

THE EMERGENCE OF THE IDEA OF SCIENTIFIC HISTORIOGRAPHY

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INTRODUCTION

An Overview of Historical Philosophy

If, as Carl Becker maintains, every normal person knows a great deal of history--indeed, knows all the history that is necessary for his immediate efficiency, it would be somewhat presumptuous to regard history as a modern discipline. But that is a semantic problem deriving from the ambiguity of "history." In some senses--perhaps the most important--history is indeed a modern discipline: a child of the Enlightenment and a development of the nineteenth century.

The history of the philosophy of history is marked by three great crises.¹ The first of these occurred in the fifth century, B.C., when the Greek historian Herodotus introduced the idea of scientific historiography and his younger contemporary Thucydides wrote the critical history on the Peloponnesian War. This crisis marked a revolution from mythological and theocentric history to scientific and anthropocentric history. But, as with many great ideas, the idea thus introduced, became dormant, not to be revived until modern times.

The second crisis occurred in the fourth and fifth centuries of the Christian era when the idea of history was transformed by the imposition of Christian theology. The publication of Augustine's De Civitate Dei in A.D. 426, established a motif for historical philosophy which dominated the field for a millennium. Augustine is generally credited with having produced the first systematic philosophy of history. The City of God is the first universal history and marks a great departure from the ancient cyclical interpretation to the linear and teleological view. Augustine's introduction of the idea of providence is the first use of a single controlling idea by means of which all history can be written, interpreted, and utilized. It is in this sense that his work qualifies as the first philosophy of history. To be sure, Augustine's philosophy of history is really a theology of history; but if a rigid distinction is maintained between philosophy and theology, then philosophy of history is a modern development, indeed.

A third crisis occurred in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the final emergence of scientific historiography. In the eighteenth century, especially in connection with the French Enlightenment, the idea of providence was replaced by the idea of progress--humanistically

conceived. The progress of reason was taken as an indication of the inevitable perfectability of man and establishment of utopia. During the nineteenth century the idea of progress came to be understood as a strictly determinate operation and as such susceptible to rigorous scientific investigation after the model of the physical sciences. It is this third crisis with which we are concerned in this paper.

Types of Historical Philosophies

Since in any discussion it is helpful to define terms it will be helpful here to orient the subject of historical objectivity with respect to philosophy of history in general. First, there is the fundamental ambiguity in the term "history." "History" is commonly used to refer to (a) a series of events (particularly, human actions) as they occurred independently of their being recorded, interpreted, or even known by an external observer, and (b) the literary record of such a series of events. Now, it is quite possible to think philosophically about history in either of these two senses. That is, one may reflect seriously and draw general conclusions regarding either (a) the course of human events, or (b) the work of people who regard themselves as professional historians.

Voltaire was the first to use the phrase "philosophy of history." For him, philosophy of history was social and economic history which he took to be more scientific than the repetition of old wives' tales about kings and queens.² For Hegel, philosophy of history was the construction of a universal or world history. The positivists understood philosophy of history as the discovery of general laws operative in the course of human events.³ In view of such divergent and sometimes contradictory notions of the nature of philosophy of history it is helpful to distinguish between critical and speculative philosophy of history following C. D. Broad's general distinction between critical and speculative thought. An excellent account of this distinction is given in Philosophy of History: An Introduction, by W. H. Walsh.⁴

Speculative philosophy of history is concerned with the temporal series of events themselves. Here the great question is that of the meaning and purpose of history as such. It involves the attempt to formulate a transcendent metaphysical scheme in terms of which the whole historical process makes sense--to see the pattern of the historical process. With respect to the possibility of achieving success in such an endeavor there are several possible attitudes. Negatively, it is possible (1) that there is no meaning, pattern, or purpose in history--the nihilistic position, (2) that such pattern if it exists cannot be known--the skeptical position, and (3) that the apparent pattern in history and its meaning is a construction superimposed on history by the knowing mind--the subjectivist position. On the positive side there are two live options, (1) the cyclical, and (2) the linear view of the historical process. Nietzsche, e.g., revived the ancient cyclical view with his doctrine of the eternal recurrence; Hegel, on the other hand, transformed the classical theistic position with the notion of the progressive development of the idea of freedom on the part of the Absolute Spirit. From a somewhat different perspective, William Dray categorizes speculative philosophies of history in accordance with the epistemological method by which the pattern is derived, using Hegel as an example of the metaphysical [or better, a priori] approach, Toynbee as an example of the empirical approach, and Reinhold Niebuhr as an example of the religious [revelational] approach.⁵

Another sort of question regarding the temporal series of events, which on the surface appears to be a critical question, also belongs in the area of speculative philosophy, viz., the question of the mechanism of historical change. The speculative nature of the question is most easily illustrated by reference to the Marxian interpretation. According to Marx, the really important factors in historical change (i.e., the factors of historical causation) are economic; however,

. . . we can say that the Marxist theory of historical interpretation is philosophical in so far as it presents its main contention not as a mere empirical hypothesis, but as something much more like an a priori truth. Marx, as we find if we look at his views carefully, does not appear to be claiming only that economic factors are as a matter of fact the most potent forces determining the course of history; he seems to be holding further that, things being what they are, such factors are and must be the basic elements in every historical situation.⁶

