HISTORY

JULY, 1922

HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY.¹

PLATO spoke of an ancient difference between philosophy and poetry. We may perhaps speak of a certain modern difference between philosophy and history—or at any rate between teachers of history and teachers of philosophy. Every teacher is apt to magnify his own subject, and naturally prone to magnify it most at the expense of the nearest and most closely related of other subjects. When teachers of different subjects are brought closely together—as they are in Oxford common rooms and Cambridge combination rooms—they are driven to take stock of one another; and the philosopher may rally the historian with a nimble dialectic, while the historian, who has more of the *esprit positif*, will pursue his Parthian foe in the heavy armour of “facts.” “You philosophers,” he will say, “love to theorise about provinces, such as the State, into which you have not travelled and of which you have made no survey. The real stuff is not in you. You are detached from affairs: you say you are spectators of all time and existence, but when it comes to the point, you retire from the dust and heat under the shelter of a wall. It is we historians—students of things that have actually been done or are actually being done—who have an instinct for affairs and a sense of reality: it is we who can bring the lessons of the past to guide the making of the future.” The philosopher, with his ironic modesty, may admit the impeachment; but he will shoot some rankling arrow. “Yes,” he will say, “you historians are great travellers and surveyors. You accumulate much knowledge (or rather memory—for knowledge is a deep thing) of events and institutions; but I wonder whether you ever attempt to think together all this memory, or to find its significance and

¹ The substance of an address delivered during the Annual Meeting of the Historical Association, January 1922, at King's College, London.

plan. It may be that you do; in fact, I believe that I have noticed an occasional attempt here and there. But I doubt if these attempts have carried you very far. For you assume, whenever you make these attempts, that historical process is the explanation of existence, and that the sequence of events preceding any given thing is the explanation of that thing. Does that assumption really help you to think things together, or to find any significance or plan?"

If I may make a personal confession, I would admit that these sayings of the philosopher long left me with an uncomfortable feeling. I remembered (as a teacher of history I hope I may be forgiven for "remembering" rather than thinking) the dictum of Hobbes, that philosophy "excludes history as well natural as political, though most useful (nay, necessary) to philosophy: because such knowledge is but experience, and not ratiocination." I said to myself that any knowledge I had was "but experience"; I admitted to myself that history only dealt with "How" and not with "Why"—that it only explained how things came to be, and did not and could not explain why they were or should be. I realised (or I thought that I did) that to know how private property came to exist is not to know why it should exist, any more than to know that common property once existed in the dawn of time—if indeed it did—is to know that it ought to exist in these latter days. History does not explain values, on which alone a *raison d'être* can be grounded; and this is because values are not due to the growth (or, as I would rather say, remembering that history is the record of human will and action, to the *making*) which constitutes the historical process. Nothing possesses value because it has grown, or was made long ago, or has been made by a long process: everything possesses such value as it possesses, in that field of institutions with which history deals, because it serves, and to the extent to which it serves, a moral purpose. We are always cheating ourselves into the conviction that continuity of duration or antiquity of origin is itself a value; but we must always criticise continuities and antiquities by a criterion which is beyond time. In a word, the historian, with all his historical values, must come before the bar of philosophy. And there—to take one instance—all the many nationalisms which feed on the historic method, with their memories of Cuchulain and Stephen Dushan and other heroes and glories, will be asked to change their language; and the question will be, not "What have you been?" but "What can you do for the moral betterment of humanity?"

While I was in this frame of mind, I came across, and I read, a work by Benedetto Croce on history.¹ The thesis of this work, if I understand it rightly, is that there is really no difference between history and philosophy. History *is* philosophy, and philosophy *is* history. If we are to adopt such a thesis, and to make such an identification, it would seem that we must change the connotation of one or both of the terms which are thus identified. It may be that we must assign a new sense to the term "philosophy"; but at any rate it appears necessary that we should give a new meaning to the term "history." If the terms are identical, an investigation of either should lead to an understanding of the other. A philosopher would naturally start with philosophy. Those who have been trained in history may be forgiven for starting with history.

