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HEGEL ON THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

W. H. WALSH

I. TEXTUAL.

Hegel first lectured on the history of philosophy in the winter of 1805-6 when he was a Privat-Dozent at Jena. He gave a course on the subject in each of the two winter semesters of his professorship at Heidelberg (1816-18), and took it up again soon after his transfer to Berlin. His first Berlin series on the history of philosophy was given in the summer of 1819, his first winter course there on the topic began in October 1820. From the autumn of 1823 he made a practice of lecturing on the history of philosophy in alternate years, and had just begun a fresh series when he died suddenly in November 1831.

Hegel's lectures on the history of philosophy were first edited by his pupil Carl Ludwig Michelet. In his preface, dated 28 April 1833, Michelet explained that in preparing the text he had at his disposal both material from Hegel's own hand and a number of sets of student's lecture notes, including one taken by himself. Hegel had left behind (1) a fully-written out manuscript from the Jena period; (2) a short summary of the history of philosophy, made at Heidelberg; (3) supplementary material for (1) and (2), in the form of marginal notes or notes, mostly scrappy, on separate sheets; (4) part of a manuscript covering the introduction, most of which was composed in the Berlin period and the rest at Heidelberg. "About a third" of the introduction as Michelet printed it represented what Hegel had written, as opposed to spoken. But he had clearly improvised a lot in his later years, and it was therefore necessary to eke out the manuscript material with lecture notes. Michelet mentioned three sets of notes, all taken in Berlin, which he had consulted, but gave no indication in his published text when he was relying on Hegel's own manuscripts and when having recourse to what his hearers had recorded.

Michelet's version of Hegel's lectures was republished in a corrected form as part of the collected edition of his works, issued by "a group of friends of the deceased", in 1840-42. It was from this text that the three-volume English translation, by Elizabeth Haldane and Frances Simson, was made. I shall

necessarily make considerable use of this translation in what follows, but must point out at once that the full authenticity of the text it translates is no longer admitted by modern Hegelian scholars. We owe this result to the work of Johannes Hoffmeister, who not only showed that Michelet had given himself as editor undue licence to alter, conflate, and transpose, but also produced, on the basis of a fresh survey of the source material, a new version of the lectures in which the different strata which Michelet had fused were clearly separated. Hoffmeister had a harder task than Michelet in so far as items (1), (2), and (3) mentioned above no longer survive, though (4) does (in fact as two separate manuscripts); against this he had a larger selection of lecture notes at his disposal. Moreover, he did not aim, as Michelet did, at producing the work Hegel himself might have written had he ever chosen to publish his lectures; his idea was to assemble the material in such a way that scholars could have the best possible chance to discover what Hegel was saying and thinking at various times. An English translation of Hoffmeister would be more repetitive, and indeed less of a real book, than the existing version of Michelet, and the chances are that we shall continue to make do with the latter. But we ought to check it against Hoffmeister before basing any conclusions of importance on it.¹

II. BACKGROUND AND GENRE OF HEGEL'S WORK

Hegel put out his thoughts on the history of philosophy against a background about which he was not quite candid. It was his practice to end the long introductory section of his lectures with some remarks about the sources and literature of the history of philosophy. His first point was that there is a difference between political history and the history of philosophy in regard to sources, for whereas the deeds about which the political historian writes are mediated to us through the reports of observers, the works of philosophers – their deeds, as it were – are in many cases available as original sources, without need of any intermediary. It followed that we are much less dependent on earlier historians in the field of history of philosophy than in some other branches of the subject. Hegel agrees that historians of philosophy have their uses:

Several schoolmen have left behind them works of sixteen, twenty-four and twenty-six folios, and hence we must in their case confine ourselves to the products of the researches of others, who have made extracts from them. Other works are rare, hard to obtain; extracts come into their own in this case too.

He implies again that the historian of philosophy has a job to do in inter-

¹ The facts given in the first two paragraphs are taken from Michelet's original preface, republished in Band XIII of Hegel's *Werke* (Berlin, 1840). The Haldane/Simson translation appeared in London, 1892-5. Hoffmeister's edition is entitled *System und Geschichte der Philosophie*, and came out in 1940.

preting philosophical texts, particularly those of philosophers of the ancient world who “stand at another stage of the Notion, and are on this account more difficult to comprehend”. But he suggests that few of his predecessors have done this job with any competence, and indeed the general picture he gives of his fellow-workers is far from flattering.