In short, speculative philosophy of history is concerned with such questions as (1) has history any meaning? (2) what is the pattern, if any, of the past? (3) how does historical change occur? and (4) what purpose, value, or justification is there in the process?⁷

I take note of these questions in a paper dealing primarily with a critical problem because I shall attempt to show that the construction of a critical philosophy of history and empirical historiography, apart from a general (speculative) philosophy is a theoretically invalid enterprise.⁸

Critical philosophy of history is concerned with the production of history in the sense of a literary record about a temporal series of events. In the present century it has become much more popular to theorize about historians than about history. Speculative philosophy is generally out of vogue and Hegel is usually regarded as a paradigm of how not to theorize about history.⁹ The great issues regarding the work of the historians are these: (1) Historians claim not only to tell a story about a past series of events but to do so with understanding and this involves explanation. They are concerned not only with what occurred but why (and this is necessarily so, since apart from explanation the history as record would be as infinite in scope and as unintelligible as the series itself). The philosopher of history therefore asks what is the nature of historical explanation? Is description explanation? Does explanation depend on the formulation of scientific laws? Can, indeed, the historian defend his claim to explain? (2) A closely related problem stems from the historian's presumption to discuss historical causation. The historian, e.g., poses as a significant question, What caused the American Civil War? and boldly sallies forth to meet the challenge. The philosopher of history, on the other hand, is apt to point out that not only does no one know what caused the Civil War and that it is impossible to find out, but also that the notion of historical causation itself requires careful scrutiny. The historian therefore should not proceed as though David Hume never existed. (3) Doubtless the most presumptuous claim of the historian is that his record is true. Historians invariably suppose that there is a difference between history and fiction--between Thucydides and Aesop. This presumption is of such commanding importance to historians that they should certainly be willing to state clearly what is meant by truth, and how it is that they have such ready access

to it. In other words, the historian cannot escape his special case of the general questions of epistemology. It is this final and most presumptuous claim I wish to explore. I shall try to indicate why I believe that a true history is impossible on a strictly empirical basis and on any other basis is an act of faith.

Objectivity: The Controlling Idea in Historical Philosophy

Walsh calls historical objectivity "the most important and most baffling topic in critical philosophy of history."¹⁰ I suggest that objectivity is the controlling idea in philosophy of history. What does this mean? How can such an assertion be justified? Consider the bearing of historical objectivity on the other problems noted above as the great issues in historical philosophy. Is it not preposterous to suppose that one can know why X happened if one is uncertain that X happened? Does it make sense to talk of factors a, b, and c being the necessary and sufficient conditions of event X when both factors and event are in doubt? Is it not absurd to look for patterns, purposes, and meaning in a series of historical events if there is not in fact a known series of historical events? Augustine's interpretation of history depended on a knowledge of both events and their meaning through revelation; Hegel's "philosophical history," clearly presupposed a knowledge of "original history"; the positivists assume the possibility of objectivity; and those who deny it are reduced to defining history as "what historians do"! It seems to me therefore that for history to achieve the status and respect it deserves, the problem of historical objectivity must be satisfactorily answered.

THE CASE FOR HISTORICAL OBJECTIVITY

I should like to state the case for historical objectivity by tracing briefly the rise of the idea of objectivity in modern philosophy, by noting the corresponding developments in the writing of history, and by pointing out the continuing impact of this viewpoint.

History in Nineteenth Century Philosophy

The eighteenth century Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico was certainly a seminal thinker for the modern conception of history, and may with justification be regarded as the founder of philosophy of history in the modern sense; but Vico himself acknowledges his debt to Bacon, so perhaps it will not be out of order to begin at that point.

Francis Bacon (1561-1626). Collingwood insists that there was no philosophy of history prior to Bacon and in the sense intended he is probably right. Bacon was the first to attempt to deal seriously with the question what is history? "Bacon sets before us a systematic picture of the activities of the human mind, which are three in number: poetry, history, and philosophy, depending on the three faculties of imagination, memory, and understanding. His theory of history is quite simple: historical knowledge is at bottom simply remembering, and what cannot be remembered we must take on authority from those who did. Memory and authority thus form

the double root of all history."¹² Bacon's position clearly separated history from the business of prediction, and established interest in the facts of the past themselves, as distinct from the recognition of a purpose or plan within the facts.¹³

Giambattista Vico (1688-1744). In 1725, Vico published the first edition of his Principles of a New Science Concerning the Common Nature of the Nations. Vico's ideas were in some respects contrary to the mood of the Enlightenment with the result that they were not widely appreciated in his century. Indeed, our contemporary respect for Vico is mainly due to Croce's respect for Vico, but there is no doubt that Vico's ideas anticipate the historical philosophy of the nineteenth century. Vico is generally associated with a spiral view of history in which a series of general cycles in human civilizations themselves constitute the elements of a progressive series. However, the emphasis that is relevant to this study is his notion that history is a wholly human product, and is therefore wholly intelligible to man. "Indeed, history lends itself to scientific investigation and reflection more easily than physical nature. Nature was made by God alone, not man; hence God alone can have a full, adequate knowledge of Nature. But human society, human laws, language, and literature are all made by man. Hence man can truly understand them and their principles of development."¹⁴ In the New Science, Vico wrote

that this world of nations has certainly been made by men, and its guise must therefore be found within the modifications of our own human mind. And history cannot be more certain than when he who creates the things also describes them. Thus our science proceeds exactly as does geometry, which, while it constructs out of its elements or contemplates the world of quantity, itself creates it. . . .¹⁵

