, can be understood in vastly different ways. Dialectic in the sense of an inexorable law of historical progress is a highly questionable idea. Dialectic in the sense of the living dynamic of human experience, *e.g.*, of philosophical consciousness, is an indispensable idea, though difficult for many to grasp.

Four of the thinkers analyzed in depth in Gottfried's book had their historicism shaped within an intellectual environment of Marxism. His explication of the meaning of historicism with reference to individuals who were at least initially prone to deterministic and reductionistic constructions of history has perhaps slanted his picture of historicism in the direction of a schematic way of thinking. Did F. S. Meyer, for one, ever entirely outgrow such a mind-set? The fact that some historicist impulses have entered American intellectual conservatism via Marxism suggests a need to guard against elements of reification and determinism.

In a book that is as full of ideas and observations as Gottfried's one will inevitably find things to question. Only books that make no difference produce a bland assent. The author presents a thesis and several sub-theses that will challenge some ingrained habits of thought. Gottfried has a quick and spirited mind whose willingness to pursue daring intuitions

often yields strong stimulants to reflection. Even when he provokes disagreement, or irritation, the result should be greater stringency of thought. Unfortunately, many will not quite know what to make of *The Search for Historical Meaning*, because it speaks an unfamiliar language. Some academic ideologues are likely to dismiss it as violating some prescribed canon of interpretation. Be that as it may, the philosophical issues raised by the book need a thorough airing so that the present muddle on the subject of historicism can be left behind.

Any serious reconsideration of the problem of history will include a careful examination of Edmund Burke, a thinker particularly relevant to Anglo-Saxon culture. Interpreters who are relying on premodern or ahistorical methods of analysis have had great difficulty discerning the connection between Burke's belief in the value of tradition and experience and his equally strong belief in a universal moral order. Rethinking this issue in the light of German historicist philosophy, perhaps in the lucid though not flawless version of Croce, should have an intellectually liberating effect. One hopes that Gottfried's *Search for Historical Meaning* will inspire such cross-fertilization.⁶

Several important philosophical problems are inhibiting the development of contemporary intellectual conservatism. They need to be addressed in ways that are as little as possible encumbered by intellectual provincialism and politicized habits of mind. One thing is clear: An intellectual movement that does not come to philosophical grips with historicism, but attempts to deal with it through some manner of evasion, is not in a position to transmit the idea of universal values to the modern world.

¹See Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago, 1953), esp. pp. 294-323. ²The need to strengthen classical and mediæval insights by drawing on selected modern ideas in ethics, aesthetics, and logic is addressed in Claes G. Ryn, *Will, Imagination and Reason* (Chicago, 1986), which sets forth a theory of

reality and knowledge. For a discussion of how such a synthesis of modern and premodern ideas might advance economic thought, see Joseph Baldacchino, *Economics and the Moral Order* (Washington, D.C., 1985). ³One who interprets the *Republic* as a defense of democracy is Allan Bloom. See the "Interpretive Essay" in Bloom's edition of *The Republic of Plato* (New York, 1968). ⁴Value-centered historicism is defined, in its ethical dimension, in Claes G. Ryn, "History and the Moral Order," in Francis Canavan, ed., *The Ethical Dimension of Political Life* (Durham, N.C., 1983). ⁵The tensions and ambiguities in Strauss's conception of natural right are examined in Ryn, "History and the Moral Order." ⁶See, in particular, Benedetto Croce, *The Philosophy of the Practical* (New York, 1967; reprint of the partly misleading translation of 1913). For a critical assessment of Croce, see Folke Leander, "Irving Babbitt and Benedetto Croce," in George A. Panichas and Claes G. Ryn, eds., *Irving Babbitt in Our Time* (Washington, D.C., 1986) and Ryn, *Will, Imagination and Reason*.

Scholarship on Burke has advanced markedly since the Second World War due to the efforts of numerous scholars. A pioneering study was *Edmund Burke and the Natural Law* by Peter Stanlis, who emerged as probably the leading authority on Burke. Recently, Stanlis together with Clara Gandy performed a great service by publishing *Edmund Burke: A Bibliography of Secondary Studies to 1982* (New York, 1983). This elaborate and richly annotated bibliography is an invaluable guide for future scholarship. Encompassing a wide range of subjects and perspectives and listing sources in many languages, the book has entries from Poland to Japan, Sweden to Venezuela. It amply documents the vast and continuing influence of Burke and the breadth of interest in his work.

Peter Stanlis has refuted the notion, found, for example, in Leo Strauss's *Natural Right and History*, that Burke's respect for historical experience signifies an abandonment of the idea of universal right. A weakness of Stanlis's refutation is that he tries to account for Burke's affirmation of universal values in largely pre-Burkean terms. A Roman Catholic, Stanlis seeks to place Burke squarely within the old Western tradition of natural law. That this tradition influenced Burke is beyond doubt, but to say, as Stanlis does in *Edmund Burke and the Natural Law*, that Burke is "essentially a Thomist in political philosophy," is to underestimate the importance of what is new and distinctive in Burke. His ethical-political thought points beyond the idea of a law of reason towards an historicized notion of ethical universality, which, to repeat, is not a contradiction in terms. This is a significant, if not fully formed, Burkean insight that German and Italian historicist philosophy can help articulate. For a discussion of this aspect of Burke that also refutes Strauss's interpretation of Burke's historicism, see Joseph Baldacchino, "The Value-Centered Historicism of Edmund Burke," *Modern Age* (Summer 1983).