WHY SHOULD PHILOSOPHERS be concerned with the study of history? Isn't the past irrevocably fixed? History would indeed be of limited philosophical interest were it not that men, unlike animals, are what they have come to be. Animals may have individual biographies, but they have no meaningful history: cats and cows today are as they were in ancient times; Odysseus might be a stranger to us, but his faithful dog is not. The growth of human culture (that is, of man) is continuous and cumulative. To study our past is to understand better how we came to be as we now are.

"The Past"

Stories about the dead are inspired by the curiosity of the living. That is why history is being rewritten constantly—not simply because new facts are discovered, but because it is "always written wrong." The past is in a steady process of imaginative re-interpretation and reconstruction; we want it to be meaningful to us in the present.

But isn't the historian bound by the facts? Can he alter what has actually occurred? As in the sciences (Chapter 9), the problem lies in the determination of the facts. No historian can examine or record all that occurs, even within a short time period. Even the chronicler or annalist whose concern is "just the facts" must winnow them ruthlessly. No event per se is history. No newspaper can publish all the news; some one must decide whether or not it's "fit to print." The historian must pick and choose and organize in accordance with his insight as to what is significant. This process is influenced by a number of factors:

1. Our interests change: we probably care less now about the love affairs of the French kings than about how the French peasantry lived. (Our histories of ancient Rome tell as much about us as they tell about the ancient Romans; this is again
the problem of cultural relativity, Chapter 11.)
2. Our conceptual apparatus changes: we now have available to us, for example, the Marxist hypothesis that the American Civil War was a class conflict, and the Freudian insight into why Bakunin loved violence and why Martin Luther was rebellious.
3. Our view of the basic historical segment changes: thus, Toynbee holds the most intelligible unit to be not the nation but the "society" (he cites five since A.D. 775-Western Christianity, Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and the Far East). Braudel chooses "The Mediterranean" as his unit.
4. The "personal equation" (interests and idiosyncrasies) of the historian changes.
5. The audience for whom he writes changes; this may have an effect on his selection and organization.

Sometimes the historian's standard of significance verges on the ludicrous. Here is one historian's complete biography of King George V.¹

¹ A. J. P. Taylor, in English History, 1914-1945, quoted by David Fischer, with appropriately raised eyebrows, in his Historians’ Fallacies.

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George V (1865-1936), second son of Edward VII: married Princess Mary of Teck, 1893; king, 1910-1936; changed name of royal family from Saxe-Coburg to Windsor, 1917; his trousers were creased at the sides, not front and back,

For all of these reasons, and probably others, nothing could be more naive than the "Baconian fallacy" that all the historian has to do is to collect the facts, or than Mach's view that "the bare data confront us." Namier said:

The function of the historian is akin to that of the painter and not of the photographic camera; to discover and set forth, to single out and stress that which is the nature of the thing and not to reproduce indiscriminately all that meets the eye.

But even the photographer must select, focus, arrange, emphasize, organize, evaluate, compose, define, and omit; he, too, searches for "the nature of the thing." As Carl Becker put it, echoing Voltaire, history "must play on the dead whatever tricks it finds necessary for its own peace of mind." The garment we wear called "the past" is remodeled for us to conform to the new styles.

It seems awkward or even perverse to conclude that "the past" is not absolutely fixed and is amenable to prudent manipulation.

But remember that "the past" does not literally exist at all; only
the present exists. The past is not a datum given to us: it is inferred from present evidence. Just as the geologist infers the "pastness" or age of the rock he is examining now, so the historian critically inspects memoirs, letters, diaries, newspapers, artifacts, etc., and infers a past history. History differs from geology in that the historian attributes meaning to his data (as we can similarly distinguish a human action from an event; see Chapter 20) . He looks at three standing stones and says, this was a Druid temple. He records the earthquake in Lisbon in 1755, but not other quakes, because this is the one that inspired Voltaire's *Candide*.