He used to mention five earlier historians of philosophy at this stage of his lectures. The first of these, Thomas Stanley, was put in as a curiosity: for Stanley the history of philosophy was the history of pagan thought, the place of philosophy in the modern world having been taken by Christianity. Stanley’s *History* first appeared in 1655. Next came J. J. Brucker, whose *Historia critica philosophiae* was published in Leipzig in 1742-44. Brucker had a strong influence on later eighteenth-century philosophers (Kant was especially dependent on him), but Hegel dismissed his work as a “long-winded compilation”, put out on principles which were completely unhistorical. Brucker could not distinguish what was in the original authorities from the construction he put upon it in the light of his own Wolffian philosophy. Similarly Dietrich Tiedemann, whose *Spirit of Speculative Philosophy* appeared between 1791 and 1797, was entirely lacking in talent for the subject he professed. Hegel complained that

He makes extracts from philosophical works, so long as they remain at the level of the understanding. But when he comes to the dialectical, the speculative, he gets mad, loses patience, breaks off and explains that it is mysticism and empty subtlety,

and concluded that

The whole work is a melancholy example of how a learned professor can occupy his whole life with the study of speculative philosophy, and yet have no idea of speculation.

Nor were Gottlieb Tennemann’s qualifications for embarking on the history of philosophy much greater, for all the length at which he wrote on the subject (twelve volumes of his *History* came out between 1798 and 1819, and it was even so incomplete). Hegel described his work as “formless” and said it was “composed as a whole in an extremely spiritless fashion.” Tennemann had entirely failed to understand some of the philosophers he had undertaken to expound, notably Aristotle, though he had fortunately quoted his references at length and so made his errors easily detectable. He also had the defect of professing to approach the history of philosophy without presupposing any philosophy of his own, when in fact the standpoint from which he wrote was evidently and consciously Kantian.

He praises philosophers, their work and their genius, and yet the end of the lay is that all of them will be pronounced to be wanting in that they have one defect, which is that they are not Kantians, have not yet undertaken a critical scrutiny of the source of knowledge, and not yet come to the conclusion that knowledge is impossible.

Only J. G. Buhle, author of a nine-volume *Textbook of the History of Philosophy* published at Göttingen between 1796 and 1804, got a good word from Hegel, and even here it was mainly for his extracts from rare works of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, from English and Scottish philosophers and from the works of Giordano Bruno, which were to be found in Göttingen. Buhle had “an acute head”, but even so the early parts of his work had “only slight value”.²

This sour commentary conceals both the extent to which studies in the history of philosophy had progressed in the period immediately before Hegel and the amount Hegel himself owed to his immediate predecessors. A modern reader who turns the pages of Hegel’s lectures will be struck at once by the detail into which the author enters at some points of his narrative; he may note with surprise that half a volume of the English translation is given over to Greek philosophy after Aristotle, or again may think it remarkable that Hegel should have known about relatively obscure writers like James Oswald and Adam Ferguson. The explanation is that he had seen the post-Aristotelian schools treated at length by his predecessors, and taken the names, and in some instances the accounts, of the Scottish philosophers from the handbooks. This is not to say, of course, that he lacked first-hand knowledge of the major philosophers: on the contrary, he had clearly studied the writers he valued – Plato, Aristotle and so on – deeply. But it seems evident, all the same, that the sort of treatment he offers of the history of philosophy presupposes a more conventional knowledge of the subject, and that Hegel was able to proceed as he did thanks to the fact that the foundations for such knowledge were now securely laid, by the despised Tennemann and others. Despite his own attempt to discount the parallel between political history and the history of philosophy, there is a sense in which Hegel as historian of philosophy is closely similar to Hegel as political historian: in both cases the standpoint he adopts is philosophical in the meaning given that term in the lectures on *Philosophy of History*. That is to say, he saw himself in each case as making sense of conclusions derived from a different sort of study, namely straightforward empirical history. And unless history in the ordinary sense had already existed, philosophical history would not have been possible.

