

PART IV. SCIENTIFIC HISTORY

§ 1. England		134
(i) Bradley	•	134
(ii) Bradley's Successors	•	142
(iii) Late Nineteenth-century Historiography	•	143
(iv) Bury	•	147
(v) Oakeshott	•	151
(vi) Toynbee	•	159
§ 2. Germany		165
(i) Windelband	•	165
(ii) Rickert	•	168
(iii) Simmel	•	170
(iv) Dilthey	•	171
(v) Meyer	•	176
(vi) Spengler	•	181
§ 3. France		183
(i) Ravaisson's Spiritualism	•	183
(ii) Lachelier's Idealism	•	185
(iii) Bergson's Evolutionism	•	187
(iv) Modern French Historiography	•	189
§ 4. Italy		190
(i) Croce's Essay of 1893	•	190
(ii) Croce's Second Position: the <i>Logica</i>	•	194
(iii) History and Philosophy	•	196
(iv) History and Nature	•	197
(v) Croce's Final Position: the Autonomy of History	•	201
PART V. EPILEGOMENA		
§ 1. Human Nature and Human History	•	205
§ 2. The Historical Imagination	•	231
§ 3. Historical Evidence	•	249
§ 4. History as Re-enactment of Past Experience	•	282
§ 5. The Subject-matter of History	•	302
§ 6. History and Freedom	•	315
§ 7. Progress as created by Historical Thinking	•	321
INDEX	•	335

INTRODUCTION

§ 1. *The philosophy of history*

THIS book is an essay in the philosophy of history. The name 'philosophy of history' was invented in the eighteenth century by Voltaire, who meant by it no more than critical or scientific history, a type of historical thinking in which the historian made up his mind for himself instead of repeating whatever stories he found in old books. The same name was used by Hegel and other writers at the end of the eighteenth century; but they gave it a different sense and regarded it as meaning simply universal or world history. A third use of the phrase is found in several nineteenth-century positivists for whom the philosophy of history was the discovery of general laws governing the course of the events which it was history's business to recount.

The tasks imposed on the 'philosophy' of history by Voltaire and Hegel could be discharged only by history itself, while the positivists were attempting to make out of history, not a philosophy, but an empirical science, like meteorology. In each of these instances, it was a conception of philosophy which governed the conception of the philosophy of history: for Voltaire, philosophy meant independent and critical thinking; for Hegel, it meant thinking about the world as a whole; for nineteenth-century positivism, it meant the discovery of uniform laws.

My use of the term 'philosophy of history' differs from all of these, and in order to explain what I understand by it I will first say something of my conception of philosophy.

Philosophy is reflective. The philosophizing mind never simply thinks about an object, it always, while thinking about any object, thinks also about its own thought about that object. Philosophy may thus be called thought of the second degree, thought about thought. For example, to discover the distance of the earth from the sun is a task for thought of the first degree, in this case for astronomy; to discover what it is exactly that we are doing when we discover the distance of the earth from the sun is a task for thought of the second degree, in this instance for logic or the theory of science.

This is not to say that philosophy is the science of mind, or

R. S. Wood
Collingswood
The Idea of
History
DUP
1946

psychology. Psychology is thought of the first degree; it treats mind in just the same way in which biology treats life. It does not deal with the relation between thought and its object, it deals directly with thought as something quite separate from its object, something that simply happens in the world, as a special kind of phenomenon, one that can be discussed by itself. Philosophy is never concerned with thought by itself; it is always concerned with its relation to its object, and is therefore concerned with the object just as much as with the thought.

This distinction between philosophy and psychology may be illustrated in the different attitudes adopted by these disciplines to historical thinking, which is a special kind of thinking concerned with a special kind of object, which we will provisionally define as the past. The psychologist may interest himself in historical thinking; he may analyse the peculiar kinds of mental event that go on in historians; he might for example argue that historians are people who build up a fantasy-world, like artists, because they are too neurotic to live effectively in the actual world, but, unlike artists, project this fantasy-world into the past because they connect the origin of their neuroses with past events in their own childhood and always go back and back to the past in a vain attempt to disentangle these neuroses. This analysis might go into further detail, and show how the historian's interest in a commanding figure such as Julius Caesar expresses his childish attitude to his father, and so on. I do not suggest that such analysis is a waste of time. I only describe a typical case of it in order to point out that it concentrates its attention exclusively on the subjective term in the original subject-object relation. It attends to the historian's thought, not to its object the past. The whole psychological analysis of historical thought would be exactly the same if there were no such thing as the past at all, if Julius Caesar were an imaginary character, and if history were not knowledge but pure fancy.