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Kant's contribution to the development of the idea of scientific historiography is contained in a short essay published in 1784, "Idea of a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View." Objective historiography, of course, depends upon historical determinism and Kant takes the position that history is determined by physical and chemical laws. The "Universal History" opens with the assertion:

Whatever metaphysical theory may be formed regarding the freedom of the will, it holds equally true that the manifestations of the will in human actions are determined, like all other external events, by universal natural laws.¹⁶

Now Kant admitted that the freedom of the human will seems to bear on such matters as marriages, births, deaths, etc., in such a way as to preclude their being predicted in detail; nevertheless, "the annual statistics of great countries prove that these events take place according to constant natural laws."¹⁷ Kant was confident that nature would eventually bring forth a Kepler or Newton to explicate the working of these statistical laws in history.

By the end of the eighteenth century, the deterministic view of history and the anticipation of a thoroughgoing science of history was well established. Generally, the Enlightenment philosophers were confident that "they could by reason's powers discover the natural laws of

all human phenomena--ethics, jurisprudence, society, religion, art--just as Newton's Principia had proclaimed the laws of physics and astronomy."¹⁸

G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831). I include Hegel in this catalogue of contributors to the idea of historical objectivity in spite of the fact that he also represents a way of thinking about history which is generally regarded as the very antithesis of scientific history. Certain outstanding features of Hegel's view of history bear on our point. First, Hegel presupposes a knowledge of the facts of history as they occurred. Although, so far as I can determine, he nowhere says so explicitly, the lectures on the philosophy of history confidently proceed with the assurance that the past is objectively knowable and is in fact so known. In the discussion (below) of the subjectivist argument I shall attempt to indicate why Hegel's "original history" is impossible apart from his "philosophical history" and vice versa. May it suffice to say here that Hegel's construction of a world-history depends upon selecting data from "original historians" such as Thucydides, but unfortunately, Thucydides never heard Hegel's lectures on history so it is hard to see how he could have properly selected his material.¹⁹

The most important idea in Hegel's view of history for this sketch is that Reason rules the world. "The world is not abandoned to chance and external accident but controlled by Providence [to use the religious term]."²⁰ While it is true that the ultimate goal of the historical process is the complete development of the Idea of Freedom, this freedom is not to be understood as a promiscuous or indeterminate liberty on the part of individual men. To be sure, the Spirit achieves consciousness of Freedom in and through the minds of individuals, but the unit of historical study is the national spirit--not an individual spirit. Indeed, it is of the essence of the "cunning of reason" to utilize the private passions of "world-historical individuals" for the larger purposes of the World Spirit. "Such individuals have no consciousness of the Idea as such. They are practical and political men."²¹ But the philosopher of history is not interested in private passions and free will, he sees rather the use of these in the development of the World Spirit. "The particular in most cases is too trifling as compared with the universal; the individuals are sacrificed and abandoned. The Idea pays the tribute of existence and transience, not out of its own funds but with the passions of the individuals."²²

Hegel does not attempt to deduce details of history from the categories of the Logic. Herr Krug's pen remained undeduced. There is what Copleston calls a "necessary contingency" even in nature.²³ But the outline or skeleton plot of history is known entirely apart from any knowledge of historical detail. Apart from the "facts" of history, e.g., Hegel knows "that history must be the gradual realization of freedom; he even knows that this process must complete itself in four distinct stages. . . . If this is not determining the course of history apart from experience, it is hard to know what is."²⁴

Karl Marx (1818-1883). In the Marxist view of history, as in the Hegelian, it is only one aspect of a highly complex theory which contributes to the development of objective historiography. But that aspect is an extremely important one, viz., that the study of history can and should be put on a strictly scientific basis and that such a program is possible precisely because the events of history are determined in specific, explicable ways.

In Marx, for the first time, the reason for treating the study of history scientifically is the same as the reason for so treating nature--i.e., for control and utilization. Few persons today are particularly distressed to discover that the laws of physics could not possibly be true--our goal in science is not to learn the truth but to utilize nature. So Marx, whether or not he understood that scientific historiography cannot be true, certainly appreciated the chief potential value of scientific historiography when he declared, "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it."²⁵

In the Marxist view historiography can be scientific because it is determined, but this determination is not a geographical or physical determination as such--it is an economic determination. The determining factors in history are the processes of material production. The whole of man's consciousness, including his "political life, his law, his morality, his religion, his art, his philosophy" is determined by varying successive modes of production. "It is not the consciousness of human beings which determines their being, but it is, on the contrary, their social being which determines their consciousness."²⁶

Auguste Comte (1798-1857). Undoubtedly the strongest expression of the viewpoint here under discussion is in the positivistic movement of the nineteenth century, particularly in the philosophy of Auguste Comte. It was the positivism of Comte that most strongly and most directly influenced the historiography of the nineteenth century.

Comte described three stages of human progress--the theological, the metaphysical, and the positive.