What, then, is history, and with what does it deal? It is natural to answer that it is a method of inquiry which deals with what has happened, exactly as it happened, or, as Ranke said, "*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist.*" In other words, which appear to be words of an obvious truth, it deals with the past. But does it really deal with the past? That is exactly the question.

We have to remember, first of all, that much of the past is irretrievably gone and forgotten, and has left no memorial, as though it had never been. This is partly the result of accident; but it also springs from the wise economy of the human mind, which has forgotten the unessential. And this may remind us that in our modern civilisation, with all its apparatus, we are debarred from forgetting. We have paper, the printing press, libraries, archives: we preserve everything: the wise economy of the mind cannot operate; and trouble is prepared for our descendants. But of the past that is past we can at any rate say that what survives is a part—the part which accident and economy have conspired to leave—and not the whole.

In the next place we have to notice that when we deal with such of the past as still remains, and still is present with us, we select. We select not only in the obvious sense of choosing this particular period, or this particular country, or this particular aspect (economic, or constitutional, or biographical), but also in the further sense of picking this or that part of the record of our period, or country, or aspect, as the substance of our thought and the staple of our exposition. A historian is like an artist—like the painter of a portrait or a landscape: he selects what has significance and interest. Such significance and interest are

¹ *The Theory . . . of Historiography*: 1921, Harrap, 15s.

present in two cases and under two conditions. They are present, in the first place, when the element selected is a root of the present, which survives in the present and is thus contemporary with it. The institutions of our Teutonic ancestors—their villages and their assemblies—are elements of the past which are roots of our present; and they have a significance and an interest for us accordingly. But significance and interest may also be present when the element selected is an analogue of the present; when it is spiritually akin to the present; when it is an inspiration and, as it were, a spiritual root of the life of the present. The past of republican Rome was such an analogue to the men of the French Revolution: it was something spiritually akin, from which they drew inspiration; it was a motive force for the time in which they lived—a force surviving and contemporary. And age by age we may similarly see some period of the past flashing into contemporaneity with the present, as the wheel of time revolves, and becoming, in a spiritual sense, which is none the less deep because it is spiritual, a living part of the real present.

It follows that history is, after all, concerned with the past which is present—present either as a root or an inspiration of the present—and that “past history, if it really is history, that is to say, if it means something and is not an empty echo, is also contemporary.” This view, that all history is contemporary history, depends ultimately upon a conception of philosophy. According to that conception time is the area of the operation of mind or spirit. In each age the spirit is struggling for self-consciousness. In order to attain self-consciousness it must comprehend those elements in its present life which have come from the past. It is the function of history to aid the attainment of self-consciousness by giving a description and by showing the derivation of those elements. If we think of his work of description, we can only say that the historian is describing the “present” and writing “contemporary” history. If we think of the elements described, we may say that they existed in the past, or that they are derived from the past; but we must also say that they are still present, because they are forces still operative in the operation of the spirit.

At this point we may pause to make an observation. The spirit has its phases, which vary from age to age. Its constitution and operation were one thing in the age of the Renaissance; another in the age of Enlightenment, of which Voltaire was the prophet; and still another in the age of Romanticism which followed the French Revolution. On this it follows that the past which