Hegel himself might well have resisted this argument. He was convinced that persons who could not rise above the standpoint of the understanding were incapable of appreciating the writing of a Plato or a Spinoza, and so could not give an accurate account of their thoughts even at the empirical level. To bring philosophy to bear on its history was hence no mere luxury, but a positive necessity. Nor must we share Hegel’s own philosophical views

² Besides the five authors mentioned, Hegel named various compendia on the history of philosophy. Of the author of one of these, T. A. Rixner, he said: “He is a man of spirit. His work is the most recent and the best both in respect of literary wealth and in respect of thought, though it does not satisfy all the requirements of a history of philosophy.” Nevertheless, it was “most worth recommending”.

to see that there are points at which he showed historical insight superior to that of most of his contemporaries: over the condemnation of Socrates, for instance, or again in discerning the connection between Plato's ideal city and the political conditions of the Greek world. But the fact that Hegel could have made a good straightforward historian must not be used to obscure the equally plain fact that this was not his main role in the lectures on the history of philosophy. There are literary critics who either are or could be good scholars, but this does not mean that criticism and scholarship are one. And just as a critic can get nowhere unless he can invoke the results of scholarship, so Hegel would have been helpless without the results of his predecessors in the field of the history of philosophy. Had they not written, he might have conceived the idea of a philosophical treatment of the history of philosophy, but it is doubtful whether he could have carried it out in detail.

III. PHILOSOPHY AND ITS HISTORY

We must now ask what Hegel meant by a philosophical treatment of the history of philosophy. In Michelet's version of the lectures he begins as follows:

The thought that may first occur to us in the history of philosophy is that the subject itself contains an inner contradiction. For philosophy aims at understanding what is unchangeable, eternal, in and for itself; its end is truth. But history tells us of that which has at one time existed, at another time has vanished, having been expelled by something else. Truth is eternal; it does not fall within the sphere of the transient, and has no history. But if it has a history, and as this history is only the representation of past forms of knowledge, the truth is not to be found in it, for the truth cannot be what has passed away.

The dilemma posed in this passage, which is not peculiar to Hegelians, could be rephrased as follows. If there is such a thing as philosophical knowledge, the history of philosophy is external to philosophy proper, for what is known is true for all time. A history of philosophy must be, on these terms, either a history of the mistakes made by previous philosophers or a history of externals, a history of the lives of particular philosophers and of the way in which their doctrines won acceptance or met with opposition. Alternatively, if we try to argue that the connection between philosophy and its history is more intimate than that, we seem to rule out the possibility of genuine philosophical knowledge, and make the subject consist in the advocacy of unsubstantiated opinions.

Hegel was quite clear that to adopt the second of these alternatives would be disastrous.

Philosophy is the objective science of truth, it is science of necessity, conceiving knowledge, and neither opinion nor the spinning out of opinions.

If the history of philosophy were nothing more than the narration of a number of opinions which have been held on philosophical topics (which is how most people have taken it, according to Hegel), the proper way to characterize such a history would be as "a display of senseless follies, or at least of errors made by men engrossed in thought and mere ideas".

If the history of philosophy merely represented various opinions in array, whether they be of God or of natural and spiritual things existent, it would be a most superfluous and tiresome science. . . . What can be more useless than to learn a string of bald opinions, and what more unimportant?

Any pretension that a study of that sort could stimulate thought or occasion valuable reflection would be baseless, for if philosophy can produce nothing better than opinions there will be no reason to prefer any one philosophy to another.

We do not have to be Hegelians to appreciate the force of these arguments, and indeed can well imagine them being put forward by writers of very different philosophical convictions, for example by Logical Positivists. But non-Hegelian believers in the possibility of philosophical knowledge are for the most part prepared to accept the consequences of the first alternative outlined above; they are ready, that is to say, to admit that philosophy and its history are only externally connected. They see nothing odd in the suggestion that the history of philosophy, if not quite a "display of senseless follies", is in the main a record of error, saved from tedium only by the fact that it also contains a certain amount of approximation to the truth. And they think that the activity of being a good philosopher is, in principle, quite separable from that of knowing about the history of thought, though few of them would go so far as to discount *all* knowledge of the history of their subject. In extreme cases, however, the attitude of the persons I have in mind is identical with that of most mathematicians or chemists to the histories of their respective subjects: they may or may not know something about it, but they do not see why they have to do so. But Hegel's attitude to the history of philosophy was clearly very different from this. The question we must now ask is how he contrived to avoid what seem to be the plain consequences of his own claim to be in possession of philosophical truth.

