

History

HISTORY cannot discuss the origin of society, for the art of writing, which is the basis of historical knowledge, is a comparatively late invention.

IN THE EYES of the positivist philosopher the study of mathematics and of the natural sciences is a preparation for action. There was once, we know, an automaton constructed in such a way that it could respond to every move by a chess player with a countermove that would ensure the winning of the game. Theorists of historiography generally agree that the historical narratives contain irreducible and inextinguishable elements of action. Technology vindicates the labors of the experimenter. Allow me to preface my remarks today by saying that I am not going to give a lecture in the usual sense of communicating results or presenting a systematic statement. A puppet wearing Turkish attire and with a hookah in its mouth sat before a chessboard placed on a large table. The historian has to interpret his materials in order to construct the moving pictures in which the form of the historical process is to be mirrored, and this because the historical record is both full and empty. On the

one hand, there are always more facts in the record than the historian (III possibly include in his narrative representation of" given segment of the historical process. The earth had become habitable and was inhabited, nations had arisen and international connections had been formed, and the elements of civilization had appeared, while that art was still unknown. No such justification can be advanced in favor of the traditional methods resorted to by the historians. Rather, what I have to say will remain on the level of an essay; it is no more than an attempt to take up and further develop the problems of the so-called Frankfurt discussion. I And so the historian must "interpret" his data by excluding certain details from his account as irrelevant to his narrative purpose. I recognize that many complimentary things have been said about this discussion, but I am equally aware that it approaches the problem correctly and that it would be wrong always to begin again at the beginning. On the other hand, in his definition of reconstruction ("what happened" in a given period of history, the historian inevitably must include in his narrative an account of some event or complex of events for which the evidence that would permit a plausible explanation of its occurrence are lacking. It is proper for more reasons than the most obvious one that I should open this series of Chadwick Lectures by quoting a passage from the Declaration of Independence. And this method that the historian must "interpret" his materials by filling in the gaps in his information on inferential or speculative grounds. The historical narrative is thus usually a mixture of and inadequately

explained events. a (ongeris of establish-d and inf-rr-d facts. :l;t onc~ a r-presentation thal is -an int-rpret-ation :l;nd -an intcrpretation th-at passes for an cxpi2n-ation of the whole process mirrored in the narrative. A system of mirrors created the illusion that this table was transparent on all sides.

First permit me a few words on terminology.

Precisely because theorists generally admit the ineluctably interpretative aspect of historiography. *they* have tended to subordinate study of the problem of interpretation to that of explanation. The passage has frequently been quoted, but, by its weight and its elevation, it is made immune to the degrading effect of the excessive familiarity which breeds contempt and of misuse which breeds disgust. Once it is admitted that all histories are in *some* sense interpretations, it becomes necessary to determine the extent to which historians' explanations of past events can qualify as objective, if not rigorously scientific, accounts of reality. They should abandon their unscientific antiquarianism, says the positivist, and turn to the study of social physics or sociology. Actually, a hunchbacked dwarf—a master at chess—sat inside and guided the puppet's hand by means of strings. And historical theorists

for the past twenty-five years have therefore tried to clear up the (piste. mological status of historical representations and (o establish their authority as explanations, rather than to study various types of imcrpre2tions met with in historiography.' This discipline will abstract from historical experience laws which could render to social "engineering" the same services the laws of physics render to technological engineering. Although the topic is natural history, it is not concerned with natural history in the traditional pre-scientific

sense of the history of nature, nor with the history of nature where nature is the object of natural science. One can imagine a philosophic counterpart to this apparatus.

To be sure, the problem of interpretation in history has been dealt with in various ways. The work of the great “metahistorians.” It is generally thought that “speculative philosophy of history” such as Hegel, Marx, Spengler, and Toynbee trade in more or less interesting “interpretations” of history rather than in the genuine “explanations” which they claim to have provided. The province of History is limited by the means at her command, and the historian would be overbold who should venture to unveil the mystery of the primeval world, the relation of mankind to God and nature.