was present to the spirit, and was a part of its constitution and operation, in each of these phases, was a past that varied with each phase. The mediæval past, for example, viewed as a past which was still present, was one thing to the men of the Renaissance, to whom it was a dark and inimical age of obscurantism, to be overcome at all hazards: it was another thing to the men of the Enlightenment, who pitied its "Gothic" absurdity: it was still another thing to the men of the Romantic movement—an enchanting Age of Faith, with its church-bells still ringing through the centuries to call humanity to its devotions. The past thus varies according to the phase of the spirit in which it is present: it is not a fixed datum, but a Protean thing which can change from shape to shape. This is not to say that its facts, events, happenings, institutions ever alter. It would be a pure absurdity to say anything of the kind. It is only to say that the significance and interest of the past alter from age to age. There is a past which is constant; and there is also a past which changes. Of the two it is the past which changes—which undergoes re-interpretation—which matters most; for it is this past which is part of the fibre of the present. And here we touch another paradox. Not only does the past change: it also lives and dies. A past age may sometimes be alive, because it is present and part of the life of the present; and it may at other times be dead, because it has no significance or interest, and is no part of the constitution of the spirit in its present phase. The Greek past, for instance, lived in the age of the Renaissance; but it was dead—or very nearly dead—in the early Middle Ages. To-day it is alive and vigorous again. "If the twentieth century searched through the past for its nearest spiritual kin," writes a Greek scholar, "it is in the fifth and following centuries before Christ that they would be found. We are to-day in a position, as no other age has been, to understand Ancient Greece, to learn the lessons it teaches, and, in studying the ideals and fortunes of men with whom we have so much in common, to gain a fuller power of understanding and estimating our own." These words may lead us to a final paradox. What is nearest to us in thought—what must particularly and primarily be comprehended if we would comprehend ourselves and our own age—may be what is very far from us in time. We are naturally apt to believe that, if we would understand the twentieth century, we must first study the nineteenth; and we push our pupils—or they push us—into the study of what seems emphatically "modern" history. But this is perhaps a short-sighted view. It is Pericles, and not Bismarck,

who is really modern, because it is he who is our nearest spiritual kin. It is Greece of the fifth century before Christ, and not Prussia in the nineteenth century of the Christian era, which is present in the spirit of this age as its analogue and inspiration. If we would study contemporary history, we must study the history of classical Greece. These words are not written in a spirit of perversity. I would seriously maintain that those who have studied Greek history in the school of *Literæ Humaniores* at Oxford may be better equipped for understanding the contemporary world than those who have studied a favourite period of "modern" history which runs from 1789 to 1878.

It is time to recur to the argument. The gentle reader (I call him gentle, but I confess he may well be incensed) will draw for himself—and receive or reject as he may prefer—any moral which may be implied in what has just been said with regard to the study and the teaching of history. . . . The argument, at the point at which we paused, had reached the conclusion that the historian describes the "present," and writes "contemporary" history. We have now to carry that conclusion further. If history describes the present as containing—and indeed as being—all the past that is still present as a root or an inspiration of contemporary life and thought, then we may say that after all history does give an understanding and an explanation of what we are and where we stand. History which is just the record of a past which is past, and an account of the process of that past couched in the form of a sequence of events, is not an explanation, but only a serial or a journal which has no significance or plan. History which is a description of the present as containing in itself the past—history which is an account of the past as still alive in the present—this may be an explanation, and a mother of understanding. On the former conception of history it would follow that it is a temporal sequence, as of a chain with many links, which produces and makes the present. That is not the fact. It may only be one link of the chain, and that a link which (in time) is far removed and very early, which produces and constitutes the present. The Greek conception and practice of democracy, for instance, may be the link that is present and helps to make the present; and the other links of the chain of time may be dropped and ignored by the spirit in its present phase, as things which possess no significance or interest for its operation.

But if history be an explanation, and a mother of understanding: if, as one of our philosophers has said, "its ultimate—which is also its present—import is an account of what we now

are and where we now stand": if "its message comes into such an account, distils and sublimates into such a quintessential judgment on the present"—then we may bring the argument to its final conclusion, and we may say that history is philosophy. History makes us spectators of this present time and this contemporary existence, with all the past that they contain: history is the achieved self-consciousness of the spirit in its present phase, viewing itself in all its fulness as containing the past which is part of its present. It was said of old that history is philosophy teaching by examples. If it were that, it would not be philosophy, but a mass of empirical precepts. It is philosophy in the higher sense of a deep and rich understanding of the present—the present seen in all its connection and contact with its roots and its inspirations in the long far-reaching past. "When history has been raised to the knowledge of the eternal present," Croce concludes, "it reveals itself as one with philosophy, which for its part is never anything else but the thought of the eternal present."

