

## Contemporary Thought on Philosophy of History\*

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The subject matter of history is not easy to define. A recent philosopher contends that to the question, what is history, any answer that can be returned only adds to confusion. According to him, "the same word history is used both for a subject-matter and for a branch of knowledge". "While polity" says he, "is the subject-matter of political science, law of the science of jurisprudence, Economy, the science of economics, and society of sociology, the subject-matter of history is history; which is, to say the least, confusing". He, therefore, admonishes us that "The beginning of clarity in this subject is to distinguish between history as the subject-matter to be known and which would have taken place if it were not known; and that branch of knowledge which is devoted to the knowing of it". According to him, "Many a boulder has fallen from its place from many a mountain side, leaving its chain of effects, without being known to any historian; unless a divine historian is introduced expressly for the purpose, in obedience to the requirements of a mathematical generalization that nothing can exist or happen that is not known—a generalization which the occurrence of such pre-human events itself serves to refute". (See Professor R. B. Perry's "Realms of Value"). But what this philosopher complains of seems to be a matter which can be dealt with effectively if we were to keep in mind the two primary coordinates with reference to which human experience (and this human experience necessarily includes human knowledge) is to be understood; and these two coordinates are *space* and *time*. Kant describes *space* and *time* as two fundamental forms in the light of which man builds

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the picture of the world-phenomenon. The category of space as a frame of reference of human experience introduces us to the World of Nature, of its matter and motion, if only because reality of it is truly outside our inward point of reference beyond which we cannot move. And what is more, this domain is characterised by *reversibility*; that is to say we can go from left to right and from right to left and from below to above and from above to below. Time on the contrary, in its essence, is time as lived, which is a pure duration, as Bergson showed in his "Creative Evolution", and in contra-distinction with *serial time* (which is merely a mathematical projection of it in spatial terms), it is characterised by its *irreversibility*; that is to say you cannot make yesterday to return for, as it is said, time has no reverse gear. The world of space is essentially the domain of the organic and the lifeless and percontra time is life itself and a domain of the organic. Whereas mathematical laws can offer to us interpretation of the facts of nature, the interpretation of the pure inwardly felt experience can only be offered with reference to some highly sophisticated symbolical analogy. It is suggested that when we take on the role of being histeriographers, we look at events of the past experience of the human race within the framework of time. By recalling their time sequence we make them subject-matter of History. Thus the subject-matter of history is that which can be described in temporal perspective - as we do when we have to grasp the movement of events in time. The end-product of the enterprise of the historian is to foster a greater understanding of the man himself as distinguished from that of Nature. A scientist attempts to understand Nature by discovering the laws of that which stands outside of man, including his body.

Man is essentially what his past has made him. A philosophic student of history studies the past of the human race in order to gain "self-knowledge"- in fact in order to psycho-analyse himself, not as an individual but as a species. And as Amaury de-Riencourt points out, "what every psychologist looks for are *symbols* in the inner world of man's consciousness whereas a scientist looks at *facts* in the outside world of Nature. Historical reality is not physical but symbolic and all interpretations of history that pretend to be scientific fall to the ground. At best philosophy of History can be deeply

religious; at worst, it can be merely ethical. Outside this alternative there is no valid interpretation of History whatever".

It must follow from this that all genuine historical knowledge that mankind has acquired is attributable to the vision that historian has of human Destiny. It is true that he sifts his facts by rigorous scientific methods and subjects them to analysis that tries to minimise the inter-action of the personal factor in the determination of facts. But the fact remains that their interpretation is born of his vision, more or less in the way in which an artist creates a work of art in which he utilises the outside material with a view to projecting his aesthetic perception of it. All great historians therefore are *perse* artists rather than *scientists*. Houston Chamberlain pointed this out in the introduction of his famous work on "Foundations of the 19th Century". "There is nothing to dwell in detail", said he, "upon the limitations which the individual must admit when he stands face to face with an immeasurable world of facts. The mastery of [such a task, scientifically, is impossible; it is only artistic power aided by those secret parallels which exist between the world of vision and of thought by that tissue which like ether - fills and connects the world, that can, if fortune is favourable, produce a unity here which is complete, and that, too, though only fragments be employed to make it. If the artist does succeed in this, then his work has not been superfluous; the immeasurable has been brought within the scope of vision, the shapeless has acquired a form. In such a task, the individual has an advantage over a combination of men however capable they may be, for a homogeneous whole can be the work only of an individual mind. But he must know how to turn this advantage to good account for it is his only one. Art appears only as a whole, as something perfect in itself; Science, on the other hand, is bound to be fragmentary. Art unites and science disconnects. Art gives form to things, science disconnects them. The man of science stands on an Archimedian point outside the world; therein lies his greatness, his so-called objectivity; but this very fact is also the cause of his manifest in-sufficiency; for no sooner does he leave the sphere of actual observation, to reduce the manifoldness of experience to the unity of conception and idea than he finds himself hanging by the thin thread of abstraction in an empty space. The artist on the contrary stands at world's centre (that is at the centre of his own world)

and his creative power takes him as far as his senses can reach; for this creative power is but the manifestation of the individual mind acting and reacting upon its surroundings. But for that reason also, he cannot be reproached for his "subjectivity"; that is the fundamental condition of his creative work".

