

## SOME ASPECTS OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

The wonder with which philosophy begins is first and foremost the cosmic wonder, the wonder which Nature forces on us in its cosmic complexion and in its macroscopic expanse. No doubt the mystery of the starry heavens has compelled man's attention earlier than the riddle of the unfathomable deep surging within. The history of the philosophical inquiry makes it abundantly clear that the reflection on self has no psychological or historical priority. But once philosophic consciousness awakens to the dichotomy of the self and the not-self the accent of philosophic reflection shifts constantly from one sphere to another. The attempt to assimilate the world of Nature to the world of psychic privacy is met with a parallel movement which seeks to reduce the world as experienced from within into the categories of the world as given without. It was the genius of Plato that introduced the concept of a third realm which belongs neither to Nature nor to psychic reality, a world of pure transcendental universals which he called Ideas. But neither the beginnings of early classical European thought nor of Oriental speculation have shown any concern for historical reality. It is true that the concept of perpetual flux dominated the classical antiquity very early but there is a long way from the idea of interminable change to the idea of historical process.

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In spite of the awareness that the idea of perpetual becoming involves the dialectic of change, it took philosophy centuries to arrive at the concept of the historical dialectic. In terms of the history of philosophy it means a transition from Heraclitus to Hegel. But it does not imply that the historical consciousness is totally modern in its phenomenal actuality. The Semitic religious consciousness is historical through and through. The historical process moves between the dawn of Creation to the end of history. As history assumes Nature for its unrolment the end of Nature is simultaneous with the end of history. Why is it that in German the Last Day is called the Jungste Tag, the youngest day, Kant asked? And he answered that it was because no other day followed the last day it remained the youngest member of the human calendar. This means that in the religious context history has both a beginning and an end. Involved in the whole concept is the teleological bias. The historical process is taken as a guided and directed process to serve a divine telos. But it is one thing to say that it has a purpose and another to say that it has a meaning. Even if one fails to find a purpose which directs the historical process to a far-off divine event one may still detect intelligible patterns in the historical complex, discover some driving forces behind the historical phenomena, discern a dialectical movement which governs the march of history at least partially and in fragments and find unmistakably a value-orientation in history in so far as different periods of history seem receptive to different orders of values. A period of history may develop its own physiognomy and impart its character to the period in such a way as to make the man of the Renaissance so different from the man of the Victorian era or of our own technological age. It is remarkable nonetheless that modern philosophers who have completely severed their links with the teleology of history still speak of a logic of history. The teleology of history is linked with the theology of history, with the view that historical events follow with an inevitability which has a definite direction. Nature is assimilated to history as a means. Thus both on the mechanical and teleological-cum-theological view historical events have an inevitability. But in spite of their essential inevitability the historical events may have unpredictability as their inherent character. This might be grounded not only in the limitations of the human knowledge

but in their own character. In a non-theological context the historical process must remain incalculable and whatever is to happen remains often a surprise. This is implicit in the non-repetitive character of history where historical phase has its distinct character. The historical process has inevitability in retrospect and unpredictability in its contemporary reference. The emphasis on inevitability makes it appear as an expression of historical fatality and the stress on unpredictability imparts a character of freedom to the historical process. But as it was already hinted by Bergson with reference to the life processes, inevitability seems to attach to the historical process when it has shaped itself in a definite form as an expression of the past and unpredictability to the event which has yet to form itself. In other words the actual seems to be inevitable whereas the potential seems to be undetermined before its actualisation.