**Patterns and Selectivity**

The patterns said to be found in past events are selected by the historian; like the hypotheses of the scientist, they may be suggested, but are neither imposed nor dictated, by "the facts." At a particular time the facts may have been that in Belgium many men were running around, shouting, fighting, and dying; the historian later designates this the decisive Battle of Waterloo. Is there always a structure to what happens? Is there only one structure? Is the structure evident at the time? Was the Industrial Revolution, or the Gothic Age, or the Hundred Years War evident to those who participated in it? We refer offhandedly to the sexual revolution; and to the revolution in the Catholic Church: will future historians so elect to describe what is going on now? (I like a whimsical idea of Jorge Luis Borges about literary predecessors: we would say, for example, that the predecessors of Kafka are Zeno, Kierkegaard, and Robert Browning; but what if Kafka had never lived? Each writer thus creates his own predecessors: no one ever is, all on his own, a predecessor. It is not merely that predecessors cannot be identified until later, but that no such thing even exists until later!) What exists are individual persons doing things one at a time, "a wilderness of single instances." Historical terms are, as *Santayana* puts it, "merely rhetorical unities" that "break up on inspection into a cataract of miscellaneous natural processes and minute particular causes."

The metaphysics of *absolute idealism* (Chapter 1) regards all events, present and past, as concatenated into a seamless web that cannot-without distortion-be analyzed into discrete events. **Mark Van Doren**'s poem "*Past is Past*" expresses this view:
To wish a word unsaid,
To wish a deed undone-
Be careful, for the whole
World that was is one.
Pull the least piece away,
And bigger ones may fall;
Then granite; then great timbers,
And the end of all.

But historical pluralism, as defined by Maurice Mandelbaum, seems much more plausible:

The grand sweep of events which we call the historical process is made up of an indefinitely large number of components which do not form a completely inter-related set.... [Historical pluralism] denies that every event is related to every other event.

Is there, then, no limit to the historian's selectivity? Is there no hard core or bed-rock of indisputable facts that the historian must recognize? Can a totalitarian government rewrite the past as a matter of political expedience? I am told that one edition of the Great Soviet Encyclopedia devotes an excessive number of columns to the Bering Sea because just prior to publication the entry for Beria had to be deleted. Is he the only unperson? Was there ever a man named Trotsky? Under our eyes today, the achievements of Stalin and Khrushchev are being re-written. But let us not disregard the beam in our own eye. Winston Churchill claims in his History that the Monroe Doctrine could not have succeeded had it not been supported by "the friendly vigilance of the British Navy." Is that a fact? [Mr. Blackmon's note: Yes, at least until the 1880's.]

Columbus' landing place has recently been reidentified and it has been suggested that he discovered America in 1467, not 1492. A Finnish historian finds that the Russian winter of 1812, which is supposed to have destroyed Napoleon's army, was a mild one [Mr. Blackmon's note: Napoleon's army was destroyed before the first snow fall; and, of course, a "mild" winter in Russia is still pretty cold! The winter of 1811-12 was more severe]. The Catholic Church has recently "decanonized" St. Christopher—it seems there never was such a person. In brief, the hard core of indisputable facts is not so very hard. Ranke demands that history tell us "wie es eigentlich geweesen [war]"; but there is no such thing as "the way it really happened." The past in Dewey's phrase, is always "the past-of-the-present."

But these considerations do not make history incurably slanted, partial, relativistic, nonobjective, or mythical. The historian never indeed knows all there is to be known about an event, but neither does the physicist. The historian "goes beyond the evi-
dence," but so does the physicist. The historian selects his facts and decides how to describe them; so does the physicist. There may be more than one "true" account of the past; but neither is our physics the only conceivable description of the world. *Just as science is self-correcting, so different historical accounts may be confronted, compared, and contrasted; emphasis and bias may be made manifest; evidence may be scrutinized; arguments may be evaluated.* The alternative to absolutism does not have to be nihilism; just because we don't have certainty about the past, it does not follow that anything goes.