It is also true that every historian perceives a mass of historical facts in the light of those *prejudices and preconceptions* which are the result of his own traditional background, the early influences and the cultural processes of his time. In order to avoid the charge of being "subjective" in his approach, all he can do, is to avowedly state what all those prejudices and pre-conceptions are and thus take his readers into confidence. But for an historian to take the position that his interpretation of historical evidence is objective in the sense that he has acted as a detached spectator of "all-time and all-existence" is to put forward an impossible claim—a claim which is incapable of being accepted in principle.

A philosopher of history necessarily views the work of the historian as furnishing a solution to the problem of *fate* and *free-will* and the question that is often debated is whether by listening to the voice of history as though it were an infallible oracle upon the issue viz. whether its course is determined or whether it is free, we will be able to solve the problem of Fate and Free Will. Many have seen in the face of history the indelible marks left behind by the grip of fate upon the affairs of mankind. Marx, for example, believes in the inevitable victory of proletariat and condemns the course of human development as being one which is regulated by the iron law of history. Marx believes in "historical Determinism". Indeed, the pivotal point of his contribution was to highlight his materialistic conception of history; for him Matter and Motion alone are real. Historical Determinism as propounded by Marx attributes historical events to only one type of cause viz. the economic factors, and ignores other factors. In a sense it is true to say that events may be historically determined in the sense that there is general impact of several causal factors that account for the happening of a particular event, but to say that, prime mover of social change is only the economic factor is virtually to assign decisive value to one species of causal factors to the prejudice of others. The historical events,

for example, cannot be isolated from their physical environment. Similarly there are cultural factors which account for the happening of certain events. By culture in this context we understand the variety, totality and mobility of what man makes of himself and of his environment. There is a presence of certain common features in all human societies since they are all rooted in nature and common human experience. But over and above the constantly recurring features of human life, there are several other variations on the theme and these peculiarities are characteristics of certain societies and not others because of "historical and local differences and because of the unpredictable spontaneities which operate in the field of human behaviour like mutation in the field of genetics". Of course Marx denied the primacy of the ideas and refused to acknowledge that they can be regarded as prime movers of social change. For him, the idea itself is neither primary nor autonomous, but is only a concomitant condition that co-exists with that inter-play of Matter and Motion in man's outer environment, in which he saw the efficient cause of the making of History. He denies to the individual any competence to take initiative in the making of History since for him the individual himself is the product of history and therefore he could not be regarded as a maker of history. Individual is no doubt in a sense product of history but then there is something in him which *transcends* the plane of individual consciousness which is attributable to the impact that inter-play Matter and Motion and makes, as has been said, the river of man's life rise beyond its source. To that extent, at any rate, individual can also be a maker of history and succeed in imparting new direction to social changes that are taking place in history. The role of ideas cannot, therefore, conceivably be under-rated. Any one who sees the history of humanity in its proper perspective would find that the great ideas released in the teachings of various Prophets of universal religion have been responsible for bringing about pronounced changes in the beliefs and behaviour of the members of the human race. Ideas, however, mistaken or fictitious, as a matter of fact have played a decisive role in causing major wars and revolutions and in our own time ideologies continue to be at war with the peace of the world or depending upon their main thrust can also be responsible for securing survival to the human race.

Writers like Tolstoy do subscribe to the view that the con-

ventional mode of regarding the activities of great or powerful individuals as constituting decisive causal factors in the determination of historical events has to be rejected. In his second Epilogue with which his famous Novel "War & Peace" (1869) concludes, he has dealt with this matter at some length and has pointed out the difficulties that beset the way of those who set out to define the character and effectiveness of forces that move nations. According to Tolstoy, the historical process is a continuum which is made up of infinitely small actions and events and he was vehemently opposed to cutting it into arbitrary segments by way of abstraction or generalization since according to him that method of dealing with what is an indivisible whole necessarily distorts its true character. He states "To understand the laws of this continuous movement is the aim of history. But to arrive at these laws resulting from the sum total of these human wills, man's mind postulates arbitrary and disconnected units. The first method of history is to take an arbitrarily selected series of continuous events and examine it apart from others, though there is and can be no beginning to any event, for one event always follows uninterruptedly from another. The second method is to consider the actions of some one man - the king or commander - as equivalent to the sum of many individual wills; whereas the sum of individual wills is never expressed by the activities of a single historic personage.