In the final, the positive state, the mind has given over the vain search after Absolute notions, the origin and destination of the universe, and the causes of phenomena, and applies itself to the study of their laws--that is, their invariable relations of succession and resemblance. Reasoning and observation, duly combined, are the means of this knowledge. What is now understood when we speak of an explanation of facts is simply the establishment of a connection between single phenomena and some general facts, the number of which continually diminishes with the progress of science.²⁷

The three stages apply to history as a whole (the theological stage extending until the Renaissance, the metaphysical, beginning with the Renaissance, and the positivistic beginning with Auguste Comte!) but they also may be observed within the development of each particular science. According to Comte the studies of astronomical, physical, chemical, and physiological phenomena have already entered the positive stage, but this is not so in the case of social phenomena. Comte's great goal therefore was the establishment of a new science--Social Physics--with the avowed aim of reducing all social phenomena to a single law (like the law of gravity). Social knowledge will consist of explaining known facts by established laws. Phenomena that are not explicable in terms of universal law are of no interest to the positive philosopher.²⁸

As specifically applied to historical investigation, Comte's program consisted of (1) establishment of the facts of history as they happened, and (2) construction of explanatory laws by inductive generalization.

Positivistic Historiography

In the mediaeval curriculum history was a part of the grammar in the trivium. There was no office of "historian" per se. Through the later European Renaissance history was generally connected with moral philosophy and was regarded as "philosophy teaching by examples."²⁹ The development of history as an autonomous discipline paralleled the development we have traced in the philosophy of history and its integrity as a discipline is due in large part to the adoption of the scientific model, particularly the goal of objectivity in historical research. In this connection the leading figure in the nineteenth century is the German historian Leopold von Ranke.

Leopold von Ranke. The fundamental conviction in nineteenth century historiography was that it is possible to describe the past as it actually was. "Its author, Ranke, a German conservative, writing after the storm and stress of the French Revolution was weary of history written for, or permeated with, the purposes of revolutionary propaganda."³⁰ In Ranke's often-quoted words, "[this work] wants to show only what really happened (wie es eigentlich gewesen)."³¹

The classical expression of this notion of the historian as instrument, is the famous statement attributed to Fustel de Coulanges. Half a century ago the French mind was reacting strongly against the romantic idea that political liberty was brought into Gaul by the primitive Germans; and Fustel was a leader in this reaction. One day he was lecturing to his students on early French institutions, and suddenly they broke into applause. "Gentlemen," said Fustel, "do not applaud. It is not I who speak, but history that speaks through me." And all the time this calm disinterested historian was endeavoring, with concentrated purpose, to prove that the damned Germans had nothing to do with French civilization. That of course was why the students applauded--and why Fustel told them that it was history speaking.³²

The positivistic program of historical objectivity was accepted by the nineteenth century historians in its aspect of fact collection, but was largely rejected in its law-formulation emphasis (mainly because no general laws were discovered!). Under this influence historical data came to be regarded as atomistic. The resultant methodology, as described by Collingwood, was twofold:

(1) Each fact was to be regarded as a thing capable of being ascertained by a separate act of cognition or process of research, and thus the total field of the historically knowable was cut up into an infinity of minute parts each to be considered separately. (2) Each fact was to be thought of not only as independent of all the rest but as independent of the knower, so that all subjective elements in the historian's point of view had to be eliminated. The historian must pass no judgment on the facts: he must only say what they were.³³

This program, of course, led to a vast increase in knowledge of historical detail, it stimulated accuracy in research, and, as mentioned above, it led to the integrity of history as

an autonomous discipline; but the program was also "vicious in principle"³⁴--a fact that is now receiving due recognition.

Henry Thomas Buckle. An exception in nineteenth century historiography in that he accepted the whole of the positivistic program including the effort to establish general historical laws is Henry T. Buckle, author of the History of Civilization in England (1857), Buckle insists that history has been delayed in achieving status as a science by the pernicious doctrines of predestination and free will. He rejects both doctrines and asserts a mechanistic determinism as the foundation for his History. Any person who is unbiased by a system will admit, says Buckle,

that when we perform an action, we perform it in consequence of some motive or motives; that those motives are the results of some antecedents; and that therefore, if we were acquainted with the whole of the antecedents, and with all the laws of their movements, we could with unerring certainty predict the whole of their immediate results.³⁵

Failure, he says, would not be ascribed to predestination or a capricious freedom of will but to an incomplete knowledge of the antecedents or an inadequate understanding of the operations of the mind. Buckle also followed Kant in his confidence that the laws of history could be discovered through the study of national statistics. This led Buckle to the observation that

even the number of marriages annually contracted, is determined, not by the temper and wishes of individuals, but by large general facts over which individuals can exercise no authority. It is now known that marriages bear a fixed and definite relation to the price of corn. . . .³⁶

What Buckle fails to recognize is that statistics never really explain a marriage and even if the statistics were much better the result would be sociology, not history.

The Life of Jesus Movement. A special application of the positivistic historiography during the nineteenth century was the life of Jesus movement. I mention this development because, although I have a vital interest in Christian theism as an historically rooted position, I have no sympathy with empirical efforts either in support or in attack on that position. I take the life of Jesus movement to be instructive in this regard inasmuch as the result of the inquiry was that Strauss was uncertain that Jesus lived and if he did we certainly know nothing about him; Baur discovered a simple ethical teacher who was in no sense a theologian; Harnack, a simple theologian who taught the fatherhood of God and the infinite worth of the human soul; Schweitzer discovered a theologian who suffered messianic delusions--in other words, they failed to discover the historical Jesus.³⁷ A more recent example of the same thing is the failure of Earl Warren to establish beyond question the historical assassin of John F. Kennedy.