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Let us examine some of the frameworks or hypotheses that historians have used as implicit bases for selecting facts and exhibiting their interconnections (that is, their philosophies of history). I. We may begin with *Ecclesiastes*:

The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done; and there is no new thing under the sun.

It is an ancient idea that *history is cyclical*; the Persians, Babylonians, and Hindus believed that it repeats itself endlessly. Is this view naive? Alexander Goldenweiser argues that there is only a limited number of possible solutions to most practical problems of human life. (How many kinds of pot can you cook in? In how many ways can you paddle a canoe?) Repetition is therefore likely. Pitirim Sorokin says, more emphatically, "the basic forms of almost all socio-cultural phenomena are limited in their number; hence they inevitably recur in time, in rhythmic fashion."

II. A second group of philosophies of history may be called *functional* because of the way in which they isolate and stress certain causative factors:

1. *Buckle, for example, believes that the history of civilization depends on climate, soil, and geography.* Of course such factors are important: personality is affected by diet; maturity is in part a function of climate. Ancient Greece and Rome, situated near swamps, were almost wiped out by malaria. Simkhovitch attributes the fall of Rome to the exhaustion of the soil. Taine shows that in Egypt the devil is personified as the typhoon; in Scandinavia as the Frost Giant. But physicalistic and telluric factors, although necessary conditions for civilization, are not sufficient. Inland peoples will probably not invent canoes, but coastal peoples—the ancient Peruvians, for example—likewise may not. The Hopis and Navahos, in almost identical geographical circumstances, have vastly different cultures. Although the Fiji
Islands are cold and stormy, the natives wear no clothing; in
torrid Uganda the people are fully clad. Thus, a functional theory
of history has both strengths and weaknesses.

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Other functional theories of history may be indicated schemat-
ically. In each case, the historian has selected a particular causa-
tive factor to which he attributes major significance in the inter-
relations of past events:

2. Race is stressed by historians as ancient as Tacitus (who
contrasted the virtues of the unspoiled Germans with the vices
of the decadent Romans) and as modern as the Frenchman
Gobineau and the Anglo-German H. S. Chamberlain. Both were
anti-Semitic advocates of Nordic supremacy; they believed that
racial endowment is the determinative factor in history.

3. Hereditary ability is paramount in historical interpre-
tations that focus on the influence of such families as the Medici,
the Adarnses, the Bachs, the Kennedys, and the Soongs. Francis
Galton, the founder of eugenics and himself a member of a
distinguished family which included Charles Darwin, was a pro-
oponent of this theory.

4. Psychological factors are identified by Freud and many
post-Freudians as the moving force in history. In this view, civili-
zation results from the sublimation of deep impulses and un-
conscious basic drives. Eros (the libido, or sex drive) and Than-
atos (the death wish) are personified as the causative factors
in history.

5. The Communist Manifesto begins, "The history of all
hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." Marxism
is not the only theory of economic determinism; Charles
Beard's interpretation of how the American Constitution was
adopted is another example. The modes of economic life and
the relations of production are deemed to explain the legal,
political, intellectual, religious, and other "ideological" aspects
of a society and its history.

6. Carlyle said, "The History of the World is but the Bio-
graphy of Great Men." Emerson and James also found the motive
power of history to be the appearance of superior individuals.

What happens when two functional theories conflict? Sidney
Hook offers the amusing example of Trotsky's account of the
role of Lenin in the Russian Revolution. As a Marxist, Trotsky
was committed to the inevitable success of the proletarian revolu-
tion; but Lenin's "Theses of April 4," which set the course of
the revolution, Trotsky wrote, were
published in his own name and his only. The central institutions of the party met them with a hostility softened only by bewilderment. Nobody—not one organization, group, or individual—affixed his signature to them.

How, then, could the revolution have succeeded without Lenin? How can Marxist economic determinism be reconciled with Lenin's apparent indispensability? Lenin would somehow have been produced, according to Trotsky, because he was not an accidental element in the historic development, but a product of the whole past of Russian history. Lenin did not oppose the party from outside, but was himself its most complete expression.