"Historical science in its endeavour to draw nearer to truth continually takes smaller and smaller units for examination. But however small the units it takes, we feel that to take any unit disconnected from others, or to assume any *beginning* in phenomenon, or to say that the will of man is expressed by the actions of any one historic personage is in itself false.

"It needs no critical exertion to reduce utterly to dust any deductions drawn from history. It is merely necessary to select some larger or smaller unit as the subject of observation - as criticism has every right to do seeing that, whatever unit history observes, must always be arbitrarily selected.

"Only by taking infinitesimal units for observation (the differential of history, that is, the individual tendencies of man) and attaining to the art of integrating them (that is finding sum of these infinitesimals) can we hope to arrive at the laws of history".

From what has been said so far the functional value of historical knowledge can be understood from three principal stand-points and these are: (a) *factual*, (b) *explanatory* and (c) *normative*. We can offer factual narration of what happened and the degree to which evidence supports the narrative is the degree to which historical knowledge will be valid.

Historical knowledge must find the answers to the following five questions: (1) what occurred in a specific place at a specific time; (2) what is the importance of what occurred; (3) what was it like when it occurred; (4) in what condition did it occur; (5) is it good or bad that it should have occurred. Answers to these questions adequately cover the factual ground necessary for offering an explanation and evaluation of events that are selected to constitute the data for historical interpretation. It is clear that in dealing with the explanatory accounts and in making the normative adjustments a great deal of the vision that a historian has of human destiny necessarily must enter. History is a sophisticated version of historian's vision of the past in that the stand-point of historian constantly shifts from his being a spectator who sees only to describe to being a philosopher who explains why certain events have occurred and then, further on, to the stand-point of his taking on the role of being a judge and passing a judgment whether or not what has happened was good or bad. The religious background of the Historian and the moral standards to which he subscribes are apt to be reflected in any significant contribution that he makes in recounting to us what the past of an institution or any other subject-matter of his study has to say upon its present make-up and structure.

Whether or not the changes in the course of history argue for "progress" can only be answered with reference to some definable norm in terms of which what is *later in time* can be regarded as *being better in the scale of value*. There are historians who believe that what is later in time must be better and most of the idealistic interpretations of history which place emphasis on the unfolding of great potentialities that are inherent in man are apt to subscribe to the doctrine of progress by affirming on a *priore* ground that man necessarily progresses towards the better. Modern scholarship has moved away from the eighteenth century doctrine of progress and

subscribes to the theory which says that it is possible in principle that later can be worse and not necessarily better; or that some times it can be both better and worse, all depending on the value coordinate selected for the purpose of making it as a basis for historical judgment—for what moves forward in time, may move up in some respects and down in others. Whether or not there is a value “on the whole” in respect of which historical judgment is possible can only be answered by the historian, *if he can take his stand outside time* for while the drama of history is on, one cannot say what the end would be like. The question is as meaningless as the one that may be asked of a physicist ‘What is the weight of the universe’? Since the concept of weight defines the relation between the two objects, the totality of objects can conceivably have no weight, since there is nothing outside the totality in relation to which the concept of weight can at all prevail. When the poet subscribes to “one increasing beneficial purpose running through the course of history”; he is more taking on the role of a man of faith than that of a historian—the latter is after all committed to the programme of drawing inferences from the data presented to him. Philosophy of Hegel, for instance, erects a system of thought upon the notion of reality being intelligible in rational or ideal terms and further in regarding this notion of reality as a developing and a dynamic process. For him the rational is real and the real is rational. For Hegel, logic is the key to grasp not only the movement of the thought-structure in terms of which reality can be progressively understood but since reality itself is rational, the dialectics discerned in the thought process corresponds to all the underlying changes in the structure of reality itself. But it is impossible to apply dialectical method to understand the changes in history because time, according to Hegel, is not real and therefore rationality cannot comprehend it. The Hegelian dialectics as is well known proceeds on the assumption that a concept may generate its opposite (which is its contradictory) and the two taken together giving rise to further idea which may represent what is essential to both and yet, since it transcends them, it becomes the thesis at a higher level only to be contradicted by its opposite yielding place to a new synthesis and so on till we reach the absolute idea, which though *universal* is never-the-less *concrete*. But the riddle how would this dialectics, which may serve to explain movement within the framework of ideal relationships, also apply to the world of nature and spirit,