The answer to this question is closely bound up with Hegel's distinctive conception of the nature of philosophical thought. One of his most commonly repeated ideas was that thinking is not a mechanical process but an activity carried out by a living being and therefore characterisable in terms appropriate to what is alive. Thought is not static but dynamic; movement and development are intrinsic to its nature. This seemingly innocent proposition, to which a modern linguistic philosopher might assent in a charitable moment, carried with it far-reaching consequences for Hegel. One was that thinking cannot, except in artificial circumstances (when we move out of the sphere of natural languages, for example), be a purely formal activity, for

formal operations are repeated unchanged from one context to another and therefore, in Hegel's picturesque terminology, belong to "the realm of the dead", not that of life. A second was that thought at its best cannot be taken as being *about* an object which is alien to itself. However much our thinking may seem to be directed on data which are externally presented, our aim is always to grasp what is rational in such material, to find intelligibility in it and so cancel its foreign character. All reflection is in the end reflection on self, all understanding a species of self-comprehension. Closely connected with this view is a further deduction, that the movement and development which are native to thought are induced from within. We find ourselves abandoning philosophical theories not because they fail to accord with supposedly independent fact, but because they do not satisfy an ideal which is present in thought itself. We are not only endowed with the passion for truth; we also have at once a sure eye for what pretends to be true but cannot make good its pretensions and an unflinching tendency, once our hopes are disappointed, to press on with the search by finding a new position which embodies the virtues of the rejected view while steering clear of its vices.

One further feature of the situation as Hegel saw it remains to be mentioned. Not only is it the case that the human mind is fired by an untiring ambition for philosophical truth, in the course of satisfying which it passes through many stages of comparative contentment; it must also be recognised that each of these stages has to be passed through if we are to make any progress towards philosophical understanding. For though every such position is doomed to be negated, it does not follow that it will henceforth be dismissed as totally worthless. On the contrary, the later positions in the series are built on the earlier and could not be what they are apart from these; they contain all that their predecessors sought to establish, though they contain it in an altered form. That philosophical theories are connected in this way, and hence that every such theory has its distinctive contribution to make to final truth, Hegel tried to demonstrate in the course of his writings on logic. What he added in the lectures with which we are concerned was that the development whose logical articulation had been traced in his systematic works could also be seen writ large in the history of philosophical thought. The series of positions through which anyone must pass who proceeded from the most primitive of philosophical ideas to the deepest and most satisfying was identical with the series of positions which philosophers had developed historically, and the history of philosophy made sense for that reason.

This theory had some interesting corollaries. One was that no philosophy, however seemingly misguided, had been put forward in vain: every philosophy had its contribution to make at the time it was formulated. Since every philosophy corresponds to a moment in the self-development of spirit, and each such moment is a necessary part of the whole process, no philosophy

can be dismissed as utterly uninformative. Hegel had a low opinion of some types of philosophical theory – he clearly thought very little of most forms of empiricism, for instance – but this did not lead him to leave them out of his history, though it did mean that he dealt with them in somewhat summary fashion, omitting the detail which their exponents thought important. Even empiricists had something to say of importance; their mistake, like that of more reputable philosophers, lay in thinking that what they had to say was the last word on the subject. Another corollary was that every philosophy belonged to its particular time and accordingly could not be revived in its original form. To demand that we should all become Platonists or Aristotelians was, in Hegel's view, the height of folly, for Plato and Aristotle had philosophized in conditions markedly different from those which confront us, and hence had not even raised some questions which we regard as of the greatest importance. But Hegel did not conclude from this, as might at first be expected, that past philosophical systems were of purely historical interest. He argued on the contrary that, in studying past philosophers, we were philosophizing in the fullest sense of the term, since the principles embodied in the writings of major philosophers were involved in the self-articulation of reason. Hence, as he put it:

We must not regard the history of philosophy as dealing with the past, even though it is history. The scientific products of reason form the content of this history, and these are not past. What is obtained in this field of labour is the true, and, as such, the eternal; it is not what exists now, and not then; it is true not only today or tomorrow, but beyond all time, and in so far as it is in time, it is true always and for every time.

IV. COMMENTS ON HEGEL'S POSITION

It would obviously be absurd in an essay of this length to attempt any direct criticism of a theory as far-reaching as this. Instead, I shall confine myself to pointing out that, even on his own terms, Hegel does not solve the problem mentioned above, and shall then go on to discuss the effect his theory had on his detailed treatment of the history of philosophy.