Perpetuation and Modification of the Idea of Objectivity

The progress of the ideal of scientific history has suffered significant setbacks, particularly as a result of the arguments for historical relativism, but with certain modifications that ideal is very much alive today. Indeed, the debate over this problem is the major interest in contemporary philosophy of history.

In an article, "The Idea of Scientific History in America," in 1940, W. Stull Holt described the "remarkable historical achievements" of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The achievements included (1) the contribution of great historical writings in various forms from the broad world histories [e.g., the works of Spengler and Toynbee] to monographs on historical minutiae, (2) the professional status of historical scholarship, and (3) the development of great ideas about history. "Among these ideas was the belief generally shared by American scholars that history is a science. Such a conclusion was, of course, a natural one. Science had triumphed in the thought of the nineteenth century. To be 'scientific' was the great desideratum. The very word was a fetish."³⁸ Holt notes that although history was thought to be a science very little attention was given to what that might mean. Actually, two distinct notions of scientific history emerged paralleling the historical thought of the nineteenth century. Of these, the one saw history as a science after the model of biology--Charles Darwin being the great prototype. In the Annual Report of the American Historical Association for 1893, F. J. Turner wrote: "Behind institutions. . . lie the vital forces which call these organs into life and shape them to meet changing conditions."³⁹ In this view, the goal of historiography is the formulation of explanatory laws. A splendid illustration of this viewpoint comes from the presidential address of Henry Adams to the American Historical Association in 1894:

You may be sure that four out of five serious students of history who are living today have, in the course of their work, felt that they stood on the brink of a great generalization that would reduce all history under a law as clear as the laws which govern the material world. . . . The law was certainly there, and as certainly was in places actually visible, to be touched and handled, as though it were a law of chemistry or physics. No teacher with a spark of imagination or with an idea of scientific method can have helped dreaming of the immortality that would be achieved by the man who should successfully apply Darwin's method to the facts of human history.⁴⁰

On the other hand, there was the perpetuation of Ranke's view that scientific history is a search for the facts alone.

Thus, Rhodes, who once stressed the outstanding importance of Darwinian evolutionism for the historian, insisted later with equal finality that, since the object of the historian "is to tell a story and leave philosophy to others," his aim had been "to get rid so far as possible of all preconceived notions and theories." Dunning stated the same idea in another way when he wrote, "The absorbing and relentless pursuit of the objective fact--of the thing that actually happened in exactly the form and manner of its happening, is. . . the typical function of the modern devotee of history."⁴¹

Both of these viewpoints have been to some extent discredited. The search for explanatory law has been discredited by the failure to find such a law and by the glaring falsification of history on the part of those who have sought to establish such a law.⁴² The search for the facts as they happened has been discredited by the relativists. Charles Beard, one of the leaders in this reaction and a past president of the American Historical Association wrote: "Owing to internal criticism and the movement of external events, the Ranke formula of history has been discarded and laid away in the museum of antiquities. It has ceased to satisfy the human spirit in its historical needs. Once more, historians recognize formally the obvious, long known informally, namely, that any written history inevitably reflects the thought of the author in his time and cultural setting."⁴³

As a result of these developments, we now have a situation in which it is the philosophers, rather than the historians who are arguing most strongly for the scientific status of historiography.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, it is a tenacious myth--hard for anyone to discard--that in writing history, one is trying, at least, to tell the truth. Many current examples could be cited in defense of this claim. Meyerhoff includes in his anthology articles by such influential American philosophers as A. O. Lovejoy, Morton White, and Ernest Nagel, each supporting the idea of historical objectivity. In an article entitled "Presupposition and Objectivity in History," Sidney Ratner argued that objectivity is just as possible in the social sciences as in the natural sciences. All the sciences are subject to the same hazards, but in the natural sciences, the scientists recognize their presuppositions and achieve objectivity by overcoming them. In this way they discover the truth--i.e., the "opinion fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate."⁴⁵ Ratner believes that natural scientists achieve objectivity by the "creation and perfection of techniques and instruments that enable him to correct the biases and errors he is liable to." So far from recognizing that scientific techniques and instruments only magnify the problem, Ratner insists that historians as well as physicists can "approximate more and more as time goes on to the scientist's ideal of certainly, exactitude, and universality."⁴⁶ The amazing thing is that the program Ratner suggests for achieving this "certainty, exactitude, and universality" includes (1) the use of the relative frequency theory of probability, (2) the fruitful employment of false hypotheses, and (3) a recognition that the results of scientific investigation are useful symbols of an artistic sort!

THE CASE FOR HISTORICAL RELATIVISM

By way of contrast, I would like to note the arguments put forth in opposition to the idea of scientific historiography, to point out that relativity entails skepticism, but that philosophical and even religious presuppositions cannot be avoided.