For the philosopher, the fact demanding attention is neither the past by itself, as it is for the historian, nor the historian's thought about it by itself, as it is for the psychologist, but the two things in their mutual relation. Thought in its relation to its object is not mere thought but knowledge; thus, what is for psychology the theory of mere thought, of mental events in abstraction from any object, is for philosophy the theory of

knowledge. Where the psychologist asks himself: How do historians think? the philosopher asks himself: How do historians know? How do they come to apprehend the past? Conversely, it is the historian's business, not the philosopher's, to apprehend the past as a thing in itself, to say for example that so many years ago such-and-such events actually happened. The philosopher is concerned with these events not as things in themselves but as things known to the historian, and to ask, not what kind of events they were and when and where they took place, but what it is about them that makes it possible for historians to know them.

Thus the philosopher has to think about the historian's mind, but in doing so he is not duplicating the work of the psychologist, for to him the historian's thought is not a complex of mental phenomena but a system of knowledge. He also thinks about the past, but not in such a way as to duplicate the work of the historian: for the past, to him, is not a series of events but a system of things known. One might put this by saying that the philosopher, in so far as he thinks about the subjective side of history, is an epistemologist, and so far as he thinks about the objective side a metaphysician; but that way of putting it would be dangerous as conveying a suggestion that the epistemological and metaphysical parts of his work can be treated separately, and this would be a mistake. Philosophy cannot separate the study of knowing from the study of what is known. This impossibility follows directly from the idea of philosophy as thought of the second degree.

If this is the general character of philosophical thinking, what do I mean when I qualify the term 'philosophy' by adding, 'of history'? In what sense is there a special philosophy of history different from philosophy in general and from the philosophy of anything else?

It is generally, though somewhat precariously, agreed that there are distinctions within the body of philosophy. Most people distinguish logic or the theory of knowledge from ethics or the theory of action; although most of those who make the distinction would also agree that knowing is in some sense a kind of action, and that action as it is studied by ethics is (or at least involves) certain kinds of knowing. The thought which the logician studies is a thought which aims at the discovery of

truth, and is thus an example of activity directed towards an end, and these are ethical conceptions. The action which the moral philosopher studies is an action based on knowledge or belief as to what is right or wrong, and knowledge or belief is an epistemological conception. Thus logic and ethics are connected and indeed inseparable, although they are distinct. If there is a philosophy of history, it will be no less intimately connected with the other special philosophical sciences than these two are connected with each other.

We have then to ask why the philosophy of history should be a subject of special study, instead of being merged in a general theory of knowledge. Throughout the course of European civilization people have in some degree thought historically; but we seldom reflect on the activities which we perform quite easily. It is only the difficulties which we encounter that force upon us a consciousness of our own efforts to overcome them. Thus the subject-matter of philosophy... as the organized and scientific development of self-consciousness, depends from time to time on the special problems in which, at any given time, men find special difficulties. To look at the topics specially prominent in the philosophy of any given people at any given period of their history is to find an indication of the special problems which they feel to be calling forth the whole energies of their minds. The peripheral or subsidiary topics will reveal the things about which they feel no special difficulty.

Now, our philosophical tradition goes back in a continuous line to sixth-century Greece, and at that time the special problem of thought was the task of laying the foundations of mathematics. Greek philosophy therefore placed mathematics in the centre of its picture, and when it discussed the theory of knowledge it understood by it first and foremost the theory of mathematical knowledge.

Since then there have been, down to a century ago, two great constructive ages of European history. In the Middle Ages the central problems of thought were concerned with theology, and the problems of philosophy therefore arose out of reflection on theology and were concerned with the relations of God and man. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries the main effort of thought was concerned with laying the foundations of natural science, and philosophy took as its main theme the relation of

the human mind as subject to the natural world of things around it in space as object. All this time, of course, people were also thinking historically, but their historical thought was always of a comparatively simple or even rudimentary kind; it raised no problems which it did not find easy to solve, and was never forced to reflect upon itself. But in the eighteenth century people began thinking critically about history, as they had already learnt to think critically about the external world, because history began to be regarded as a special form of thought, not quite like mathematics or theology or science.