The problem faced by Hegel was that philosophizing and occupying oneself with the history of philosophy are on the face of it wholly separate activities. Philosophy concerns itself with what is tenable, the history of philosophy with what views have actually been held. Hegel's reply is that the history of philosophy is not a matter of the mere retailing of historically expressed opinions; in dealing with the thoughts of past philosophers we are not treating those thoughts as past, but rethinking them as a stage in the solution of our own problems. To engage in the history of philosophy is thus to philosophize. But even if this argument is granted the history of philosophy seems to remain an optional extra for the philosopher. We can see this if we

ask the question: which comes first, philosophy or the history of philosophy? Hegel's official answer to this is that philosophy comes first, since "in order to obtain a knowledge of its progress as the development of the Idea in the empirical, external form in which philosophy appears in history, a corresponding knowledge of the Idea is absolutely essential". We could not begin to write the history of philosophy unless we knew what to look for in the works of previous philosophers, and we could not know what to look for without having independent philosophical knowledge. In principle there seems no reason on this account why a man of genius should not sit down and work out the stages in the progress of the Idea as it were from scratch, without benefit of historical knowledge. In practice Hegel treats such a possibility as unreal: any philosopher, in his view, will build, consciously or unconsciously, on the results of his predecessors, for he will philosophize in a concrete situation inherited from them. Yet even if this is true it does not follow that he will need, or benefit from, explicit historical knowledge of the background of his thought. Every painter paints in a concrete situation he has inherited from his predecessors, but we do not conclude that being learned about the history of painting is a necessary condition of being a good painter.

The question of the effect of Hegel's theory on his practice as an historian of philosophy is perhaps of more general interest. It will be obvious at once that he meant by the history of philosophy something more than an account of what philosophical views had been held and how one group of philosophers had influenced another. He meant the history of philosophy to be at least a critical account of these matters; an account, that is to say, which is not content to describe and connect but also aspires to assess. Now the question can be raised whether, in demanding that the historian of philosophy should thus not be a mere reporter but a judge, Hegel was not cutting him off from history proper. And this question is the more worth looking at because Hegel's attitude on the point is shared to a substantial degree by many historians of philosophy whose outlook in other respects is very far from being Hegelian.

To proceed then to Hegel's own practice, we may note first that despite what he says about every philosophy arising in a particular historical context, his general procedure is to tell us little or nothing about such contexts. He does indeed notice that certain external conditions have to obtain if philosophy is to flourish at all: "philosophy commences in the west", as opposed to the Orient, because free speculation was impossible in a setting of oriental despotism. But this promising beginning is not followed up. For all his insistence on the connection between a prevalent philosophy and the spirit of a time generally, Hegel did almost nothing to explicate the non-philosophical background to philosophical movements, whether intellectual or social. The relation between philosophical developments and events like the Refor-

mation and the rise of modern science is noticed by him only in the most perfunctory way, and the non-philosophical interests of individual philosophers are scarcely so much as mentioned. Biographical details of particular writers are of course given, but they seem to be put in for no philosophical purpose, and indeed Hegel implies that they have no proper relevance to the history of philosophy as he conceives it.

The events and actions of this history [he told his hearers at the very beginning of his lectures] are such that personality and individuality do not enter to any large degree into its content and matter. . . . In philosophy, the less deserts and merits are accorded to the particular individual, the better is the history; and the more it deals with thought as free, with the universal character of man as man, the more this thought, which is devoid of special characteristic, is itself shown to be the producing subject.

The lesson would appear to be that philosophical thoughts are timeless, like mathematical thoughts. But if they are, what conceivable interest can their history have?

Nor is this all. In deciding on the amount of space to assign to different philosophical systems and in discussing their relationships Hegel is guided by philosophical and not by historical considerations. The question he asks himself, as regards the first, is not whether a philosopher's work had a profound influence or provoked widespread repercussions, but whether it embodied a significant idea or principle, significance here being measured by reference to philosophical doctrine. This alone will explain how he could assign nearly 30 pages (in the English translation) to the philosophy of Jakob Boehme, whose influence on European thought generally was minimal in Hegel's time, and only 18 pages to Locke, whose ideas had dominated the whole eighteenth century. Boehme, in his view, had positive philosophical thoughts, presented no doubt in a less than coherent fashion but all the same of absorbing interest, whereas Locke represented a negative step on the road to philosophical truth, a step which had to be taken at the time but about which no-one with a genuine passion for speculation could be enthusiastic. Similarly Spinoza, who was reviled but not read in the century following his death, was treated by Hegel at greater length than Descartes: the explanation again is that Spinoza was nearer the truth, in Hegel's view. As for the connections between philosophical systems, Hegel was interested in one question only, namely, how the ideas which underlie the one system stand in logical relation to those which underlie another. The fact that philosophical principles give rise to one another dialectically in the sphere of philosophical logic is the only fact on which the historian of philosophy need fasten here. But once again we wonder whether, if this is so, he deserves to be called an historian at all.³