Arguments for the Relativistic View

Throughout the whole period of modern philosophy there can be traced a reaction against the notion of historical objectivity. This reaction has been most vocal and most influential in the twentieth century; but at the very beginning of modern philosophy, Descartes correctly observed that

. . . even the most accurate of histories, if they do not exactly misrepresent or exaggerate the value of things in order to render them more worthy of being read, at least omit in them all the circumstances which are basest and least notable; and from this fact it follows that what is retained is not portrayed as it really is.⁴⁷

In the eighteenth century, Rousseau represented, in many respects, the minority report of the French Enlightenment. His reputation as a rebel was established by his essay Discourse on the Arts and Sciences in which he argued that progress in the arts and sciences has actually contributed to the corruption and deterioration of mankind. Rousseau's discussion of history in the Emile strikingly anticipates the twentieth century historical subjectivism. He discusses the difficulties in the notion of historical causation, and in the following paragraph shows his appreciation of the most difficult problem of historiography--the problem of selection.

Moreover, the facts described in history never give an exact picture of what actually happened. They change form in the historian's head. They get moulded by his interests and take on the hue of his prejudices. Who can put the reader at the precise point where an event can be seen just as it took place? Ignorance or partisanship distorts everything. Without even altering a single feature a quite different face can be put on events by a broader or a narrower view of the relevant circumstances. How often a tree more or less, a rock to the right or the left, a cloud of dust blown up by the wind, have decided the outcome of a battle without anybody being aware of it! But that does not prevent the historian telling you the causes of defeat or victory with as much assurance as if he had been everywhere himself. In any case, what do the facts matter when the reason for them is unknown? And what lessons can I draw from an event when I am ignorant of the real cause of it? The historian gives me an explanation, but it is his own invention. And is not criticism itself, of which there is so much talk, only an art of guessing, the art of choosing among various lies the one most like the truth?⁴⁸

In the nineteenth century, the idea of scientific historiography was opposed by the development of historicism. The outstanding representative of this movement was Wilhelm Dilthey, who from 1882 to 1902 occupied Hegel's chair at the University of Berlin. Croce and Collingwood also take this position, and the subjectivism of Beard and Becker is a rather direct development of historicism. "The original root of the reaction was the idea that the method and aims of the historian are different from those of the scientist: the historian is interested in understanding the particular, the concrete, the unique, while the scientist is interested in understanding the general, the repetitive, the abstract."⁴⁹ History was regarded as distinct from the sciences and from philosophy--as an all-embracing autonomous discipline more akin to imaginative literature than to physics or philosophy. Dilthey's ambition was to construct a critique of historical reason after the model of Kant's Critiques, "i.e., an epistemology of history which would be a refutation of both speculative philosophy and scientific empiricism."⁵⁰ Meyerhoff lists as general features of historicism

(1) the denial of a "systematic" approach to history; (2) the repudiation of any single, unified interpretation of history; and (3) the positive assertions (a) that the basic concepts of history are change and particularity, (b) that the historian has a special way of explaining things by telling a story, and (c) that history is all-pervasive, that historical categories permeate all aspects of human life, including morality and philosophy.⁵¹

Dilthey's historicism is a major advance toward the irrationalism of the present century. All world-views are shown by the historical consciousness to be historically conditioned and therefore limited and relative.⁵² However, according to Dilthey, this is no cause for despair. All world-views, though incomplete, are true! This recognition is the key which finally frees men from religion, philosophy, science, etc. If some particular world-view "fills us with creativity, then we may quietly surrender. For truth is present in them all."⁵³

Some specific arguments advanced against objective historiography are:

1. In historical investigation, man is both subject and object. Therefore, the sort of detachment necessary for "objectivity" is a logical impossibility.
2. History as fact and history as knowledge of historical fact are inseparable.
3. The events of the past are single, non-repeatable, non-accessible. Our information about them is, at best, fragmentary. These problems are scarcely less troublesome for eyewitnesses than for historians a thousand years removed.
4. Exhaustive chronology is impossible; if it were possible, the result would be unintelligible, but anything less cannot be accurate.
5. It is impossible for the historian to avoid value judgments since, e.g., moral categories are deeply imbedded in the very language used to write history.
6. Our picture of the past is conditioned by present experience, at least by furnishing the imagery for the picture and by establishing limits as to what will be believed.
7. History involves rational actions which must be mentally re-enacted to be understood.
8. Above all else, all historical writing involves selection, and principles of selection are not empirically derived from the data of history--they are brought to the task by the historian and can only be justified in terms of a general philosophy.

Many of these arguments are incorporated in a paper by Carl Becker, read at the 41st annual meeting of the American Historical Association, in December, 1926. The paper, "What are Historical Facts?" is one of the finest statements of the case against scientific historiography.⁵⁴

In this paper Becker asks (1) What is the historical fact? (2) Where is the historical fact? and (3) When is the historical fact?

1. What is the historical fact? A fact of the sort historians deal with (e.g., in 49 B.C., Caesar crossed the Rubicon) is, in the first place a generalization. Thousands of lesser facts comprise the event covered by the generalization. Furthermore, it is a symbol. Apart from the myriad connections with Roman history and world history the "fact" of Caesar's crossing a river would certainly not constitute history. Then too, the historical fact is an affirmation, not an event. Historians are not concerned with Caesar's crossing of the river but with the affirmation: "Caesar crossed the river." Therefore, "the historical fact is not the past event, but a symbol which enables us to recreate it imaginatively."

2. Where is the historical fact? "The historical fact is in someone's mind or it is nowhere." The event of Lincoln's assassination on April 14, 1865 does not now exist as event. What does exist is the memory of the event, and this is the historian's material. "It is the persisting historical fact, rather than the ephemeral event, which makes a difference to us now; and the historical fact makes a difference only because it is, and so far as it is, in human minds."

