

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY ?

Philosophy of history is, notoriously, a vague and many-faceted area of inquiry, and anyone who surveys the existing literature in the area must soon become aware of a certain clumsiness in the widely accepted distinction between 'speculative' and 'critical' philosophy of history.¹ Although limitedly useful, this distinction needs elaboration and refinement, which ought to be linked to an analysis of distinguishable central meanings within the (itself highly vague and many-faceted) term 'history'. Hence, this paper begins with an attempt to draw the basic distinctions that are necessary for an adequate delineation of the main directions of inquiry that are pursued under the rubric 'philosophy of history', and to ask whether any particular one of those directions could plausibly be seen as the centrally, or properly, characteristic one.

But philosophy of history is also, notoriously, an area of inquiry whose legitimacy is controversial, and the arguments offered for or (more often) against its very possibility are many. While a direct consideration of these arguments lies beyond the purpose of this paper, some account will nevertheless have to be taken of several such arguments whose general drift bears on the question of what philosophy of history is. Hence, the second part of the paper is an attempt to consider the meaning of 'philosophy of history' in the light of the main kinds of argument that are invoked to deny its very legitimacy as an area of philosophical inquiry.

I

First, as it is used within writings on philosophy of history, the term 'history' can mean one or more of four broadly distinguishable things. The most basic meaning is roughly definable as 'the totality of actual past events in the realm of whatever thing the history is the history of'. History in this sense, which may be termed simply 'history', is the concrete, infinitely complex, past reality that is the presupposed object of general historical inquiry, but that can never be grasped in its full, concrete

totality by historical knowledge. The *history* of Caesar, then, would be the totality of things that actually happened to him, or were done by him, in the course of his life. (Here the problems of just how, in practice, such a history is to be delimited, and whether the notion of history can properly apply to anything whatever, or only to things intimately connected with human existence, may be ignored.)

A second broadly distinguishable meaning of 'history' is 'the totality of existent, supposed knowledge of the history of something'. For all practical purposes, this meaning of 'history' implies recorded (or at least communicated) accounts of the history of something, and can thus be designated with the more precise term 'historiography'. There is, of course, an obvious distinction within historiography between historiographical activity (or science) and historiographical records (or knowledge), but here this distinction can remain collapsed. (It also seems unnecessary to take account here of the distinction between historiography as chronicle and historiography as explanation and interpretation.) History in this sense is a (possibly internally conflicting) knowledge-claim purporting to present and preserve a maximally complete account of the "facts" about the nature of the actual history of something. The *historiography* of Caesar, then, would be the totality of existing records purporting to recount aspects of Caesar's history.

A third meaning of 'history' emerges when the emphasis within historiography shifts from claiming to report the maximally concrete factuality of past reality to claiming to reveal the ultimately significant, or most important, aspects of that concrete factuality. Since what is seen as an event of great significance or importance is commonly spoken of as a really *historical* event, the term 'historicality' can be used to identify this third distinguishable sense of 'history'. History as historicality, then, presupposes history as historiography, but implies a clear emphasis on the distillation of a level of ultimate significance or importance from historiography. The *historicality* of Caesar would accordingly be the most significant, or most important, aspects of his history. (These must, of course, be judged from some perspective, but here it is unnecessary to

pursue the problem of whether historicity can ever be 'objectively' grounded in some 'absolute' perspective or not.)

Finally, a fourth broadly distinguishable meaning of 'history' is 'the quality of human existence that inheres in the structure and implications of those aspects of the nature of man and the world that make the phenomenon of history (in the three previously distinguished senses) possible'. This sense of 'history' can be designated by the term 'historicity' (whose use in this way will be familiar to those acquainted with recent 'continental' European philosophy), and it refers to a complex quality resulting from certain aspects of the nature of human existence, e. g., that man exists in space, through time, and as embodied; that man is mortal and has a finitely-perspected consciousness; that man is socially contexted and reproduces himself in successions of individuals; that man is language-using, belief-directed, and value-striving; that memory and imagination enable man to transcend the present in the directions of past and future; and so on. The *historicity* of Caesar, then, would be the quality inherent in those particular aspects of his nature and environment that must be pre-supposed when any being is subject to existence through time in the specifically human way