³ It is ironical that later historians of philosophy, using Hegel's principle, have assumed that because Hegel's philosophy has certain logical relationships to the philos-

The evident conclusion to draw from all this is that, whatever else it was, Hegel's history of philosophy was not very good history. Indeed, it was scarcely history at all, despite its author's historical talents. For though the familiar charge that Hegelian history is *a priori* cannot be maintained in this instance (or indeed in any other) in its extreme form, it has sufficient substance to cause Hegelians severe disquiet. The doctrines of the Hegelian logic afford only a clue to the details of philosophical history: empirical research is necessary if we are to identify particular embodiments of the Idea. The fact remains, even so, that the order of appearance of philosophies is taken by Hegel as fixed by purely logical considerations: we know in advance of experience that, say, a system like Locke's will follow a system like Descartes', though we have to look at the facts to discover how in fact this 'ideal' relationship got phenomenal expression. The scope for genuine historical investigation is in these circumstances extremely limited. And Hegel shows in his treatment of individual philosophers that his historical curiosity is by no means unbounded. Once he has identified Locke as the embodiment of empiricism and sensationalism, for instance, he has discovered about him everything that an Hegelian historian of philosophy would ever need to discover.

V. IN DEFENSE OF HEGEL

At this point I want to consider some arguments that could be advanced in Hegel's defense. Probably no-one would want to support his views precisely as they stand, yet it needs comparatively little reflection to see that his conception of the history of philosophy is not entirely idiosyncratic. Three points at least might be made in his favor: that other historians of philosophy have very much the same notion of their task as he has; that the kind of treatment he recommends for the history of philosophy has its parallels in the history of the arts and the sciences generally; finally, that there is a sense in which all history, whatever its particular object, has to assess as well as describe and explain, with the result that Hegel's demand that the historian of philosophy be a judge and not merely a chronicler is not so extravagant after all. These three points in effect constitute a defense in depth, and I shall accordingly start by examining the outermost fortifications.

ophies of Kant and Fichte, he must have formed his views in conscious opposition to theirs. Dilthey and others showed that Hegel did arrive at his mature position by thinking about the views of Kant, but that these were not, as they ought to have been on the theory, those expressed in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, but rather some of his ideas in ethics and philosophy of religion. See Hegel's *Early Theological Writings*, transl. T. M. Knox (Chicago, 1948), and the chapter on the origins of Hegelianism in my book *Metaphysics* (London, 1963).

I have myself argued elsewhere⁴ that it is the business of historians to assess as well as describe. I had two things in mind in my argument. One was that there is something wrong with the common idea that the true historian approaches his facts entirely without preconceptions and surrenders himself completely to their spell. The true historian, on my account, makes judgments of intrinsic importance as well as judgments about what brought about what; the latter are, or ought to be, wholly determined by the evidence, but the former themselves determine, broadly, what evidence the historian shall take into account and what general sorts of question he shall ask about it. An example of such a judgment of intrinsic importance would be that what matters in history is the fate of the common man. My other point was that, in practice, we undertake enquiries into past ages less from disinterested curiosity than from the necessity to make some comparison between those ages and our own. The establishment of the precise course of events is all-important in this activity, just as it is in a court of law, but it is even so subsidiary to a further purpose. What we seek from the historian is a picture of the age or course of events under investigation, a picture which will in fact convey a judgment as well as information. Many historians offer us no more than the materials for such a picture, but I do not think this fact invalidates the case I have outlined.

Now it may seem that, if anything like this is accepted, Hegel's procedure in tackling the history of philosophy is vindicated. Hegel too was interested in making comparisons between past and present; his purpose was to pass judgments on previous philosophies, if not exactly on his own. But there are important differences in the two cases. Preconceptions of the kind I claimed to detect serve only to indicate an area for empirical investigation: they reflect, or constitute, a point of view, and our point of view determines *how* we see things but not *what* we see. Hegel's preconceptions were evidently far more powerful, since they did not merely tell him where to look, but also determined to a significant degree what he would find when he looked. Nor does my account rule out historical investigations into the causal relationships of particular happenings, which remain as important, and incidentally as empirical, on this view as on any other. But Hegel, as we saw, was virtually indifferent to such investigations in writing the history of philosophy; he was preoccupied with logical relationships and dismissed causal connections as mere reflections of these. So far as he was concerned, the historian of philosophy could dispense with the notion of what is instrumentally important: his mastery of philosophical doctrine would give him all the insight into connecting links he needed.