matter and motion cannot be explained. Of course, Hegel assumes that nature and spirit, matter and motion do also somehow conform to the demand of dialectics, but as far as the present writer is aware, it remains right to the end an assumption and therefore when Hegel insists that history presents a rational process, it is an illegitimate extension of a principle valid in ideal relationships to an area which is outside its domain. But for Hegel somehow, philosophy of history as even of nature are only aspects of the philosophy of spirit and therefore subjected to the dialectical process. According to Hegel, so viewed history shows a progressive development towards the realization of certain goals and the end towards which human history is gravitating was regarded by him to be the realization of freedom. No wonder one of his recent disciples, Benedetto Croce, regarded human history as 'Story of Human Liberty'. This too is a deterministic view but the basis is apparently taken from something which is outside the history itself, viz. the spirit which manifests itself in time. Here the movement of History is viewed as the unfolding of Absolute Idea in Time. Karl Marx too drew his inspiration from Hegelian dialectics - only at the expense of rejecting the idealistic under-pinning of his system.

In conclusion and as a foot note to Hegelian philosophy of history which may be taken as a typical illustration of idealistic interpretation of history, the question whether historian is at all qualified to answer the question as to what the shape of coming things is going to be like, might be discussed.

The answer to this question from the philosophical standpoint seems to be so plain as to admit of no controversy. The business of the historian is to present a picture of past events but since the historical process is an indivisible one it is difficult to see how historian as such is particularly qualified to know the future. According to R. G. Collingwood "Whenever historians claim to be able to determine the future in advance of its happening, we may know with certainty that something has gone wrong with their fundamental conception of history. Further we may know exactly what it is that has gone wrong. What has happened is that they have split up the single whole of historical process into two separate things, one which determines and one which is determined: the abstract law

and the mere fact, the universal and the particular. They have hypostalized the universal into a false particular supposed to exist by itself and for itself and yet in that isolation they still conceive it as determining the course of particular events. The Universal being thus isolated from the temporal process does not work in that process, it only works upon it. The temporal process is something passive shaped by time-less force working upon it from without". (See his 'The Idea of History' — Oxford Paperbacks, p. 54).

Only a Prophet who, by virtue of his high level of consciousness and Divine Grace, can stand above the temporal process and can see it *sub-species aeternatus* is qualified to predict what lies ahead. Whenever historians engage themselves in prophesying the future on the basis of historical developments that have culminated in the present shape of things they employ some kind of vague and woolly symbolism which according to them is seen reflected in the paradigm of history. For instance, for some, the historical process is *rectilinear*, for others it is *cyclic* and, therefore, *recurring* and yet for others it is both rectilinear and cyclic as it is reflected in a *spiralish movement*. Then there are artificial generalisations concerning what is to be regarded as subject-matter of historical studies. Some say it is about the ruling power of Kings and Queens, of dictators. Some again, more particularly in the recent past, have begun viewing history as a story of the economic struggle of the people — as a sort of class-warfare at the back of which they see the push of the Revolutionary forces leading people on to a classless society. Yet some have viewed nation-state as a unit of historical study; there are others again who have taken the study of a given people from the point of view of their religious unity — others talk about people who are wedded to a particular ideology. There are some again who take civilization as a unit of their study as, for instance does Toynbee, who has evolved formulas like "challenge and response", "withdrawal and return", "Route & Rally", "growth, breakdown and disintegration" to explain the rise and fall of civilizations.

All these modes of regarding the date of history within the framework of pre-conceived stereotypes are unproductive, if only because the whole procedure is vitiated by the Historians' arbitrary selection of data with a view to substantiating a particular conception

of history that he had presupposed. There is no attempt to reach these conceptions by an impartial examination of historical evidence nor again is it possible from the immeasurable range of facts to inductively arrive at what are called the operational laws of history. The present writer has sympathy with the way in which his favourite philosopher, Professor R. B. Perry (with whose quotations the present paper opens) deals with the matter and it is fitting that the paragraph in which he states his attitude to the question under examination should also conclude this paper. The note of cautionary warning contained in the following quotation adequately sums up what the present writer regards is the only proper approach with which historian should tackle his task:

"History itself, the complexity of human happenings, has burst the seams of all neatly tailored philosophies of history. Their great merit despite dogmatism and over-simplification, lies in their broad sweep, and in their emphasis on the relations, continuities, and similarities which are lost sight of in special histories. Such a masterly survey as Toynbee's is not only compendious, but brings to light certain aspects of massiveness and generality which are as solid facts as the items or limited segments with which more meticulous historians are preoccupied. They are there to be seen by one who has the far-reaching and synoptic vision to see them. But a pluralistic philosophy of history agrees better with the known facts than a monistic philosophy of history. A more modest, if less impressive, philosophy of history, reveals both manyness and disorder, threads of connection together with disconnectedness and irrelevance, false starts, detours, and vicissitudes of many kinds. Such a spectacle, despite its lack of architectural grandeur, still reminds man of his membership in the family of mankind and leaves open the possibility of a unity to be achieved by good will and enlightenment".