This analysis is not unlike Kautsky's claim that, had Napoleon died in 1785, another soldier would have risen from the ranks to perform Napoleon's historic task.

III. The idea of progress as a philosophy of history is relatively new. Prior to Voltaire and the French Revolution, the "Golden Age" was usually placed in the remote past. *Progress must be distinguished from historical evolution and from change. Change is pervasive and objective; it is any difference in position, size, or quality. If the change is gradual and has a direction, it is evolution; this mayor may not be pervasive, but it, too, is objective. However, progress is change in the direction of human interests; it is neither pervasive nor objective.* Giambattista Vico first suggested in the early eighteenth century that men control their history, so that it could be directed progressively. In different ways, Saint-Simon, Comte, Kant, Hegel, Fichte, Bergson, Spencer, and Whitehead would agree that history shows progress.

IV. History is a great drama of sin and redemption, according to the Christian view. In the year 4004 B.C., God created beings who were imperfect copies of Himself. But Adam and Eve succumbed to the temptation of the Devil, so they and their sinful descendants were condemned to suffer. God then tried to redeem mankind by the incarnation of His Son. According to St. Augustine, history is the conflict between the "City of God" and the "City of Satan" until the final day of reckoning. (The Christian view might be regarded as a special example of the progressive theory.)

V. Organismic theories consider society to be a kind of living organism. Spengler believes that all civilizations grow, from in-
fancy, through youth, maturity, and senility, to death. All cultural phenomena are thus said to be "organically" interrelated. In ancient Greece, for example, the unit of government (the city-state), the development of Euclidean geometry, a religion of finite deities, the characteristic orders of architecture, and belief in a closed universe were all declared to be interconnected as if they were parts of a living whole. "Everything that is Classical," Spengler summarized, "is comprehensible in one glance." Nor was it accidental, he insisted, that double-entry bookkeeping was invented in 1494 by Fra Luca Pacioli; Spengler ranked him with his contemporaries Copernicus and Columbus. The analogy between a society and an organism is also made, but more loosely, by Sorokin and Toynbee.

Closely related to the organismic theories are those that postulate a Zeitgeist, or spirit of the age, to account for cultural phenomena. These theories explain Gothic cathedrals, for example, as a manifestation of the "Gothic spirit," which is said to infuse all the products of that era. However, we can more accurately understand Gothic cathedrals as a solution to certain problems in engineering and economics. Stone was then widely used for building because of the fear of fire in wooden buildings; ceilings were necessarily heavy, and supporting walls had to be very thick, with little space for windows. But the invention of the flying buttress and the ribbed vault distributed the weight of the structure and made possible thinner walls and larger openings. Arches were pointed so that openings of different sizes could reach the same highest point. The art of staining glass was also then being mastered. Thus, the soaring buoyancy of the Gothic cathedrals is attributable less to a mysterious Zeitgeist than to the solution of specific practical problems. To speak of "Gothic man" is to use a metaphor; to seek for the collective consciousness which produced "Gothic art"-cathedrals, music, and poetry-is to pursue a will o’ the wisp. There is no single dominant outlook, or Weltanschauung, that influences all the arts. The pointed arch is also to be found in Islamic architecture. Nothing in English painting corresponds to the poetry and drama produced in the Elizabethan era. The skyscraper has nothing in common with atonality in music. It is convenient to use such general concepts as the "spirit of an epoch," but they have no explanatory or predictive value; it is fallacious to assume that whatever events are produced in a given chronological period must have a common essence.
The Myth of Historical Inevitability

In *War and Peace* Tolstoy vividly portrays the bewilderment of the millions of people caught up in the crises and upheavals of the Napoleonic Wars. "On the 12th of June [1812]," he writes, "the war began, that is, an event took place opposed to human reason and all human nature." And he wonders:

What led to this extraordinary event? What were its causes? Historians, with simple-hearted conviction, tell us that the causes of this event were the insult offered to the Duke of Oldenburg, the failure to maintain the continental system, the ambition of Napoleon, the firmness of Alexander, the mistakes of the diplomats, and so on ....