I feel clear that these very general considerations will not suffice to defend

⁴ In "The Limits of Scientific History", *Historical Studies*, ed. James Hogan, III (1961), 45-57, and in "Historical Causation", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, N.S. LXIII (1962-63), 217-36.

Hegel. But other points can be advanced in his favor. A prominent feature of his history, as we saw, was the extent to which he concentrated on what he regarded as significant, as opposed to causally efficacious. Now it is characteristic of histories of the arts and the sciences generally to do just this. We expect a history of literature, for example, to treat of writers who are genuinely worth while, and we should not be satisfied to have such a writer excluded on the ground that he exercised little or no influence. The reason for this procedure is not far to seek. We could not begin to compose a history of literature without having some idea of what it is to be a successful or effective poet, dramatist, or novelist: normative terms operate in our thinking in this field from the first. And in occupying ourselves with past achievements we quite naturally, in these circumstances, lose sight of purely historical questions and transfer our attention to the task of determining what measures up to our standards and what does not. Like Hegel, we cease to think of the productions of which we treat as existing in the past: as works of literature they claim to be valid for all time.

Doubtless this is much too crude an account. A literary critic is expected to have wide sympathies, and to learn from his study of past writers. His ideas on what constitutes great poetry, for example, will normally grow as his studies progress, and his judgment of individual writers will shift accordingly. Similarly we count it a virtue in an historian of philosophy not to be narrow in his philosophical likes and dislikes, but to show appreciation of a variety of philosophical styles and ways of arguing. But there is a limit beyond which a reasonable man could not be expected to carry this liberality, a limit set by presupposed ideas about what constitutes philosophical or literary competence generally. The rules by which we judge particular works in these and similar fields may be modified by experience, but they cannot be drawn exclusively from it.

To confirm these conclusions we need only turn to particular histories. Histories of philosophy, with some important exceptions which I shall discuss below, concentrate on what their authors consider to be philosophically significant; in this respect they continue the Hegelian tradition. It is this which explains, for instance, why Hobbes has a prominent part in most of our histories, despite the fact that he had no school and few followers at any time. We can see the same principle at work, in a singularly clear form, if we look at histories of philosophy composed by writers whose own philosophical views are now out of fashion, or at histories of philosophy composed by foreigners who belong to a different philosophical tradition from our own. I once had the task of reading through all the articles on the history of modern philosophy in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Those on the seventeenth century had been revised for the 14th edition in 1928; the rest were substantially the work of Robert Adamson in the 1880's. I found, not surprisingly, that Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel were treated at great length,

while Berkeley and Hume were dismissed in a relatively summary fashion. In recommending that the empiricists be given more space and the idealists less, I was not merely wanting to claim that the former were more influential and the latter less than Adamson's treatment might lead one to suppose; I was implying further that Adamson's estimates of intrinsic importance were mistaken. Similarly with foreign histories: we may find the same names as in our own manuals, but the allocation of space is apt to differ. And this is due to differences in philosophies, not to different estimates of the influence exerted by particular writers.

All this seems to me to show that there are aspects of Hegel's conception of the history of philosophy which are still very much alive. The practice of non-Hegelians in this field is not significantly different from the practice of Hegel. For both parties the object of the study of past philosophers is not merely to tell a story, but to make a series of assessments as well; with both the latter aim clearly takes precedence over the former. But though this puts Hegel in good company, I do not think it absolves him from the charge of being insufficiently historical in his history of philosophy. Moreover, it serves to bring out a certain tension in the history of philosophy as we have it today, a tension which can be found in the work of many of its most successful exponents. I shall not discuss the first point further, but will try to elaborate the second by way of conclusion.

VI. THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY AND THE HISTORY OF IDEAS

Suppose that someone sets himself to write a history of religious beliefs, or a portion of that history. We shall certainly expect him, among other things, to treat such beliefs from the point of view of those who held them. We shall look, that is to say, for an articulation of the doctrines involved, and for an account of the grounds on which they commended themselves. But we shall want, I think, to be told a great deal more. Even if it is agreed that the externals of religious belief, the organization of the believers and the ceremonies of their worship, fall outside the subject proper, we shall still require to be informed about the circumstances in which particular beliefs caught on, the personalities who put them over, the obstacles encountered in their propagation, the influence which they had on rival systems, and which rival systems had on them. We shall be interested, that is to say, in religious beliefs both as doctrines which claim to be rationally tenable and, if I may put it so, as objective phenomena.⁵

⁵ It is perhaps worth noting that this attitude to religious beliefs is comparatively new; earlier and less sceptical generations, to whom Christianity was evidently the true religion, would not have taken it. Hence (in part at least) the traditional dichotomy between secular and sacred history. Hegel himself remarks on the similarity of religion to philosophy in this respect.