The four senses of 'history' that have been distinguished here may be summarized in a way that makes clear that they have been listed in order of increasing generality. *History*, as the totality of what actually happened to something in the past, is the concrete, specific substratum that the other three are based on. *Historiography* comes next, as an attempt to record and explain what actually happened in the past. Since historiography can never reflect the past in its concrete totality, but always remains partial and selective, it inevitably represents history at a somewhat general level. *Historicity*, which comes next, implies greatly increased partiality and selectivity, in the direction of judgments about ultimate significance and essential importance, which obviously represent history at a still more general level. Finally, *historicity*, as a quality of the general conditions that make specifically human historical existence possible, can be viewed as the totally general, abstract 'form' of the original substratum of actual, concrete history.

In the light of this analysis of the different general meanings that the term 'history' can have within philosophy of history, the notion of 'philosophy of history' itself may now be more directly examined. Here it seems best to begin with the stock distinction between 'speculative' and 'critical' philosophy of history. This distinction has its basis both in the history of philosophy of history (the 19th-century German tradition is seen as exemplarily speculative; the 20th-century Anglo-Saxon, as exemplarily critical) and in the aims of philosophy of history ('metaphysical' interpretations of the meaning, pattern, or goal of history are seen as reflecting speculative aims; 'epistemological' investigations into the purposes, methods, and limitations of historiographical science are seen as reflecting critical aims).

If this distinction is considered against the background of the four distinguished senses of 'history', there seems to be an obvious link between critical philosophy of history and the notion of *historiography*, and an equally obvious link (at least to those familiar with the writings of thinkers typically classed as 'speculative' philosophers of history) between speculative philosophy of history and the notion of *historicity*. Also, it becomes obvious that the speculative-critical distinction leaves the question of the relation between philosophy of history and the notion of *historicity* largely unanswered. In fact, those who use the speculative-critical distinction tend to give little attention to historicity and its problems, and insofar as they are at all aware of such problems, they tend to see them as lumped together with the problems of historicity, and to consign both kinds of problem to the 'speculative' realm.

In view of this situation, a distinction within the stock notion of speculative philosophy of history seems necessary. Since philosophy of history's concern with historicity implies attempts to give large-scale interpretative accounts of actual past history, whereas its concern with historicity implies attempts to deal with highly general problems of a kind usually termed 'metaphysical', it seems reasonable to label the first kind of concern 'interpretative philosophy of historicity', and the second, 'metaphysical philosophy of historicity'.

Once *metaphysical philosophy of historicity* has been separated off from *interpretative philosophy of historicity*, and both

of these placed alongside *critical philosophy of historiography*, a satisfactory indication of the three broadest streams of activity within philosophy of history seems to result.³ (In practice, of course, these distinctions are far from absolute, but they do seem to reflect centrally important differences in emphasis and intent.) However, anyone familiar with the entire range of activities within philosophy of history will probably still feel uneasy about the category designated 'interpretative philosophy of historicity', and it seems possible to draw some useful sub-distinctions within that category.

Assuming that interpretative philosophy of historicity is basically concerned with revealing the most significant, or most important, aspects of the (historiographically accessible) actual past history of something, and that the 'something' in this case is usually Western history or world history as a whole, three distinguishable kinds of orientation seem discernible within the works of those who undertake this kind of interpretative project.

First, there is the *sociological* orientation, which seeks the key to historicity in certain basic structures of social organization and basic laws of social change that can supposedly be discovered to exist as universal constants below the apparent uniquenesses, irregularities, and diversities that characterize the surface of the historical flux. Second, there is the *culturological* orientation, which seeks the key to historicity in the supposedly unique, unrepeatable nature of the particular world-view and socio-cultural configuration that characterizes each of the major 'cultures' or 'civilizations' that existed in the past. Finally, there is the *historiological* orientation, which seeks the key to historicity in some unifying strand or pattern of abstract intelligibility that supposedly underlies, and is articulated through, the various particular stages of the concrete, on-going course of historical reality. (Again, these distinctions are far from absolute, and the fact that all three orientations can exist together in one philosophy of history, as they do in Hegel's, does not necessarily render the distinctions invalid or useless.)

