

HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY

HAS HISTORY any data or method to contribute to philosophy comparable in importance to the data and method of the physical sciences? I propose to maintain that it has; in spite of the undoubted importance of the physical sciences to philosophy. For the purpose of the argument, philosophy or metaphysics may be taken to mean *the study of the nature and number of what is real*; and this may be held to include the philosophy of Realists and modern Idealists, of Mr. Russell, Mr. Bradley, M. Bergson and Signore Croce. By a mistake of historical interpretation it is frequently supposed that, as physical science advances, so metaphysics recedes; and it is often said that what is now the subject-matter of astronomy or biology or psychology was once subject matter for philosophy. Probably, however, it would be truer to say that when any section of reality or any class of reals comes to be studied in segregation from other sections, when the relation of its elements or its peculiar type of reals comes to be thought of in a special way, then what before was studied simply as real is studied in science as one kind of real. The same "reals" or the same section of reality still continues to be subject-matter for philosophy, as it was before, because it is real: stars, for example, do not cease to be data for philosophy because the laws of gravitation have been discovered. The sphere of philosophy has not shrunk: indeed, in some cases, the new science may in-

crease the data or improve the method of philosophy. New types of reals may come into sight, by the closer inspection in a new science of a separate section of reals. New ways of arriving at truth, especially in some restricted field, may be found in the detailed work of the physical scientist. Aristotle may have been wrong as a metaphysician in his classification of the heavenly bodies as a unique type of reality: but the modern metaphysician as well as Aristotle must have some place in his universe of discourse for the stars. In the same way recent advance in psychology has not deprived the metaphysician of the right or the duty of placing "mind" among the reals of which he must take account, or of showing that there is no ultimate real referred to in the traditional use of the word "mind." Thus the data of philosophy or metaphysics are actually increased by the advance of special sciences; and a new method, which is found to be applicable in a restricted field, may be useful also in the wider field of the study of the real as such. The place of philosophy is not less, but more, important as new data and new methods come to be known.

From these preliminary considerations it will appear in what sense philosophy may be conceived to gain from physical science. But it is essential, further, to distinguish more clearly what is here meant by history. For the purpose of the argument, history may be taken as the name for all those classes of study which divide the field of *knowledge of sections* of realities with the physical sciences. Thus it includes the study of events in the record of human society or individual human life, the study of literature and the non-philological study of language, the study of music and of art generally,—all that field of knowledge which is sometimes called "the humanities," as contrasted with "science." Clearly this distinction is arbitrary. There are (i) some subjects of study which are on the border line, as for example psychology or geography in

its social aspects; and (ii) in "history" there are elements of science, as appears from the use of statistics. It would be difficult, with the use of the terms here suggested, to say whether the theory of evolution is history or science. Nevertheless, the distinction is adequate for its use here; for there is a sufficient exactness in the distinction to allow of showing what the study of art and human affairs may have to add to the data of metaphysics. The kind of realities studied in history are sufficiently distinct from those studied in physical science if we say that they are "mental" realities, but this does not involve that there is no science of mind. The methods of history, as distinct from science, are sufficiently obvious, particularly in regard to that mental activity usually called appreciation. One further preliminary statement is needed. The form of mathematics which is logic, or the logic which is the basis of all thinking, is not to be identified with the physical sciences. No one denies that mathematics in this, the Platonic, sense is fundamental. It contributes data and method to philosophy; but its contribution should not accrue to the credit of science *as opposed* to history; for history, no less than science, must be based upon, and must use, the laws of number, identity, difference and the rest. It is true that, in what is commonly meant by history, logic does not seem to be, even in the vaguest sense, mathematical; but that is in part a defect of historical practice, not a necessary characteristic of history in its truest sense. In any case, no knowledge at all is possible except in dependence upon the processes, and in reference to the realities referred to, in mathematics in this widest sense of the word. We are not, therefore, comparing the data and method of mathematics in this sense with the data of history.