In the opinion of the historicist philosopher the study of history provides man with signposts showing him the ways he has to walk along. The concept of nature employed here has absolutely nothing to do with that of the mathematical sciences. But the work of such metaphysicians is usually conceived to differ radically from that of the so-called proper historian, who pursues more modest aims, eschewing the impulse to solve “the riddle of history” and to identify the plan or goal of the historical process as a whole. It cannot develop in advance what nature and history will mean in the following context. The “proper historian,” it is usually contended, seeks to explain what happened in the past by providing a precise and accurate reconstruction of the events reported in the documents. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are

created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." He does this presumably by suppressing as far as possible his impulse to interpret the data, or at least by indicating in his narrative where he is merely representing the facts and where he is interpreting them. Thus, in historical theory, explanation is conceived to stand over against interpretation as clearly discernible elements of every "proper" historical representation. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is small and ugly and has to keep out of sight. However, I do not overstep myself. I say that the real intention here is to dialectically overcome the usual antithesis of nature and history. In metaphysics, by contrast, the explanatory and the interpretive aspects of the narrative tend to be run together and to be confused in such a way as to dissolve its authority as either a representation of "what happened" in the past or a valid explanation of why it happened as it did. The nation dedicated to this proposition has now become, no doubt partly as a consequence of this dedication, the most powerful and prosperous of the nations of the earth. Does this nation in its maturity still cherish the faith in which it was conceived and raised?

Now, in this essay I shall argue that the distinction between proper history and metaphysics obscures more than it illuminates about the nature of interpretation in historiography in general. **Man can succeed only if his actions fit into the trend of evolution. To discover these trend lines is the main task of history.**

"It is one of the most noteworthy peculiarities of the human heart," writes Lotze, "that so much selfishness in individuals coexists

with the general lack of envy which every present day feels toward its future.”³ Moreover, I shall maintain that there can be no proper history without the presupposition of a full-blown metahistory by which to justify those interpretative will-egies necessary for the representation of a given segment of the historical process. Therefore, wherever I operate with the concepts of nature and history, no ultimate definitions are meant, rather I am pursuing the intention of pushing these concepts to a point where they are mediated in their apparent difference.

The bankruptcy of both positivism and historicism raises anew the question about the meaning, the value, and the use of historical studies.

This observation indicates that the image of happiness we cherish is thoroughly colored by the time to which the course of our own existence has assigned us. In taking this line, I continue a tradition of historical theory established during the nineteenth century at the time of history's constitution as an academic discipline.

This tradition took shape in opposition to the spurious claim, made by Ranke and his epigoni, for the scientific rigor of historiography. **The solution of such problems must be entrusted**

to the joint efforts of Theology and Science.

The concept of nature that is to be dissolved is one that, if translated into standard philosophical terminology, would come closest to the concept of myth.

During the nineteenth century, four major theories of historiography rejected the myth of objectivity prevailing among Ranke's followers. Hegel, Droysen, Nieusche, and Croce all vicew-d

interpretation as the ve-ry soul of historiography, and each tried to work OUt 2 classification of its types.

Some self-styled idealists think that reference to a thirst for knowledge, inborn in all men or at least in the higher types of men, answers these questions satis- factorily. Does it still hold those "truths to be sdf--evident" Hegel. for e-xample, distinguished among four types of interpret2tion within the

cl2SS of what he called Reflective historiogr2phy: Univers21. Pragmatic, Critical. and Conce-ptu21. J Oroysen. writing in the 1860s, 21so discerned four possible interpretative su2tegies in historic21 writing: C2usal, Conditional, Psychological. 2nd Ethical.4 There is happiness-such as could arouse envy in us-only in the air we have breathed, among people we could have talked to, women who could have given themselves to us. This concept is also vague and its exact sense can not be given in pre- liminary definitions but only in the course of analysis. Nietzsche, in "The Use 2nd AbuseofHistory," concdved of four approaches to hislOrical repre-sentation: Monumental. An- tiqu2rian. Critic21. and his own "SuperhislOrical " appr02ch.) About a generation ago, an American diplomat could still say that 'the natural and the divine foundation of the rights of man , is self-evident to all Americans," And. finally. Croce purported to find four different philosophic21 positions from which historians of thc nine-te-e-nth ce-ntury h2d claimed. with different degrees of legitimacy. to m2ke sense of the historical record: Romantic. Idealist, Positivist. and Critic2!" Yet the problem is to draw a boundary line between the thirst for knowledge that impels the phi- lologist