The history of religious beliefs, so treated, forms part of the general history of ideas. I have already tried to make clear that Hegel and most of his successors have a very different view of the history of philosophy. For them this subject is of its nature part of philosophy itself: its aim is not to discover facts, but to pronounce on truth and falsehood. Hence the question of the historical circumstances in which philosophical doctrines originated, like that of the personalities of those who put them forward, is taken as extraneous to the main enquiry. A commentator may have views on the one question or the other, but the chances are that he will not think that he needs to have such views. On the contrary, he is likely to agree with Professor Price when, in discussing "the spirit in which Hume's theory of knowledge ought to be studied", he wrote:

My remarks are addressed to those who write about him as philosophers, not as mere historians of philosophical literature: to those who ask what his statements mean, and whether they are true or false, and what consequences they entail. I have nothing to say, here or elsewhere, to those who inquire into the historical genesis of his opinions.⁶

The question we naturally want to ask here is how absolute is the distinction between studying Hume as a philosopher and studying him as a "mere historian of philosophical literature". Whatever the answer, it seems clear that it is less absolute than Price suggests. To find out what Hume meant, and thus to be in position to pronounce on truth or falsity, we require to take account of the precise questions he asked himself; and to do this we must reconstruct the situation in which he philosophized, which means knowing about the books which excited him, being familiar with his extra-philosophical interests, taking account of factors in the intellectual atmosphere of the time which may have made some arguments appear congenial to him and others uncongenial, and so on. That enquiries of this sort can be significant philosophically as well as historically is most obvious in the case of the ancient philosophers, where questions about meaning are plainly of central importance just because of their difficulty; but the same is true of modern philosophers too. Our estimate of Hume himself has undoubtedly been affected in recent years by the historical studies of such scholars as Kemp Smith and Hendel, who argued incontrovertibly that the traditional picture of him as the last and greatest of the British empiricists corresponded only partially to his achievement. The work of Dilthey, Haering, and Hyppolite has not only provided much historical information about Hegel's early intellectual life; it has also enabled us to see his philosophy in a new light and has thus made possible a new estimate of its philosophical value. In a less startling way Gilson's studies in the medieval background to Descartes' philosophy put some interpretations of that philosophy out of court; thanks to them, we

⁶ H. H. Price, *Hume's Theory of the External World* (Oxford, 1940), 3.

now have clearer ideas of what Descartes himself meant to convey, and so are in a better position to say whether what he said was true.

As a result of the work of such writers, the history of philosophy has become more genuinely historical in the course of the present century. And it seems clear that this tendency will not be reversed. Even analytic philosophers, whose attitude to the history of philosophy is one of indifference where it is not one of hostility, have realized by now that the stimulus to philosophical thinking usually comes from outside philosophy; to enquire into the extra-philosophical interests of philosophical writers no longer seems to them irrelevant. As for metaphysicians, it became clear long ago that the explicit reasons they give for their conclusions are, despite their own claims, quite inadequate to ground them; to make a proper estimate of a metaphysical system we need not only to take account of the reasons put forward by its supporters, but also to grasp the central insight on which the whole system rests. Information about the background of the metaphysician's thinking is vital in a situation like this. And the Hegelian advice to treat him as an embodiment of pure spirit is, in fact, the reverse of helpful.

I do not mean these remarks to suggest that I think the history of philosophy is collapsing into the history of ideas (which, incidentally, also thinks of ideas as having grounds), still less that it ought to do so. The main interest of philosophers in past systems is bound to be in their tenability, and the historical enquiries I have mentioned will without doubt remain ancillary in their status. But the results of recent scholarship have been sufficiently impressive to create a certain tension, if not quite a positive incoherence, in our conception of the history of philosophy: the pull of genuine history is much greater than it was, the plausibility of the Hegelian view that this can be regarded as a purely philosophical activity much less. And of course it is always possible that a day will come when someone who is not a philosopher will write the history of philosophy in the way in which I suggested at the beginning of this section we might write the history of religious beliefs. The result might not be interesting to philosophers, but that is not to say that it would not be interesting to the world.

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