In summary, then, it seems possible to outline the main directions of inquiry actually pursued within philosophy of history as follows :

1. Critical philosophy of historiography
2. Interpretative philosophy of historicity
 - a. Sociological orientation
 - b. Culturological orientation
 - c. Historiological orientation
3. Metaphysical philosophy of historicity.

Here, the question inevitably arises of whether all of the outlined directions of inquiry are equally representative of the nature of 'philosophy of history', or whether some particular one of these directions could possibly be regarded as being the proper, or uniquely characteristic, form of philosophy of history.

It seems obvious that critical philosophy of historiography largely overlaps with the areas of general philosophical inquiry known as epistemology, logic, and scientific methodology, or with what may be called 'philosophy of (social) science'. On the other hand, it seems equally obvious that metaphysical philosophy of historicity largely overlaps with the areas of general philosophical inquiry known as ontology and philosophical anthropology, or with what may be called 'metaphysics'. This would seem to suggest that a proper, or uniquely characteristic, area of inquiry for philosophy of history would have to be sought within *interpretative philosophy of historicity*.

However, all three of the sub-streams within that area are pursued professionally by various historians and sociologists, who strongly claim that their particular professional qualifications make them the only ones properly competent to pursue these streams with any success. Philosophers within the Anglo-Saxon tradition have tended to agree with this claim, and to content themselves with viewing philosophy of history as little more than a convenient term for identifying a specific area of focus within philosophy of science. But many philosophers within the 'continental' European tradition have continued to lay claim to the area of interpretative philosophy of historicity, and to argue that *their* particular professional qualifications make *them* the only ones ultimately competent to pursue these streams with any success. (The classic statement of the 'continental' case here is given by Hegel.)³

Whether or not the 'continental' tradition is right on this point cannot be decided here, but the foregoing considerations seem to suggest that, if it is *wrong*, philosophy of history is left as a fairly 'hodge-podge' area of inquiry that lacks any clearly definable, uniquely characteristic, philosophical focus. If, on the other hand, the 'continental' tradition is *right*, the foregoing considerations seem to suggest that philosophy of history would have to derive its unique focus from being a kind of fusion, or integration, of the areas distinguished as metaphysical philosophy of historicity (the specifically *philosophical* element) and interpretative philosophy of historicity (the specifically *historical* element). (If this hypothesis seems to slight critical philosophy of historiography, it may be noted that most of the problems dealt with in critical philosophy of historiography are also dealt with in metaphysical philosophy of historicity, although not vice versa.)

II

Assuming, then, that philosophy of history, in its proper, uniquely characteristic philosophical sense, is a fusion of metaphysical philosophy of historicity, or what could be viewed as a *metaphysically sophisticated* approach to interpretative philosophy of historicity, a brief review of the main kinds of objection to the legitimacy of philosophy of history may throw some additional light on the problem of just what philosophy of history is.

Perhaps the most obvious objection that might be raised against the legitimacy of such an undertaking would be that metaphysics itself is an outmoded, nonsensical kind of philosophical inquiry, and thus that supposed metaphysical sophistication could contribute nothing to one's ability to interpret historicity properly. Fortunately, many of those who might have been inclined to raise this objection in earlier years would now admit that metaphysical assumptions are implicit in any attempt to think at all, and that anti-metaphysics is itself a metaphysical position. Hence, in view of the realization that metaphysical assumptions are inescapable, confirmed anti-metaphysicians can do little more than try to dismiss metaphysics by claiming that its assumptions rest ultimately on unprovable, irrational choices. This may be true, or it may not, but as it stands, it is itself metaphysical, I.P.Q...15

and thus can hardly serve as a philosophically effective denial of the relevance or possible usefulness of metaphysical inquiry.