The result of this reflection was that a theory of knowledge proceeding on the assumption that mathematics or theology or science, or all three together, could exhaust the problems of knowledge in general, was no longer satisfactory. Historical thought has an object with peculiarities of its own. The past, consisting of particular events in space and time which are no longer happening, cannot be apprehended by mathematical thinking, because mathematical thinking apprehends objects that have no special location in space and time, and it is just that lack of peculiar spatio-temporal location that makes them knowable. Nor can the past be apprehended by theological thinking, because the object of that kind of thinking is a single infinite object, and historical events are finite and plural. Nor by scientific thinking, because the truths which science discovers are known to be true by being found through observation and experiment exemplified in what we actually perceive, whereas the past has vanished and our ideas about it can never be verified as we verify our scientific hypotheses. Theories of knowledge designed to account for mathematical and theological and scientific knowledge thus do not touch on the special problems of historical knowledge; and if they offer themselves as complete accounts of knowledge they actually imply that historical knowledge is impossible.

This did not matter so long as historical knowledge had not yet obtruded itself on the consciousness of philosophers by encountering special difficulties and devising a special technique to meet them. But when that happened, as it did, roughly speaking, in the nineteenth century, the situation was that current theories of knowledge were directed towards the special problems of science, and inherited a tradition based on the

study of mathematics and theology, whereas this new historical technique, growing up on all sides, was unaccounted for. A special inquiry was therefore needed whose task should be the study of this new problem or group of problems, the philosophical problems created by the existence of organized and systematized historical research. This new inquiry might justly claim the title philosophy of history, and it is to this inquiry that this book is a contribution.

Two stages are to be expected as the inquiry proceeds. First, the philosophy of history will have to be worked out, not, indeed, in a watertight compartment, for there are none in philosophy, but in a relatively isolated condition, regarded as a special study of a special problem. The problem requires special treatment just because the traditional philosophies do not deal with it, and it requires to be isolated because it is a general rule that what a philosophy does not assert it denies, so that the traditional philosophies carry with them the implication that historical knowledge is impossible. The philosophy of history has therefore to leave them alone until it can build up an independent demonstration of how history is possible.

The second stage will be to work out the connexions between this new branch of philosophy and the old traditional doctrines. Any addition to the body of philosophical ideas alters to some extent everything that was there already, and the establishment of a new philosophical science necessitates a revision of all the old ones. For example, the establishment of modern natural science, and of the philosophical theory produced by reflection upon it, reacted upon the established logic by producing widespread discontent with the syllogistic logic and substituting for it the new methodologies of Descartes and Bacon; the same thing reacted upon the theological metaphysics which the seventeenth century had inherited from the Middle Ages and produced the new conceptions of God which we find for example in Descartes and Spinoza. Spinoza's God is the God of medieval theology as revised in the light of seventeenth-century science. Thus, by the time of Spinoza, the philosophy of science was no longer a particular branch of philosophical investigation separate from the rest: it had permeated all the rest and produced a complete philosophy all conceived in a scientific spirit. In the present case this will mean a general overhauling of all philosophical

questions in the light of the results reached by the philosophy of history in the narrower sense, and this will produce a new philosophy which will be a philosophy of history in the wide sense, i.e., a complete philosophy conceived from an historical point of view.

Of these two stages, we must be content if this book represents the first. What I am attempting here is a philosophical inquiry into the nature of history regarded as a special type or form of knowledge with a special type of object, leaving aside, for the present, the further question how that inquiry will affect other departments of philosophical study.

§ 2. *History's nature, object, method, and value*

What history is, what it is about, how it proceeds, and what it is for, are questions which to some extent different people would answer in different ways. But in spite of differences there is a large measure of agreement between the answers. And this agreement becomes closer if the answers are subjected to scrutiny with a view to discarding those which proceed from unqualified witnesses. History, like theology or natural science, is a special form of thought. If that is so, questions about the nature, object, method, and value of this form of thought must be answered by persons having two qualifications.

First, they must have experience of that form of thought. They must be historians. In a sense we are all historians nowadays. All educated persons have gone through a process of education which has included a certain amount of historical thinking. But this does not qualify them to give an opinion about the nature, object, method, and value of historical thinking. For in the first place, the experience of historical thinking which they have thus acquired is probably very superficial; and the opinions based on it are therefore no better grounded than a man's opinion of the French people based on a single week-end visit to Paris. In the second place, experience of anything whatever gained through the ordinary educational channels, as well as being superficial, is invariably out of date. Experience of historical thinking, so gained, is modelled on text-books, and text-books always describe not what is now being thought by real live historians, but what was thought by real live historians at some time in the past when the raw material was being