History adds to the data of philosophy (a) mnemonic causation, in the language of Mr. Russell's *Analysis of Mind*. This is characteristic, not only of individual expe-

rience in sensation, but also of the racial or group experience which is too much neglected by skilled psychologists. Matter, indeed, in the study of physical sciences seems to preserve its past experiences. Metal struck once is in a new state to receive a second blow; but clearly mind includes, or is affected by, or represents, past experience in some way differently from this. The manner in which mind so becomes the past in the present is set out in history. This, of course, does not assume that there is "a" mind, or Mind in the traditional sense; for it is equally true of history, if mind is a perspective or a "section" of material things. That kind of reality, which is referred to when we speak, not of "the real pen," but of "the pen in thought or mind" (what used to be called "the idea of the pen"), is studied in history as part of a process in time. And of that kind of reality one characteristic is mnemonic causation, which is of very great importance to philosophy. Indeed anyone, who, with a very full knowledge of chemistry or physiology, set out to reach a philosophy *without* a knowledge of mnemonic causation, would be likely to misrepresent "the nature and number of what is real"; nor would infinite progress with his physical science supply the omission, although it might suggest that there was an omission. Causation in the world of chemistry or physics would not indicate the peculiarity of causation in the world of mind or thought. There is, of course, no peculiarly superior status to be given to mnemonic causation; but its difference from other types of causation is important for philosophy. The characteristics of this type of causation as presented in history will be described later.

Secondly, (*b*) history adds to the data of philosophy uniqueness or identity of events and of "persons." In history an event or a person is not simply nor chiefly an example of a law or a specimen of a class, as they tend to be regarded in science. Of course, history does include some

study of "laws" in the sequence of events, and many speak as though we could "learn" from history by reference to similarities between our own situation and some other situation in the past. This implies the scientific element in history, but it does not include that other element in history which is referred to in the saying that "history *never* repeats itself." The uniqueness of each moment, or point-instant (in Professor Alexander's language) in the historic series is a fundamental fact. But philosophies much dominated by scientific conceptions seem to imply that we could explain the unique moment or individual by reference to a law or an all-absorbing force or reality within which the uniqueness disappears, or of which the unique may be conceived to consist. Bergson, for example, in his *élan* seems to explain away the uniqueness of the moments in a process; but it is bad philosophy to treat as "explained" what has been omitted, nor is it possible to suppose that uniqueness or individuality is not "objective," but only the creation of a spatializing mind. It is "given" just as obviously and irrefutably as any process; and this *datum* is presented in the study of history. Science also, if it is in the widest sense mathematical, presents the unique and the individual or particular; for in any section of space the points are each unique and particular; and in sciences implying evolution there are point-instants in the process described as development. But in history, especially of human or mind process, the instant in the process of time is in a new aspect seen to be unique and particular. What is this new aspect? It can best be understood by reference to the misleading implications of the common idea of progress. The majority think that one generation exists or works for the next, that the future is in some sense the justification or the explanation of the present and the past; but this is clearly a mistake. Whatever the results of my action upon the fortunes of future generations, I exist, so

to say, in my own right and not for the sake of what is to come. Each event, each instant in historical process is what it is, independently of its relation to other members of the series. The excellence of a state of mind is not entirely to be tested by reference to its results on the future, and this is the kind of excellence to which George Meredith refers when he speaks of a kind of reality:

"Whose fleetingness is bigger in the ghost
Than time with all his host."

The importance of time or of "motus," as the scholastics called it, or of *durée*, is well recognized by M. Bergson; but he seems to have misinterpreted the character of time in omitting to give an important and permanent place in his interpretation to the uniqueness of the event or the point-instant. As it has been seen, the phraseology of Professor Alexander in his *Time, Space and Deity* has been used here, and a further conception from the same source may emphasize the importance of history in this matter. He speaks of time as the "mind" of space or of a similarity between time-space and mind-body; but this "mind" aspect of time is more clearly to be seen in history than in science.

