

WHAT IS HISTORY?

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IN a recent paper¹ Professor John Macmurray has attacked illegitimate extensions of the use of the word 'history'. He contends that strictly speaking the solar system cannot be said to have a history, though we can speak of a history of astronomy. This is so because history is concerned with what men have done, why they did it and their doing of it. He is not, I think, suggesting that one cannot carry on fruitful discussions in one sphere by making use of simple analogies drawn from another; as for instance, when the search for significant new resemblances leads us to speak of 'x' as if it were 'y', and in this way to talk about the unknown on the analogy of the known. Examples of this method are the 'clock' and 'pump' analogies of the seventeenth century, or the more recent use by biologists of 'government offices' and such like as concepts of illustration. All this is not denied, but the 'as if' is stressed, for the danger of this kind of thinking is that it tends to confuse the picture or model with that which it is intended to exemplify.

There is a further point to be made. It is helpful, though in some cases dangerous, to use 'pictures' which stimulate the formation of partial exploratory hypotheses. It is less helpful, and even more perilous, to commit oneself to a master 'picture', for in doing so we become impatient of distinctions and unscrupulous in our manipulation of evidence. For Professor Macmurray history is an enquiry into the past actions of human beings. This statement, which seems so straightforward at first sight, is in fact very difficult, as it raises the question of what it is that we study when we study history. It seems clear, as W. H. Walsh points out in a helpful little book,² that history is not simply perceptual

¹ *Concerning the History of Philosophy*. By Professor John Macmurray (A Paper in the Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, 1951).

² *An Introduction to the Philosophy of History*. By W. H. Walsh. (Hutchinson's University Library, 7s. 6d.).

in that the historian does not immediately perceive the past *as past*. Nor is the historian concerned with mere remembering, though to some extent this is involved in so far as the historian is dependent on written records. It is not plausible, however, to suggest that the task of the historian is simply to sift and chronicle records in an exhaustive manner. But even if it were, a very superficial knowledge of 'records' suffices to show that the chronicler, who is not content simply to record a meaningless jumble of items, is forced to adopt some criterion of selection. He will formulate to himself rules for the distinguishing of reliable records from untrustworthy ones, and so on. But if he goes as far as this—and it is difficult to see how he can refuse—it would appear that he is making an appeal to some kind of experience and standard which is independent of his chronicle activities and item-knowing.

There is another difficulty. It is easy to assume that historical facts are just there to be looked at. This is only true in the sense that intelligent inquiry will uncover evidence, and evidence is not just unrelated detail. Clearly, too, the evidence uncovered will to a large extent depend on the questions which guide the investigation, and these questions will depend on a theory about existing evidence. Research is a directed activity which involves a selective hypothesis. If this be true, history is not just painstaking and empirical (in the narrow sense of the word) inquiry; nor is it on the other hand only insight.

Perhaps the last remark requires some explanation. It has been maintained that the positivist view of history reduces to nothing more than a collection of 'histories'—an orderly statement about some subject-matter which makes no claim to be 'historic'. No one would want to deny that extra- or a-historical conditioning plays its part in the historical, and to that extent histories of environment are of importance; but the true historical statement is always in human terms, whether individual, collective or institutional. History is the record of something unique, the story of man as creator.

This might suggest that the object of history is given in the insight which the trained historian attains through re-thinking the past. He *is* concerned with the inwardness of the

recorded event, the inward meaning of the event to which the record gives a clue. In order not to misunderstand this contention it is perhaps necessary to explain that talk about 'inward meaning' is not here intended to enmesh us in meta-history. By meta-history I mean, following C. S. Lewis, the discovery, by natural and rational means, of an inner meaning in history or of the plot in the historical process. It does not appear, in spite of some spirited attempts, that the insight of the historian enables him to construct such a meta-history. When historians become meta-historical in a valid sense they are appealing to meta-historical categories relevant to history, which do not, however, define history. For instance, nothing is easier to show than that Christian revelation has radically altered the very perspective in which history is envisaged, for it has led us to see the whole framework of time as an irreversible continuum of before and after which prolongs but does not repeat itself; a continuum with beginning, end, and focal point. Thus through faith we achieve a meta-historical viewpoint which gives significance to the history of the historian, and which is illustrated in that history but which cannot be said to spring from a merely 'historical' insight. When some people speak of the 'inner meaning' of the event they are not speaking about a synoptic vision of the total content of time—very few people are so foolish as to speak in that way—but something seen in surviving and fragmentary evidence. It is maintained that the specific function of historical thought is to represent the past, for the interpretation of the historian restores the human—which is thought—that the data signifies. The 'here', 'this', 'now' of the past is re-thought, and thus the real past is restored as the mind of the historian penetrates beyond mere sequences to the thought behind the recorded event. History is then a concrete mode of thought, not in the sense that it falls on the details of sensation but in that it penetrates beyond the merely phenomenal to the eternal significance of the event.