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# PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY(PART-1)

# INTRODUCTION

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The term *history* may be employed in two quite different senses: it may mean

- ❖ *the events and actions that together make up the human past, or*
- ❖ *the accounts given of that past and the modes of investigation whereby they are arrived at or constructed.*

When used in the first sense, the word refers to what as a matter of fact happened, while when used in the second sense it refers to the study and description of those happenings.

The notion of philosophical reflection upon history and its nature is consequently open to more than one interpretation, and modern writers have found it convenient to regard it as covering two main types of undertaking. On the one hand they have distinguished

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philosophy of history in the traditional or classical sense; this is conceived to be a first-order enquiry, its subject matter being the historical process as a whole and its aim being, broadly speaking, one of providing an overall explanation of the course and direction taken by that process. On the other hand, they have distinguished philosophy of history considered as a second-order enquiry. Here attention is focused not upon the actual sequence of events themselves but, instead, upon the procedures and categories used by practicing historians in approaching and comprehending their material. The former, often eluded to as *speculative philosophy of history*, has had a long and varied career; the later, which is generally known as *critical or analytical* philosophy of history, did not rise to prominence until the 20th century.

# SPECULATIVE THEORIES

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## *Speculative theories (the idea of an order or design in history)*

The belief that it is possible to recognize in the course of human history some general scheme or design, some all-encompassing purpose or pattern, is very old and has found expression in various forms at different times and places. The reasons for its persistence and vitality are numerous, but two very general considerations may be identified as having exercised a fairly continuous influence. First, it has often been supposed that, if the belief in an overall pattern is abandoned, one is obliged to agree in the view that the historical process consists of no more than an arbitrary succession of occurrences, a mere agglomeration or patchwork of random incidents and episodes. But such a

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patchwork view (it has been contended) cannot be seriously entertained, if only because it conflicts with the basic demand for system and order that underlies and governs all rational enquiry, all meaningful thought about the world. Second, it has frequently been felt that to refuse to allow that history is finally intelligible in the required manner implies a disbelief concerning the value of human life and existence that constitutes an affront to the dignity of human nature. The 18th-century German philosopher *Immanuel Kant*, for example, spoke of the “repugnance” that is inevitably experienced if the past is viewed

*as if the whole web of human history were woven out of*

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*folly and childish vanity and the frenzy of destruction, so that one hardly knows in the end what idea to form of our race, for all that it is so proud of its prerogatives.*

In more recent times, a comparable attitude was discernible beneath *Arnold Toynbee's* uncompromising repudiation of the idea that *history is "a chaotic, disorderly, fortuitous flux, in which there is no pattern or rhythm of any kind to be discerned."*

Thus, it has been the object of a long line of theorists, representative of widely divergent outlooks, to demonstrate that such pessimism is unjustified and that the historical process can, when appropriately viewed, be seen to be both rationally and morally acceptable. (To be continued)