Thirdly (*c*) history gives the characteristics of mnemonic causality and mind or thought in general. For example, under the general term, history, we have included the study of arts. Arts are peculiar to humanity. The processes and products of the arts are parts of the real world and are important to philosophy. To neglect them in a systematic metaphysics is to omit facts, and they cannot be rendered in the terms of science. A product of art, a painting, a melody or a novel or poem, is not, as Aristotle thought, an imitation, and even the wildest reinterpretation of his terms will not prove him to be on the correct lines for the placing of art-products in the world of realities. That element in the painting which is not the amount of the paint

and canvas nor the spatial relation of the parts, that element which makes us say of it that it is beautiful or not beautiful, is not secondary; nor is it reflection of anything else. It is "in" the painting. It is a unique creation. To know how it came there, who was the painter, and other facts "about" it, is not to know *it*; but *it* is the subject for knowledge for one section of history as the study of "the humanities." Now we have no reason to suppose that any other reality but "man" can produce or appreciate art. The perceptions by animals of sounds or of likenesses in pictorial art is no proof that they perceive or appreciate that particular "it" to which a person who knows what a good painting is refers when he says it is beautiful.

In this section of the data provided by history the "group" characteristics of thought or conation or mental activity in general should be included. All art is social. Indeed all mental activity is social. This may seem to be very obvious; but psychologists, logicians, and even philosophers tend to forget it. For example, in logic it is often said that language is an instrument of thought; but clearly its main characteristic is to be an instrument, not of thought, but of *communication*, and "of thought" only because communication is essential to thought. Indeed, all the so-called laws of thought and rules for deduction and induction are spoken of as if "a" mind were active in a non-mental world; but we know of no such mind. All we know is minds in the plural, always in relation to one another. Conation and, still more, "feeling" are social. They are mental activities only as of *many minds*; and of this fact philosophy must take account. But its importance as a fact in the real world is nowhere more clearly to be seen than in history. Finally, truth, goodness and beauty, all of which are in some sense realities, are social; and cannot be understood except in reference to more than one mind, as Professor Alexander has shown in *Space, Time*

and *Deity*. But the operation of these realities and their connection with non-mental realities are to be seen in history.

This fact, the social character of mental activity, is not only important as a *datum*, but also because it indicates a method in philosophy. The traditional logic as well as the traditional psychology is "atomistic" or individualistic. The judgment is treated as fundamentally an act of "a" mind in a non-mental *milieu*; but clearly no mind exists or acts in that environment or atmosphere. Even the proposition, which Mr. W. E. Johnston, in his new *Logic*, has shown to be an "objective" fact distinct from the judgment, can hardly be understood without reference to the plurality of minds. For example, it is probable that the chief distinction between truth and falsehood, or reality and illusion, arises from the fact that the "real," as an object of thinking or mental activity, is a perspective for *more than one mind*. Illusion is obviously what is *not* for more than one, except in cases where one dominates or expunges the perceptiveness of the "others" in the experience. The interaction of minds is clearly of the first importance to epistemology and philosophical method; and this interaction is shown in history.

Against the arguments used above an objection may be raised as follows: It may be said that great advances in philosophy have followed the discoveries of physical science, but no noticeable effect upon philosophy can be traced to advances in historical research or humanistic studies. To this objection there are at least two replies: First, the actual practice of historians must not be identified with the characteristics of history, and secondly, the experience of the recent past is not typical of the whole of experience, for in the Renaissance and in the eighteenth century history was useful to philosophy. As a preliminary, it must be repeated that advances in philosophy due

to "mathematics" in its widest sense are, of course, incomparably greater than those due to other sources; but, as was said above, what is due to mathematics in this sense must not accrue to the credit of physical science as contrasted with history. As for the practice of historians, it is true that historians are commonly untrained in philosophy or in ethical theory. They accept the social ideas and standards of their grandmothers. They pass or imply ethical judgments without even noticing that they are applying an uncriticized traditional criterion. Nevertheless, history is in essence a sphere for the comparison of ethical standards and for the examination of the character of mind in society. In the Renaissance the humanists, and in the eighteenth century Leibniz and Hume were as much historians as "scientists," in the narrow sense of that word. The data supplied by Hegel, although misinterpreted by him, may fairly be regarded as historical. Finally, one of the defects of contemporary philosophy, especially in regard to the nature of mental activity, is due to the too great dependence on the physical sciences and the too little attention to the data and methods derived from history. Clearly there must be an advance in history itself before it can contribute much to philosophy. The use of records is at present crude, the ethical judgments of historians are commonly primitive, and the criticism of art is "childish"; but in a more advanced stage of "the humanities" philosophy would gain much in data and method. Even as it now stands history has much to offer.

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