Many may demur to this conclusion. There is a history, they will say, which is not philosophy. There is a history which is a story of the past, exactly as it happened; and the human mind, with its boundless and divine curiosity, will always crave to know the story of what has happened, just because it happened, and exactly as it happened. There is a touch of nature which makes us all kin: we think nothing human alien from ourselves: the Incas of Peru or the Aztecs of Mexico—they *were*; and just because they were, and because they were men, we shall always desire to know their story, and we shall always turn to history for their story. The wardrobe of a mediæval king: the panoply of a mediæval knight: the structure of the *Great Harry*: the rig of a frigate—these, too, were all in the world once upon a time; and we desire to know what they were.

Yes, we desire to know; but we have to avoid the *progressus ad infinitum*. There is no end of the things that were; and there is no end of the stories which might be told about them. But are such stories history? And is it not wise to have some definite conception of history—what it is and what purpose it serves? The danger before historians is that they should become story-tellers of the infinite. "All things are defined—and limited—by the function they discharge and the potentiality they possess." It may be wise for the historian to acknowledge that his function is to aid each age to the attainment of self-consciousness, and that his potentiality rests in his ability to describe all the roots and the inspirations of the past which go

to constitute the living present. He may be well-advised to become the ally of the philosopher; and in the issue he may be rewarded—and astonished—by finding that he has become a philosopher himself.

We may make two observations which show the need for an alliance between the historian and the philosopher. In the first place, every history that is a genuine history implies some view of the world. If we call Herodotus the father of history (he is rather the eternal child of history), we shall find in the first book of the father of history, in the story of the fortunes of Cræsus, a philosophy concerning the ways of the gods towards men—a philosophy which runs through the whole of his *ἱστορίας ἀπόδεξις*. And if there is much history nowadays which has no view of the world, and is rather a compilation of facts (which men sometimes call by the name of research), perhaps it is not history. In the second place, every philosophy that is a genuine philosophy implies some knowledge of the present world, and of the factors which have gone to constitute that world; and the name for that knowledge is history. For the object of the study of the philosopher is spirit, or mind. And mind is not a timeless or abstract thing: it sits at the roaring loom, and weaves its living web. Plunged in time, concrete in history, it is ceaselessly thinking and making and being in successive presents. In each present it must attain self-consciousness; in each present it must find its philosophy. There is no final philosophy, just as there is not, and never will be, any final history of any age or movement—be it the Periclean age or the decline of the Roman Empire or the Great Rebellion; and the reason is in either case the same. And just because there is no final philosophy, every philosopher should be so far an historian as to recognise that his philosophy is a philosophy of his own present, and to ensue accordingly—what he can only attain if he studies history—a knowledge of that present in all the fulness of its manifestation.

This is the end of the argument, if I have understood Croce aright, concerning history and philosophy. It remains to point some morals. One of these concerns the curriculum of the various schools of history which are now established in most of our universities. If the historian must also be a philosopher, the historical student must be trained in philosophy as well as in history. What, then, are we to say of the curricula in these schools of history? We can only say that they are almost exclusively concerned with outlines or surveys of history, partly

English, partly European—outlines or surveys in which the field of “ancient” history (in many ways the history which is most contemporary) is left uncultivated, and any reference to the living present is absent; while, if there be any philosophy, it has generally two defects—it is treated in isolation, in a compartment by itself; and it is only that skimming of philosophy which goes by the name of political science. Yet moral philosophy is of the first order in a study which is concerned with the will and actions of men; and even the metaphysics of an age may be of primary importance for the understanding of its life. Who can say that he knows much of the Middle Ages if Realism and Nominalism remain to him unfathomed terms of art? The study of the history of an age should go hand in hand with the study of its philosophy. There is much to be said for those Oxford schools which combine the study of the history of the ancient world with that of its philosophy, or, again, the study of modern philosophy with that of the history of the modern world which started with the Industrial Revolution and the Revolution in America and the French Revolution.