The causes of this war seem innumerable in their multiplicity. The more deeply we search out the causes the more of them we discover; and every cause, and even a whole class of causes taken separately, strikes us as being equally true in itself, and equally deceptive through its insignificance in comparison with the immensity of the result, and its inability to produce (without all the other causes that concurred with it) the effect that followed ....

And consequently nothing was exclusively the cause of the war, and the war was bound to happen, simply because it was bound to happen. Millions of men, repudiating their common sense and their human feelings, were bound to move from west to east, and to slaughter their fellows, just as some centuries before hordes of men had moved from east to west to slaughter their fellows ....

Although in that year, 1812, Napoleon believed more than ever that to shed or not to shed the blood of his peoples depended entirely on his will (as Alexander said in his last letter to him) , yet then, and more than at any time, he was in bondage to those laws which forced him, while to himself he seemed to be acting freely, to do what was bound to be his share in the common edifice of humanity, in history.

One enduring myth is that human history has an overall plot, and that if we could only figure out what it is, we would have a clue to what the future holds. But there is no evidence at all to support so romantic a view.

Appraisal of Histories

How are we to evaluate these philosophies of history? As may be expected, none of them is entirely true, none is entirely false.
They are frameworks for collecting and organizing data; like metaphysical theories or like the psychologist's models, they succeed if they fructify our self-understanding. Thus, they may not be equally satisfactory even when they are equally accurate. No crucial experiment can test the validity of a theory of history, any more than it can the truth of a metaphysical theory. **Edmund Wilson** declares that the Russian Revolution was "the moment when for the first time in the human exploit the key of a philosophy of history was to fit an historical lock." But locks often have more than one key. Did the success of Lenin's revolution "prove" Marxism? And if he had failed, would Marxism thereby have been disproved? Were the French ultimately ousted from Algeria because of concessions made to the rising nationalism, or in spite of it? **Raymond Aron** observes that

> When an Empire begins to break up, the blame is ascribed indifferently to those who for too long refused to reform it, and those who, by permitting reform, accelerated the course of events. The facts never decide the issue between the opposed theories.

There is no Archimedean point of view; and neither the bird's eye view nor the worm's eye view is infallible.

History is far from being exclusively scientific or factual; it is also in large part creative. **Macaulay** regards history as a branch of literature. The historian, like the novelist, tells a story: this is how things happened. This may be considered to be a genetic explanation. As **Ernest Nagel** shows, it is also the way in which the scientist answers such questions as, why does the ocean contain about 3% salt? or why does English have so many words of Latin origin? Historical geology and Darwinian evolution also explain by demonstrating how things came to be as they are.

**Thus, the explanatory aspect of history would differ from that of the social sciences.** Although both disciplines face the problem of the plurality of causes, and the necessity to select and impute causes, the social sciences (ideally) explain by embedding the fact to be explained **within a general law**. However, there seems to be no compelling reason to insist that such a "covering law" or "deductive-nomological" model be the only legitimate one for historical explanation; nor that the cyclical, functional, progressive, organismic, and other frameworks used by the historian to structure his data be metamorphosed into scientific hypotheses or general laws to be verified or falsified. That would be to miss the point of how the study of history operates in fulfilling the commandment "Know thyself."
Here are two enlightening examples of the construction of a meaningful past: the Crusades, which loom so large in European history, are now described by Islamic historians as Christian fanaticism, or as European exploitation of the Arabs, or as imperialism, or even as a precursor of Zionism; but Islamic writers at that time spoke of the Crusaders only as Franks or as infidels, not distinguished from other invaders or marauders—there was not even an Arabic word for Crusades! And the heroic and suicidal defense at Masada in A.D. 66, in the Jewish revolt against the Romans, now considered one of the outstanding events in Jewish history, is not even mentioned by the Rabbinic and other chroniclers of that time—their interest was rather in such religious scholars as Johanan ben Zakkai; our only information about Masada comes from Josephus, who was a renegade Jew.