to investigate the language of an African tribe and the curiosity that stimulates people to peer into the private lives of movie stars. In other words, the idea of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the idea of redemption.

The fourfold nature of these classifications of the modes of historical interpretation is itself suggestive, and I will comment on its significance for an understanding of interpretation in general later. **Many historical events interest the average man because hearing or reading about them or seeing them enacted on the stage or screen gives him pleasant, if sometimes shuddering, sensations.** By it is meant what has always been, what as fatefully arranged predetermined being underlies history and appears in history; it is substance in history. The same applies to the idea of the past, which is the concern of history. For the moment I want to dwell upon the different reasons each of these theorists gave for insisting on the ineluctably interpretative element in every historical narrative. First, all of these theorists rejected the Rankean conception of the "innocent eye" of *the* history and the notion that the elements of the historical narrative, the 'facts,' were apodictically provided rather than constituted by the historian's own agency.

From this primeval world we pass to the monuments of

a period less distant but still inconceivably remote, the vestibule, as it were, of History. The masses who greedily absorb newspaper reports about crimes and trials are not driven by Ranke's

eagerness to know events as they really happened.

What is delimited by these expressions is what I mean here by "nature." "All of them stressed the investigative aspect of the historian's pursuit - "inquiry" into "what happened" in the past. The question that arises is that of the relationship of this nature to what we understand by history, where history means that mode of conduct established by tradition that is characterized primarily by the occurrence of the qualitatively new; it is a movement that does not play itself out in mere identity, mere reproduction of what has always been, but rather one in which the new occurs; it is a movement that gains its true character through what appears in it as new. For Droysen, interpretation was necessary simply because the historical record was incomplete. At about the same time a German scholar could still describe the difference between German thought and that of Western Europe and the United States by saying that the West still attached decisive importance to natural right, while in Germany the very terms "natural right" and "humanity" "have now become almost incomprehensible, , , and have lost altogether their original life and color." If we can say with some confidence - "what happened." we cannot always say. on the basis of appeal to the record, "why" it happened as it did. The record had to be interpreted. and this meant "seeing realities in past events, realities with that certain plenitude of conditions which they must have had in order that they might become realities." The past carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to redemption.

I would like to develop what I call the idea of natural-history on the basis of an analysis, or more correctly,

an overview of the question of ontology within the current debate. This “seeing” was a cognitive act, and, in Oroysen’s view, it had to be distinguished from the more obviously “aesthetic” activity in which the historian constructed a proper literary representation of the “realities” thus seen in a prose discourse. While abandoning the idea of natural right and through abandoning it, he continued. Even in representation, however, interpretation was necessary, since historians might choose on aesthetic grounds different plot structures by which to endow sequences of events with different meanings as types of stories.’ **The passions that agitate them are to be dealt with by psychoanalysis, not by epistemology.** Doesn’t a breath of the air that pervaded earlier days caress us as well?

Nietzsche, by contrast, insisted that interpretation was necessary in his historiography because of the nature of that “objectivity” for which the historian strived.

The idealist philosopher’s justification of history as knowledge for the mere sake of knowing fails to take into account the fact that there are certainly things which are not worth knowing. This requires beginning with “the natural.” In the voices we hear, isn’t there an echo of now silent ones? This objectivity was not that of the scientist or the judge in a court of law, but rather that of the artist, more specifically that of the dramatist. The historian’s task was to think dramatically, that is to say, “to think one thing with another, and weave the elements into a single whole, with the presumption that the unity of plan must be put into the objects if it is not already there.” **These monuments have**