A second kind of objection would be that the very nature of actual, concrete history, and of the historical dimension of human reality, is such as to necessarily foredoom all attempts to give large-scale interpretative accounts of historicity. According to this view, history is the realm of the concrete, the infinitely complex, and the largely unknown, so that all large-scale interpretative attempts must inevitably remain hopelessly abstract, incomplete, and arbitrary. This kind of objection may, or may not, have some force, but if it does, one could ask whether the very same objection would not apply equally to most of what normally qualifies as specifically *historical* writing. Is the 'abstractness gap' between Hegel's or Spengler's interpretations of world-history and the infinitely complex concreteness of world-history really *significantly* more problematic than the 'abstractness gap' between a professional historian's account of anything (e. g., Japanese history, the Russian revolution, or Vico's life) and the infinitely complex concreteness of that thing? And, if it is assumed to be more problematic, does this not rest on prior assumptions about the nature of 'abstractness', 'concreteness', 'reality', and 'knowledge' that can perhaps be refuted within metaphysical philosophy of historicity? Hence, this kind of objection seems to be more an identification of certain problems that any interpretative approach to history must be expected to face rather than a refutation of the possibility of specifically philosophical interpretations of history.

A third kind of objection (the last to be considered here) would be that, even though a fusion of metaphysical philosophy of historicity and interpretative philosophy of historicity seems sound in theory, it could not be successful in practice, since no single person could possibly acquire the requisite degree of detailed competence in both metaphysics and history. This objection is somewhat more persuasive than the other two, since one might well doubt whether anyone setting out to do interpretative philosophy of history could be both a fully competent metaphysician and a fully competent historian. Still, one could suggest that it is much easier for a professional metaphysician to acquire

an adequately thorough knowledge of history by assimilating the main relevant writings of historians than it would be for a professional historian to acquire an adequately sophisticated knowledge of metaphysics by trying to assimilate the main writings of metaphysicians. This is because history is written in familiar, everyday language and deals with familiar, everyday kinds of action and event, whereas metaphysics is written in esoteric, highly technical language and deals with areas of reality and experience whose high generality makes them all but unapproachable to common-sense. Hence, the present objection could be met by arguing that philosophy of history presupposes first-hand professional competence in metaphysics only, and that adequate second-hand competence in history can be relatively easily acquired by a metaphysician who is willing to devote sufficient time to appropriating the major relevant writings of professional historians.

All of this will undoubtedly sound naive and condescending to most professional historians, who, although probably willing to admit that they could not easily acquire metaphysical competence, would tend to deny that they need it anyway, and also to deny that metaphysicians could, as suggested above, easily attain historical competence. Further, professional historians would probably object to the implication that they are little more than the hand-maidens of philosophers, and that their work remains incomplete until philosophers have taken it up and refined it into some scheme of supposedly ultimate significance.

However, the support of professional historians is not indispensable to the possible legitimacy of the aims of interpretative philosophy of historicity, and one of the inescapable implications of the legitimacy of those aims would seem to be that professional historians are, in a way, the hand-maidens of philosophers. On this view, the function of historians would be primarily one of providing maximally probable and maximally complete reports about the human past, which the philosopher can then survey and interpret against a background of metaphysical sophistication. Historians, of course, would inevitably continue to indulge in a degree of large-scale historical interpretation of their own, but it would tend to be naively based on

either the metaphysics of 'common-sense' or the metaphysics of some particular ideology, and in both cases the philosopher would have little trouble recognizing, and discounting, these aspects of historians' writings.

The foregoing considerations pretty well exhaust what can be suggested about the nature of philosophy of history within the scope of this paper. In conclusion, it is perhaps worth noting that philosophy of history, in the assumedly central sense, seems to differ significantly as a 'philosophical' undertaking, from the other 'philosophies-of' such as philosophy of art or philosophy of religion. In doing philosophy of art or philosophy of religion, the philosopher does not thereby necessarily become an artist or a theologian; but in doing philosophy of history, the philosopher does, apparently become a historian. Hence, philosophy of history seems to be 'philosophical' only in that it must be *undertaken* by a philosopher, but what is undertaken is a kind of historiography, or *history*, and not philosophy.

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NOTES

1. See William H. Dray, *Philosophy of History* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964), Chap. 1, where the distinction is explained and its clumsiness noted.

2. Cf. Nicolai Hartmann, *Das Problem des geistigen Seins* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1933), pp. 2-3.

3. G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, Vol. 12 of *Werke* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970). Particularly interesting are the distinctions between original, reflective, and philosophical history (pp. 11-29) and the analogy between Kepler and the philosopher of history (pp. 87-88).