created out of which the text-book has been put together. And it is not only the results of historical thought which are out of date by the time they get into the text-book. It is also the principles of historical thought: that is, the ideas as to the nature, object, method, and value of historical thinking. In the third place, and connected with this, there is a peculiar illusion incidental to all knowledge acquired in the way of education: the illusion of finality. When a student is *in statu pupillari* with respect to any subject whatever, he has to believe that things are settled because the text-books and his teachers regard them as settled. When he emerges from that state and goes on studying the subject for himself he finds that nothing is settled. The dogmatism which is an invariable mark of immaturity drops away from him. He looks at so-called facts with a new eye. He says to himself: 'My teacher and text-books told me that such and such was true; but is it true? What reasons had they for thinking it true, and were these reasons adequate?' On the other hand, if he emerges from the status of pupil without continuing to pursue the subject he never rids himself of this dogmatic attitude. And this makes him a person peculiarly unfitted to answer the questions I have mentioned. No one, for example, is likely to answer them worse than an Oxford philosopher who, having read Greats in his youth, was once a student of history and thinks that this youthful experience of historical thinking entitles him to say what history is, what it is about, how it proceeds, and what it is for.

The second qualification for answering these questions is that a man should not only have experience of historical thinking but should also have reflected upon that experience. He must be not only an historian but a philosopher; and in particular his philosophical thought must have included special attention to the problems of historical thought. Now it is possible to be a quite good historian (though not an historian of the highest order) without thus reflecting upon one's own historical thinking. It is even easier to be a quite good teacher of history (though not the very best kind of teacher) without such reflection. At the same time, it is important to remember that experience comes first, and reflection on that experience second. Even the least reflective historian has the first qualification. He possesses the experience on which to reflect; and when he is

asked to reflect on it his reflections have a good chance of being to the point. An historian who has never worked much at philosophy will probably answer our four questions in a more intelligent and valuable way than a philosopher who has never worked much at history.

I shall therefore propound answers to my four questions such as I think any present-day historian would accept. Here they will be rough and ready answers, but they will serve for a provisional definition of our subject-matter and they will be defended and elaborated as the argument proceeds.

(a) *The definition of history.* Every historian would agree, I think, that history is a kind of research or inquiry. What kind of inquiry it is I do not yet ask. The point is that generically it belongs to what we call the sciences: that is, the forms of thought whereby we ask questions and try to answer them. Science in general, it is important to realize, does not consist in collecting what we already know and arranging it in this or that kind of pattern. It consists in fastening upon something we do not know, and trying to discover it. Playing patience with things we already know may be a useful means towards this end, but it is not the end itself. It is at best only the means. It is scientifically valuable only in so far as the new arrangement gives us the answer to a question we have already decided to ask. That is why all science begins from the knowledge of our own ignorance: not our ignorance of everything, but our ignorance of some definite thing—the origin of parliament, the cause of cancer, the chemical composition of the sun, the way to make a pump work without muscular exertion on the part of a man or a horse or some other docile animal. Science is finding things out; and in that sense history is a science.

(b) *The object of history.* One science differs from another in that it finds out things of a different kind. What kind of things does history find out? I answer, *res gestae*: actions of human beings that have been done in the past. Although this answer raises all kinds of further questions many of which are controversial, still, however they may be answered, the answers do not discredit the proposition that history is the science of *res gestae*, the attempt to answer questions about human actions done in the past.

(c) *How does history proceed?* History proceeds by the inter-

pretation of evidence: where evidence is a collective name for things which singly are called documents, and a document is a thing existing here and now, of such a kind that the historian, by thinking about it, can get answers to the questions he asks about past events. Here again there are plenty of difficult questions to ask as to what the characteristics of evidence are and how it is interpreted. But there is no need for us to raise them at this stage. However they are answered, historians will agree that historical procedure, or method, consists essentially of interpreting evidence.

(d) Lastly, *what is history for?* This is perhaps a harder question than the others; a man who answers it will have to reflect rather more widely than a man who answers the three we have answered already. He must reflect not only on historical thinking but on other things as well, because to say that something is 'for' something implies a distinction between A and B, where A is good for something and B is that for which something is good. But I will suggest an answer, and express the opinion that no historian would reject it, although the further questions to which it gives rise are numerous and difficult.

My answer is that history is 'for' human self-knowledge. It is generally thought to be of importance to man that he should know himself: where knowing himself means knowing not his merely personal peculiarities, the things that distinguish him from other men, but his nature as man. Knowing yourself means knowing, first, what it is to be a man; secondly, knowing what it is to be the kind of man you are; and thirdly, knowing what it is to be the man *you* are and nobody else is. Knowing yourself means knowing what you can do; and since nobody knows what he can do until he tries, the only clue to what man can do is what man has done. The value of history, then, is that it teaches us what man has done and thus what man is.