What makes an event historical? The relation to the past is an essential feature of the historical process though all that is past has no historical character. A natural phenomenon assumes a historical character with the human involvement. The inclusion of the present in the historical process is as clear as the inclusion of the present in the past. It is in fact the presence of the past which constitutes an important moment of the historical consciousness. When Croce insists that all history is contemporary because it is enacted in the mind of the historian his statement involves more than is intimated in the context of Croce's philosophy. History has a contemporary character even without any reference to the historian. It means the past is effective not as an event which is past but as a past which is present both in the consciousness of the historian and in the objective structure of Reality. The passage of time by itself however does not constitute history. The earth both as a geographical locus and as a part of an astronomical configuration is subject to the passage of time. All that is has the character of *has been*. But the earth becomes historically relevant with the advent of man. Religious consciousness has therefore taken into account the historical relevance of man when at least in some of its characteristic expressions it has allowed history to take shape only with the fall of Man. Though for the natural sciences man is a late comer and marks the culmination of a long and laborious process, the story of creation makes him the

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central figure who gives sense to what remains non-sensical without him. Hegel even refused to admit history with the bare emergence of man but with a specific stage of his development, with his political maturity. History remains dumb and mute and becomes vocal with the political formations which we call the state. It involves the transmission of traditions, and tradition is a living process. It does not mean the assimilation of the individual in the group in a *participation mystique* characteristic of the primitive man but the development of a distinct individuality through national heritage and a living communication with the past. Though an individual by himself does not constitute history yet even in isolation his existence has historicity. It is true that constant occupation with retrospective reflection can cripple growth and maturation. Nor can history be used or abused as a refuge or retreat in times of national frustration. But there is a point where even auto-biographical events may be considered as having historical relevance. This is true above all of the decisive figures of history. The heroes of history may become as it were the loud speakers of historical urgencies. The dynamism of the historical process becomes vocal only through the finite human media. In a sense the great figures of history are the products of a long historical process; in another sense they seem to mold the historical process itself. In history we find the same involvement of freedom and necessity that we find in individual life. This is another aspect of the involvement which was already marked, the one between inevitability and unpredictability. But historical events cannot be considered without reference to human actions. Benedetto Croce's observations are worth quoting: "History is about the past-which-is-present, action is of the present, and imagination of the future: imagination, mother of hopes and fears, which the historical inquirer keeps at a distance and the man of action rejects, playing with it only in the pauses and lapses of their thinking and acting. When imagination weaves a fable, or traces the lines of a story projected into the future we have so-called prediction or prophecy, "the memory of times not yet born," history of the future of which the substance is the imagination itself, lacking any logical foundation."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Croce, Benedetto, *History as the Story of Liberty*, p. 286, Engl. Tr.

Historical consciousness assumes a different pattern in the different ways in which it is dovetailed with other forms of human consciousness. Any moral judgment of the historical process is not relevant though it has perhaps more relevance than the moral evaluation of an artistic achievement. The reason is that the historical consciousness is not indifferent to moral responsibility. Hegel observed that the world history does not know pity, when the rod of history moves it does not care how many an innocent flower is trodden down in its march. But the warp and woof of history is as much made of sweat and toil, of human sufferings and woes, of disenchantments and frustrations as of the victory of human achievements, the joy of discovery, the vision of new values of beauty and truth. Though the moral judgment on the deeds of historical individuals is inescapable the moral estimate of any period of history is not decisive for its eminence in man's culture. Our age for example with all its callous indifference to sufferings in wars and notwithstanding the occasional recurrence of the vilest group savagery might still claim a significant advance in history on the basis of its technological revolution, scientific discoveries and political achievements. There is indeed one strong moral streak in historical consciousness and this is the moment of responsibility. Responsibility is not completely exhausted in individual morality. Nuclear powers today have a responsibility that they cannot disown as indeed any of their decisions might bring to a close the civilization that man has laboured to create. But irresistible as the temptation is to see the rise and the fall of nations in a moral perspective it is difficult to commit oneself to the view that world history is a world tribunal. Nor is it possible to derive lessons from history. Hegel's observation that the only lesson that we can derive from history is that no one has ever taken any lesson from history has become famous. But more significant is the way in which aesthetic consciousness is blended with historical consciousness. That history as a record of significant events demands artistic representation is clear enough. When one considers history a re-enactment of human experience the artistic moment is necessarily made prominent. The historian has to establish rapport not only with the individuals who have been effective participants in history but to project himself into their milieu and to live through the past not as a past but as a