3. When is the historical fact? Obviously, it is a part of the present. But that in itself is problematic since the present is indefinable. It is continually passing into the past and the very consciousness that we call present awareness seems to be only a series of more vivid memories and anticipations.

From this analysis Becker draws a number of implications. Two are especially relevant to this study: (1) It is impossible for an historian to represent entirely any actual event, even the simplest. The affirmations he chooses to make about an event and the meaning he chooses to attach to it are determined by the purpose he has in mind. (2) No historian can eliminate the personal equation. Any picture of an historical event is determined by the event, but it is also determined by "our own present purposes, desires, prepossessions, and prejudices."

Relativism Entails Skepticism

Now, if objective historiography is impossible and if the historical consciousness reveals the relativity of every metaphysical and religious doctrine there seems to be little hope for the idea that historians tell a true story. Dilthey said that "the historical consciousness shatters the last chains that philosophy and natural sciences could not break."⁵⁵ But it is this sort of freedom that leads the existentialists to speak of anguish, anxiety, nausea, and the absurdity of human existence. With such results, freedom begins to look like a dubious blessing.

The conclusion is inescapable that a thoroughgoing relativism entails a thoroughgoing skepticism; but among the dreadful consequences of thoroughgoing skepticism is the fact that the theory is self-referential and therefore self-refuting. Skepticism is inherently contradictory, and if consistency be abandoned then not only is history a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing, but utter nihilism is inevitable. No meaning of any sort is

possible; communication itself breaks down, and with that human society and human existence as well. "Logic is an innate necessity, not an arbitrary convention that can be discarded at will."⁵⁶

In the same work cited above, Carl Becker has shown that human life is impossible apart from a certain amount of historical knowledge. If I suddenly found myself without any memory (the only vital sense in which historical knowledge is possible) "the result is that I don't know who I am, where I am, where to go, or what to do. . . my present would be unintelligible and my future meaningless."⁵⁷ Historical relativism, then, no less than historical objectivity, does not even allow within its own framework for human existence itself.

Inevitable Presuppositions

These observations lead to the conclusion that the historian's ideal of writing a true story must be defended at the presuppositional level if at all. The notion of uninterpreted historical "fact" cannot be defended.

Progress in empirical inquiry does not occur when minds that are freed of all prepossessions are exposed to the stimulus of fact in order that they may be led by some homing instinct to the truth. Facts do not announce their own existence, and, even if they did, they do not come labeled with their varying degrees of importance.⁵⁸

A striking illustration of this point may be seen in the case of Comte who so strongly urged the cause of objectivity but who himself interpreted history according to his law of three stages. "It was to this Law of the Three Stages, as it was called that Comte had recourse when he set out to make sense of the facts of history. History was intelligible, he believed, because in it we found the Law of the Three Stages writ large."⁵⁹

Primarily because of the problem of selection--a principle not derived from the data but imposed upon them--historian Charles Beard insisted that in writing history the historian performs an "act of faith," merely expressing his conviction that something true can be known about the movement of history, but this conviction is a subjective decision not an objective discovery. Beard confesses, therefore, that "the pallor of waning time, if not of death, rests upon the latest volume of history, fresh from the roaring press."⁶⁰

PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY UNDER THE POSTULATE OF REVELATION

In light of the foregoing discussion in which I have sought to point out the importance of at least some true historiography and the failure of philosophy to establish the same, it may not be though altogether unreasonable to suggest as an alternative presupposition the notion of an external validating source of authority in history--viz., verbal revelation. In so doing I do not deny the claim of the historians to have shown, on their presuppositions, the relativity of every

metaphysical and religious doctrine. I am not proposing a metaphysical or religious doctrine, I am suggesting rather a fundamental epistemological presupposition as an alternative to historical skepticism (and, incidentally, at the same time an alternative to religious, ethical, scientific, political, and other sorts of skepticism). It seems to me that the ancient human quest for certainty together with the equally ancient human failure to establish the same would recommend the postulate of revelation as a position worthy of serious consideration.

Religious Interpretations of History

Historically, most written histories have been in a broad sense, religious. As noted above, the ideal of scientific history apart from religious presuppositions, though introduced by Herodotus, is a modern development. But it is not clear that even the most outspoken advocates of scientific historiography have rendered themselves free of presuppositions--even religious ones. For example, in his very influential work, The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers, Carl Becker interpreted the whole naturalistic philosophy of the Enlightenment as an essentially religious phenomenon. He attempts to show that the preconceptions of eighteenth century thought were essentially the same as those of the thirteenth century. The Enlightenment philosophers destroyed the Heavenly City of Augustine only to rebuild it with more upto date materials. The religion of nature was substituted for Christianity. "Obviously, the disciples of Newtonian philosophy had not ceased to worship. They had only given another form and a new name to the object of worship: having denatured God, they deified nature."⁶¹ Becker lists as essential articles of the Enlightenment religion: (1) that man is not natively depraved, (2) that the end of life is life itself, the good life on earth instead of the beatific life after death, (3) that man is capable, guided solely by the light of reason and experience, of perfecting the good life on earth, and (4) that the first and essential condition of the good life on earth is the freeing of men's minds from the bonds of ignorance and superstition and of their bodies from the arbitrary oppression of the constituted authorities.⁶²

The philosophers called on posterity to exorcize the double illusion of the Christian paradise and the golden age of antiquity. For the love of God they substituted love of humanity; for the vicarious atonement the perfectability of man through his own efforts; and for the hope of immortality in another world the hope of living in the memory of future generations.⁶³

If this sort of analysis can be maintained--especially if the substitution of progress for providence be viewed as an expression of religious faith--then it is doubtful if any history has ever been written that is not "religious" in orientation. However, in recent historiography we have examples of much more explicit expressions of religious ideals. Toynbee, e.g., in the Study of History, at least in the last four volumes, anticipates a religious goal of history within history and this seems to furnish the guiding principle of the whole Study. In response to the question why civilizations rise and fall he gives the explicitly religious answer that the whole point of the process is to enable man to pass beyond the merely civilized state to a new order of society based on the establishment of a universal church.