§ 3. *The problem of Parts I-IV*

The idea of history which I have just briefly summarized belongs to modern times, and before I proceed in Part V to expound and elaborate this idea in more detail I propose to cast light upon it by investigating its history. Historians nowadays think that history should be (a) a science, or an answering of questions; (b) concerned with human actions in the past;

(c) pursued by interpretation of evidence; and (d) for the sake of human self-knowledge. But this is not the way in which people have always thought of history. For example, a recent author¹ writes of the Sumerians in the third millennium before Christ:

Historiography is represented by official inscriptions commemorating the building of palaces and of temples. The theoretic style of the scribes attributes everything to the action of the divinity, as can be seen from the following passage, one of many examples.

"A dispute arises between the kings of Lagash and of Umma about the boundaries of their respective territories. The dispute is submitted to the arbitration of Mesilim, king of Kish, and is settled by the gods, of whom the kings of Kish, Lagash, and Umma are merely the agents or ministers:

"Upon the truthful word of the god Enlil, king of the territories, the god Ningirsu and the god Shara deliberated. Mesilim, king of Kish, at the behest of his god, Gu-Silim, . . . erected in [this] place a stela. Ush, *isag* of Umma, acted in accordance with his ambitious designs. He removed Mesilim's stela and came to the plain of Lagash. At the righteous word of the god Ningirsu, warrior of the god Enlil, a combat with Umma took place. At the word of the god Enlil, the great divine net laid low the enemies, and funerary *tells* were placed in their stead in the plain."

Monsieur Jean, it will be noticed, says not that Sumerian historiography *was* this kind of thing, but that in Sumerian literature historiography is *represented* by this kind of thing. I take him to mean that this kind of thing is not really history, but is something in certain ways resembling history. My comment on this would be as follows. An inscription like this expresses a form of thought which no modern historian would call history, because, in the first place, it lacks the character of science: it is not an attempt to answer a question of whose answer the writer begins by being ignorant; it is merely a record of something the writer knows for a fact; and in the second place the fact recorded is not certain actions on the part of human beings, it is certain actions on the part of gods. No doubt these divine actions resulted in actions done by human beings; but they are conceived in the first instance not as

¹ Monsieur Charles F. Jean, in Edward Eyre, *European Civilization* (London, 1935), vol. 1, p. 259.

human actions but as divine actions; and to that extent the thought expressed is not historical in respect of its object, and consequently is not historical in respect of its method, for there is no interpretation of evidence, nor in respect of its value, for there is no suggestion that its aim is to further human self-knowledge. The knowledge furthered by such a record is not, or at any rate is not primarily, man's knowledge of man, but man's knowledge of the gods.

From the writer's point of view, therefore, this is not what we call an historical text. The writer was not writing history, he was writing religion. From our point of view it can be used as historical evidence, since a modern historian with his eye fixed on human *res gestae* can interpret it as evidence concerning actions done by Mesilm and Ush and their subjects. But it only acquires its character as historical evidence posthumously, as it were, in virtue of our own historical attitude towards it; in the same way in which prehistoric flints or Roman pottery acquire the posthumous character of historical evidence, not because the men who made them thought of them as historical evidence, but because *we* think of them as historical evidence.

The ancient Sumerians left behind them nothing at all that we should call history. If they had any such thing as an historical consciousness, they have left no record of it. We may say that they must have had such a thing; to us, the historical consciousness is so real and so all-pervasive a feature of life that we cannot see how anyone can have lacked it; but whether we are right so to argue is very doubtful. If we stick to facts as revealed to us by the documents, I think we must say that the historical consciousness of the ancient Sumerians is what scientists call an occult entity, something which the rules of scientific method forbid us to assert on the principle of Occam's Razor that *entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*.

Four thousand years ago, then, our forerunners in civilization did not possess what we call the idea of history. This, so far as we can see, was not because they had the thing itself but had not reflected upon it. It was because they did not possess the thing itself. History did not exist. There existed, instead, something which in certain ways resembled what we call history, but this differed from what we call history in respect of every one

of the four characteristics which we have identified in history as it exists to-day.

History as it exists to-day, therefore, has come into existence in the last four thousand years in western Asia and Europe. How did this happen? By what stages has the thing called history come into existence? That is the question to which a somewhat bald and summary answer is offered in Parts I-IV.