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present actuality. In our appreciation of the works of Art the same process of imaginative reconstruction is needed. What Dilthey calls understanding (*Verstehen*) in contrast to explanation amounts to the same. Historical events and persons can only be understood as meaningful structures and cannot be explained as by-products of a mechanical causality. Thus the historian is bound to recreate the past, though the re-creation is not a fantastic fabrication but an imaginative recall of the past which is not immediately given in precise contours. But the historian cannot claim the freedom of the artist. While the artist moves in the infinite world of possibilities the historian's is a reconstruction out of the data which are immediately available. The way the past is re-viewed and re-valued is itself historically conditioned and might lead to historical relativism. It might seem that the historian is so hopelessly involved in his own national ethos that an objective judgment is impossible. Consequently widely divergent views of historical phenomena and individuals prevail. One who is acclaimed as a hero in one national tradition might provoke hostile comments in another. Relativism of historical judgments might induce deep seated skepticism. The idea of historical objectivity becomes a myth. We have often encountered the demand for the revaluation of the historical judgments after every national revolution and the clamour has been voiced to rewrite history to satisfy national pride and aspiration. This means that Ranke's demand of the historian to report what really happened is incapable of fulfilment. The moment a historical fact is reported it is liable to be transformed into historical judgments. When a historian reports events which happened centuries ago the lapse of time itself creates difficulties in the appraisal of facts. Indeed every creation of art has an historical character in so far as it represents the milieu and reflects the epoch. A work of art might represent the spirit of the times either positively by giving vent to the genius of the era or negatively by becoming itself the critique of the times. We can now understand the caustic remark of Schiller that it is well for a poet to be the child of his times but woe betide him if he becomes a spoilt child. Thus the historical consciousness and the aesthetic consciousness are mutually involved. This involvement is strikingly apparent in the two remarkable phenomena which belong equally to Art and History, Ruins and Relics. Ruins speak of the past

in which life and death strangely mingle, in which the present appears as the past and past appears as the present. Time's power of destruction and Art's subjection to natural law evoke simultaneously the diametrically opposite impressions of preservation in spite of destruction and of the persistence of beauty in spite of the failure of the physical means through which it was originally communicated. Man's work is overpowered but not completely, and in its incomplete defeat it reveals beauty all the more majestically. Hence ruins cannot be created by wilful destruction. Only nature can create ruins by its own partial defeat. No wonder then that ruins retain their significance not only as historical monuments and archeological finds but they continue to preserve aesthetic value of a unique kind. It is our encounter with beauty in a form which we could never foresee.

Even simple historical monuments come to enjoy a religious significance by the sheer lapse of time. The experience of Taj Mahal is not a pure aesthetic experience. Apart from the fact that the mausoleum itself has a religious character and its preservation is a double challenge to death as an empirical force, its experience has the sublime as its predominant element. The category of the sublime has a complex character which shares equally the religious and the aesthetic moments. Every historic monument, however secular it might have been in its original purpose, assumes a religious significance by interpenetration of life and death. If the element of life predominates the experience is elevating; if the element of death gets the upper hand the experience is depressing. The reason why ruins do not work as depressing and do not evoke melancholy is the fact that the persistent preservation of their aesthetic intention in spite of a hostile Nature imparts to them a sublime character. The sublime is not the tragic though the tragic may work as sublime. But the moment the tragic evokes sublimity it is no more tragic, as such as the sublime involves the transcendence of the tragic.

Relics afford another significant form of artistic objects which involves the fusion of historical and aesthetic moments. But in relics the religious moment dominates. They are considered as the bearer of a numen and are supposed to be the carrier of a spiritual significance.