Harvard sociologist, P. A. Sorokin, describes three kinds of cultures which he calls the Ideational, the Idealistic, and the Sensate. The Sensate (materialistic) culture which has gained predominance in western civilization has given man immense control over nature but has stripped him of self-control. The resultant crisis in morality will continue and intensify unless the Sensate culture is replaced by a more adequately based culture, and such a change would have to be a religious revolution.⁶⁴

However, religion as such is in no better position to support apodeictic historical knowledge than the various metaphysical and empirical schemes we have already found wanting. Hence, the sort of historical authority I am suggesting is that urged by Karl Lowith in Meaning in History. "Ultimate meaning cannot be attained by reason or be based on historical evidence. Only by revelation can God disclose to man what is his salvation, or ultimate meaning, and only by faith can man appropriate it."⁶⁵ This appeal to revelation is to be distinguished from a religious presupposition inasmuch as religion, like history is in need of a validating authority. Furthermore, I am not suggesting that the truth of the presupposition can be demonstrated--that is why it is a presupposition. I am only suggesting that the postulate of revelation be taken seriously as an alternative choice to the presupposition of naturalism (which, of course, cannot be proven either). At the same time the implications of alternative world-views may reasonably be taken as a justification for one's choice. Since the meaning of history, if such there be, is determined by the goal of history I suggest the goal as a point of comparison between the Christian presupposition of revelation and a materialistic determinism--I take it as granted that historiography is possible only if history is determined in some manner and that historiography as true story can never be reconciled with a theory of a promiscuously free human will.

Premillennialism as a Philosophy of History

The merit of the postulate of revelation as regards history is not that it enables one to construct an accurate history of England or to fix the immediate cause of the Civil War--this, of course, it does not do. The merit lies in the establishment of some true historiography and in the provision of a system of meaning with respect to the whole historical process. "Therefore, instead of depriving us of knowledge otherwise obtainable, this axiom saves us from ignorance."⁶⁶

Among the claims of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures, here indicated as a verbal revelation, with respect to history are:

1. That the historiography it includes is true.
2. That certain historical events have distinctive meaning in terms of a redemptive purpose of God and that all meaningful history derives its meaning from this redemptive purpose.
3. That God has a specific relationship with the historical process--especially, (a) that he completely controls the process, (b) that he will bring the process to its culmination, and (c) that he acts in history.⁶⁷

On the most consistent, normal interpretation of the here supposed revelation, history will culminate in a thousand year period during which the incarnate God himself will rule directly over a universal kingdom on earth. In Bk. XX, of the City of God, Augustine admits that he once held this view (in common with the majority of the church fathers) but that he came to see this position as "carnal," "shocking," and "surpassing the measure of credulity itself." Augustine's shift from premillennialism has dominated Roman Catholic theology ever since, and a correction of this position has been made by only a small group within protestantism. By this shift, Augustine removed the goal of history from the historical process thus effectively depriving history of its source of meaning. (Augustine also established the notion of free will in Christian theology and subordinated the remaining sovereignty of God to a sort of Platonic "good." These blunders explain in part why a satisfactory philosophy of history has never been worked out in detail by the Christian church.) The importance of the normal interpretation is that it locates the goal of history within history and thus affords meaning to the process.

The premillennial philosophy of history makes sense. It lays a Biblical and rational basis for a truly optimistic view of human history. Furthermore, rightly apprehended, it has practical effects. It says that life here and now, in spite of the tragedy of sin, is nevertheless something worth-while, and therefore all efforts to make it better are worth-while. All the true values of human life will be preserved and carried over into the coming kingdom; nothing worth-while will be lost.⁶⁸

Predestination or Pessimism

I would like to conclude this study with a section from Bertrand Russell's Mysticism and Logic in which he admits the purposelessness and meaninglessness of the world which science presents for our belief.

That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins--all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built.

.....

Brief and powerless is Man's life; on him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction,

omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way; for Man, condemned to-day to lose his dearest, tomorrow himself to pass through the gate of darkness, it remains only to cherish, ere yet the blow falls, the lofty thoughts that ennoble his little day. . . .⁶⁹

The theists's point cannot be proved; Russell's point cannot be proved; but the choice is inescapable. If there is any meaning in the historical process, and if the historian's goal of true historiography is to be realized, the process must be determined; the remaining choice, it seems to me, is between predestination and mechanism.⁷⁰

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7. See Dray, op. cit., chap. 5.
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70. I wish to express my appreciation for Prof. Gordon Clark whose work was more influential in the production of this study than is indicated by the documentation.