There is another moral which concerns research; and this must be mentioned with bated breath. When we have put a student through a school of history, we set him to work on unprinted material in order to discover new facts. We imagine that there is a magic about unprinted material and new facts. Yet it is possible to cherish doubts, though it is perhaps dangerous to express them. Is there really any magic? What, after all, is a “fact”; and is a fact always worth finding? Is it worth while to search for facts that are perhaps not worth finding? And even if you find facts that are worth finding, have you made much of yourself, or contributed much to true knowledge, unless you have thought about them, and thought them into being present, and made them part of the present?

One wonders whether historical research is not sometimes a mistaken imitation of the research that is necessary and valuable in natural science. Natural science is a vast process of discovery of the elements and the facts of the natural world. In that vast world research is imperative. To control the natural world, we must know it; to know it, we must have at our service a vast mass of induction based on a vast observation. The world of human action is a different world. Its facts are not new pieces of matter, or new resolutions of old matter into ever tinier and tinier elements. They are, as it were, fragments of mind—creations of the spirit, and indeed parts of the spirit—which we have to

make alive again by thinking them back into life. Discovery of the fact is important here, as it is in the natural world; but interpretation and vivification of the fact matters most. To concentrate on the discovery of the fact is to forget the half which is greater than all the rest. Through such forgetfulness much historical research runs to waste. We sometimes set students to work on research, with a view to higher degrees, when they do not yet know how to think, and when, if they bury their heads deep enough, they may never learn how to think. I have seen some tragical compilations strung together for the purpose of attaining the higher degrees of universities. Research has become a piece of machinery—a sort of testing machine for those who desire some higher degree. Yet, whatever may be the needs of natural science, thinking is the thing which we need in the world of human action. I wish I knew more facts: I wish I had discovered *any* fact; but I wish most of all that I might understand better the facts which I know—and yet do not know, because I do not understand them thoroughly. We ought all to dig for new facts; but if we stop at that, the gain is not very apparent. All that has happened is much as if we had dug sherds out of a hole in the ground, and piled them in a heap by the side of the hole. And it is not clear that the sherds collected in a heap are better than the sherds in the ground. One can only hope that they will be useful to those who come after and can use the material.

I would conclude by saying once more (I only repeat Croce) that the natural world is one thing, and the human world another; and natural science is one thing, and human history another. Natural science deals with matter, reduced to the nicest and finest subdivisions—all the matter it can find, and all the subdivisions—an infinity, as it were, of infinitesimals. It employs a busy host of co-operative workers, eagerly watching one another's work: the results attained by an Austrian botanist to-day may affect the conclusions of an English professor of genetics in a few weeks' time. No research need here be wasted: every discovery may tell. It is otherwise with history. History deals with mind and the operation of mind; and the supreme necessity is that the historian should bring a living mind to the understanding of the operation of men's mind. Co-operation will help; but the great efforts of the historian have to be made in the loneliness of thought. Thucydides went deeper than perhaps any other historian into the minds of the men whose actions he described: witness the funeral speech of Pericles, or the great chapters on

sedition in the third book, or the Melian dialogue. He had researched abundantly for his facts; but it is his supreme merit, which makes him still the greatest of historians, that he thought his facts through, and thought them down to their foundations in the minds of his contemporaries. And this he did himself, and by himself. And unless this be done, we may say that the writing of history is

“Work that obscures . . .
Making our not-returning time of breath
Dull with the ritual and records of death,
That frost of fact by which our wisdom gives
Correctly stated death to all that lives.”

ERNEST BARKER.