Now the question might be justifiably asked whether there have been tragedies in history. Tragedies might be considered



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as factual happenings, as historical landmarks, as works of Art. In the concept of the tragedy the occurrence of an event which ought not to have been is involved. In seeming defiance of the moral urgencies what ought not to have happened happens with an inexorable inevitability. What distinguishes historic and non-historic artistic tragedies of dramatic Art from factual happenings is the element of significance which informs them and contributes to their aesthetic relevance. Events as such are unwanted and undesirable and have a negative character in respect of values. Once they are re-created in imagination they are not simple reproduction of facts but aesthetic constructions. This means that both History and Art are closely linked as imaginative representation of facts, and while Art enjoys unlimited freedom in its imaginative reconstructions History moves in a limited framework. This does not necessarily mean that history is all fiction but in so far as it is the representation of what was given it is imaginative transformation and evokes aesthetic delight. The delight which is born of the tragic situation in the dramatic art has an anomalous character, and it is to the credit of Aristotle that he was the first to have seen here the major problem of aesthetics, however unsatisfactory his own explanation might have been. The aesthetic joy has a reflective character. It is self-transcendent. That the aesthetic joy which a tragedy evokes might have a therapeutic function is irrelevant to the nature of aesthetic joy itself. History as a representation of events, and of events which ought not to have been, might evoke the same emotional reaction as tragedies of Art. The inter-penetration of history and art is made all the more significant in historic tragedies such as those of Shakespeare. Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* or *Antonio and Cleopatra* are based on historic figures. But the dramatist does not sharply distinguish between the realms of possibility and of actuality. What might have been is presented as what actually happened and the vacuum in historical information is filled without any hesitation or acknowledgement of ignorance. Now the joy that one feels in reading Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* or in the accounts of a great historian does not stem from the event itself but in the representation of the event. Even if history is based on exhaustive research and genuine archeological discoveries the historical portrayal will always carry a 'fictional' character. Perhaps this element of fiction in human knowledge



cannot ever be dispensed with even on the level of sense perception, though it does not play such a dominant role in our perception of the external world as to make it wholly fictitious!

The historic consciousness has a decisive religious moment, and it is clearly indicated in the classical attitudes to history. History is taken as an unfoldment of a divine plan, and the world history is considered a world tribunal. The most striking expression of this attitude is found in Hegel's concept of the cunning (*List der Vernunft*) of the Idea. The Absolute spirit cannot realise its ends without provoking passions in individuals and making them act in its own interests. What is however realized is something different from the ends which provoked passions. Individuals were just tricked to subserve the interests of the world spirit. "It is not the universal Idea that is involved in opposition and conflict and exposes itself to danger. It stands in the background unaffected and whole and pushes the particularity of the passions to fight for itself." But to all appearances the heroes of history, the so-called masters of decision, are as much subject to the cunning of Idea as the ordinary actors in the historical drama. No doubt the historical process gives the impression of teleology by the very frustration of national ends, by the futility of human planning and aspiration. However historical necessity cannot be imputed the power to override personal freedom and history cannot be equated with the decisions of any individual, however decisive his action might seem on the world historical platform.

What then is the place of historical decisions? Historical decisions are not by any means the expression of a mental act, a subjective resolve. When it is the question of a war which engulfs the whole world or a peace which brings to end hostilities the decision of the individual is really epochal in the sense that it marks the end of an epoch and the beginning of another. Hence however fantastic it might seem on a purely empirical level it is impossible to witness the vast panorama of history without considering it in a super-individual perspective, without reference to super-national ends. History is possible only through human actions taken not in isolation but in their inter-connection. Whatever man does can by itself constitute historical actions as little as it can constitute a moral action. The historical action has this much in common with the moral action that it is significant,

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that it is not reflex action but is carried by a voluntary impetus. It differs from the moral actions in so far as it is not just an individual performance but refers to a super-individual situation which we call history. Hence Hegel was perfectly right when he refused to consider history in a moral perspective.

The relation of history to religious consciousness is far from ambiguous. It may easily challenge the religious relevance of the historical as such. One of the main patterns of religious consciousness is the denial of history, of change and time, and religion might appear as an attempted liberation from the historical flux. The Buddhist conception of Salvation involves liberation from history. The Christian and the Jewish pattern of the religious world-view are historical but involve nevertheless the concept of the end of historical process. History however is not an illusion. Where time is taken seriously history cannot become insignificant. While Bergson attaches great importance to time he does not assign any significance to history and this is a surprising omission in Bergson's concept of time. In his attempt to give a purer concept of time Bergson has neglected the historical time. Historical time presents its own problems. Though dates play a major role in historical consciousness the historical dates have not simply the mechanical determinations of spatialized time. Every historical date is not a temporal sign, a determination of some event in the calendar or a determination of some physical event like the eclipse of the sun. It is much more. It refers to epochal decisions, sufferings and achievements of man, his frustration and realization. The date referring to an individual as a private unit has a limited reference and with the lapse of time this reference loses all its relevance and leaves no traces behind. The historical dates on the other hand have a collective or super-individual reference. Even the date pertaining to the historical individual has no private relevance. Its importance persists even when all private, domestic and personal relevance has been lost for good. The relation of man to man, be it that of friendship or hostility or that of blood relationship, assumes an extra-personal dimension in a historical context. Personal jealousies and feuds go beyond their limited relevance. Murders and loves in the historical arena even assume a character which is more than personal. Even if they are carried by personal motivation their significance assumes a historical dimension. The

moment a person is involved in the flux of historical processes all his personal involvement and commitments disengage themselves from his private confines. The loss of privacy is the price an individual has to pay for his role in history. Personalities in history have a remarkable resemblance to the creations of artistic imagination. The figures even change their profile in different historical perspectives. Like the figures of art they develop a different character in the course of time, and it is not only historic research, the coming to light of hitherto unknown documents which changes the perspective but the shift in the historical situation itself gives a new turn to evaluation and appraisal. The same is true of masterpieces, of the artistic creation in the different perspective of literary criticism. The whole approach and the basis of evaluation might undergo such a drastic change that a poet who reigned supreme in one period might forfeit his hitherto undisputed status in another. It is also interesting to remark that there is no perfect identity even when the artistic creation refers to a historical figure. Julius Caesar or Cleopatra of the dramatic art, or the Moses of Michelangelo are not just duplications of factual realities or of historical existence. Though history is bound to reproduce what happened it is also forced to fill the vacuum through imagination. The gaps defy historical research and hence its failure to remain true to facts. Historical existence thus offers problems of its own. We should distinguish between the historicity of existence and historical existence. To exist is to exist historically. Man is rooted in the historical situation with all his existential modalities. To be is to suffer, to be exposed to anguish and dread, to find oneself forlorn and isolated, to be projected to death. But the story of man is not constituted by suffering only. To be human is to engage oneself in personal communication in the form of love, to appreciate Beauty and to fulfil obligations. But all these modalities of existence have an historical character. It does not mean that they have only a temporal character. Temporality by itself does not constitute historicity. It is the general and indispensable character of all empirical existence, of things and persons. It is a part of reality as process. But historicity is temporality and something more. It is the involvement in traditions, language, in what Hegel called the objective spirit. It is really the involvement in the historical ethos. It is what makes man of one epoch so

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different from that of another. But historical existence has still another dimension. It does not lapse with physical existence. It is a posthumous existence on a mundane plane, and continues to be effective. It might guide, inspire or mislead nations and make them go astray. It has a life and dynamic of its own. Historical existence might become a myth or a legend. Even where the historical existence has more a mythical rather than an historical character it might work as a symbol for generations, be it for good or for evil. History might cherish national prejudices and keep alive undesirable associations. It influences the present configuration of human relationships and as the factual realization of one possibility in any given moment makes all other possibilities impossible, the present determination of historical situation eliminates all other historical possibilities and the 'ifs' of history have no other status than that of the impossible. Whatever is historically given has become what it is after the exclusion of all other possibilities.

What is most instructive is the involvement of Philosophy and history in the history of Philosophy. Philosophy may as such be considered an historical problem as history may be considered a philosophical problem. No less than Art and Religion Philosophy also has a historical character. The history of Philosophy shows the alternatives which persist through its history. Again and again the same theses recur, and if we follow Dilthey Naturalism and different types of Idealism alternate both logically and historically. We may however add that though the same patterns of thought may come to life again each re-current phase has its own historical stamp which makes all the difference. Materialism for example has changed its character through the ages. Once dependent on the physical theory of matter, then on the physiological discovery of the localisation in the brain in the eighteenth century it later came to find its justification in psychological and economic theories. The different brands of Materialism may equally be considered historical pronouncements while each system of philosophy has an historical accent. If the Stoics considered philosophy as contemplation of death, if Aristotle considered friendship an ethical value, if Indian systems aim at liberation from suffering, if Kant knows no other way to religion than through the consciousness of an unconditional 'ought' each of the positions is historically moulded and shows the variation of the historical

consciousness. Hence it will be interesting to view the whole history of Philosophy as a guide to the cultural history of the period. Philosophy really begins with the consciousness of a crisis in man, with his confrontation with the world. It arises when whatever is taken for granted as a matter of course is no more taken as such. But the history of philosophy like the history of the civilization cannot offer an unequivocal answer to the challenge which the crisis has provoked. In the seeming success in meeting the challenge there always remains an unresolved residue and the studied suppression of ideas in a given historical situation proves more dangerous to civilization than the psychological repression for the life of the individual. Thus the history of philosophy reflects the crisis of civilizations. The history of philosophy is really the history of ideas which have guided and directed humanity in the historical process. It is only in philosophy than man becomes fully self-conscious and becomes aware of the problematic character of human existence. The historical survival of nations means only the survival in a world of historical process. To speak with a poet our little systems have their day and cease to be, but the actual cessation does not indicate their elimination from the historical process. Historical survival is not the preservation through actual memory. In fact the role of memory in history has been unduly emphasized. Historical survival means preservation through objective structures, through monuments, through relics and ruins, through archeological finds, through artistic creations, through philosophic heritage and through the persistence of religious aspiration in historical inscriptions. But the historical consciousness can never encourage the idea of national self-sufficiency. Fichte's idea of a German state which could be self-sufficient is a historical contradiction. The historical understanding indeed exercises an irrevocable veto on national pretensions. It does not permit us to think of any historical phase as the last word. The old order changes giving place to new and even the old disorder changes giving place to another. Historical urgencies do not retain their current impetus for long and the issues which once provoked national upheavals lose their significance in the course of time. Indeed the contours of nature seem to be much more immune to change and upheaval than the historic structures. But historic reality cannot be conceptually exhausted. It may be freely

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conceded that no rational construction can be imposed on historical reality. Theories of historical explanation are themselves conditioned by the ethos of the period and reveal the character of that temporal cross-section of history in which they took shape. The theory of dialectical materialism for example fits in the period of its birth and vindicates itself in the contemporary situation, in so far as it is the uninterrupted continuation of the foregoing era, but fails to find confirmation in the periods which saw the emergence of great religions when the decisive factors were certainly not material. Attempts to consider history in the categories of Nature cannot but fail and a development of morphology of history in the way of Spengler have met with little success. Giving to some the impression of a systematic chaos, of sound and fury signifying nothing and to others a process subject to dialectical transitions, history does not allow the imposition of any conceptual pattern. We are always face to face with what Jaspers called the limit situations, though in a far wider significance. It is of course easier to see conflicts and tensions which remain unresolved and which give rise to even greater tensions and conflicts than final reconciliation. But conflicts and tensions have a positive content. They are as much necessary to the enrichment of civilized life as they are for the maturation of the individual life.

History reveals what man has been and what he can be. To quote Dilthey: "What man is, only his history tells. Only by surrendering to the great objective forces which history has engendered can man liberate himself from the pain of the moment and from ephemeral joy. Neither subjective caprice nor egoistic pleasure can reconcile man with life. Only surrender of his sovereign personality to the course of the world can effect this reconciliation."<sup>2</sup>

But certainly man is not exhausted in his history for the simple reason that no historical phase is final and conclusive. Nay even the historical process itself might conclude without being conclusive for Man's destiny.

<sup>2</sup> Kluback, William, *Wilhelm Dilthey's Philosophy of History*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1956, p. 109.