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PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY(PART-2)

CRITICAL OR ANALYTICAL THEORY

Serious discussion of questions about historical knowledge began in the nineteenth century, when the speculative or substantive philosophy of history had passed its peak in Hegel and history had established itself as a serious discipline in the academy. Prior to the late Enlightenment period, history was generally conceived as a literary genre more valued for the moral and practical lessons it could derive from past events than for its accuracy in portraying them. In some ways the speculative philosophy of history, looking for purpose and meaning in the whole of history, was simply a more sweeping and more pretentious version of ordinary historical discourse. By the middle of the nineteenth century, important new historical studies of antiquity and the middle ages had appeared.

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Beginning in Germany, history had acquired the dignity and trappings of a *Wissenschaft*, complete with critical methods for evaluating sources and justifying its assertions. The great historian Leopold von Ranke, one of the leading figures of the "historical school" in Germany, was explicitly repudiating the idea of history as edifying moral discourse when he famously claimed that the purpose of his historical work was simply to show the past "as it really was".

For philosophers from Descartes through Kant, mathematics and mathematical natural science had served as the paradigm case of knowledge of the real world.

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How did the newly flourishing knowledge of the historical past fit in? Some philosophers, such as John Stuart Mill and those in the "positivist" tradition inaugurated by Auguste Comte, argued for the unity of all knowledge and tried to assimilate history to science. Just as physics formulated the laws of nature, and explained events by their means, the science of society would seek out social laws; history was just a case of applying these laws to the past.

Led by the neo-Kantians (e.g., Wilhelm Windelband, Heinrich Rickert,) and by Wilhelm Dilthey, German philosophers questioned this understanding of historical knowledge, focusing on the fact that its object is not natural occurrences but human actions.

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With history in mind, they began to work out the idea of *Geisteswissenschaften* or sciences of the human spirit, in contrast to the sciences of nature. Not only is the object of history different from that of the natural sciences, they maintained, its aim is also different: it is concerned with individual events and courses of events for their own sake, not in order to derive general laws from them (it is "idiographic" rather than "nomothetic"). Moreover, because human actions are at the center of historical concern, to give an account is often to understand the subjective thoughts, feelings, and intentions of the persons involved rather than to relate external events to their external causes ("understanding" rather than "explanation").

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For some philosophers, this made it inevitable that the historian's value judgments would enter into the account of events and actions, and that the "objectivity" so prized in natural science was neither attainable nor desirable.

This opposition between "positivists" and what we might call the "humanists" on the status of historical knowledge, begun in the nineteenth century, continued to shape the epistemology of history well into the twentieth century. Those positivists who accepted the humanists' description of historical knowledge could not consider history to be a genuine science.

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Those humanists who wanted to defend history as offering genuine knowledge of the past had to contend that the natural sciences did not offer the only model for what qualifies as knowledge. Among the latter, two notable attempts to characterize historical knowledge are those of Benedetto Croce and R. G. Collingwood (1999). Both argued that historical understanding of the past requires moving from action as an external event (e.g., Caesar leading his army across the Rubicon) to the reconstruction of the "inside" of the event: the experience or thought of the agent that motivated it.

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Some of the issues that concerned philosophers of history were reflected in the work of historians as well. With the rise of the social sciences in the twentieth century (sociology, anthropology, political science) many historians coveted a place among them, arguing that *history had to be "objective" and "value-free."* If that meant ignoring the subjective motivations of historical agents, so be it. They borrowed quantitative methods from the social sciences and applied them to the study of the past. Leading the way were the *historians of the Annals school in France*, beginning in the 1930s.

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Its best-known theoretician, Fernand Braudel, argued that history should shift its focus from the "surface" ripples of political history to the deeper-lying and slower-moving currents of social, economic, and geographical change. The move toward social history had a large impact on the discipline, and it was partly motivated by the desire to make history more "objective"—but only partly. Braudel's view reflected something closer to the substantive than to the critical philosophy of history, namely a belief about what the historical process really is.

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Among philosophers, the positivist conception of historical knowledge was revived in the 1940s, under the aegis of the unity-of-science movement in analytical philosophy, by Carl G. Hempel. The focus was on the idea of *historical explanation* : Does history merely describe events, or does it try to explain them?

And if it explains them, how does its mode of explanation compare with explanation in natural science?

Hempel argued that history does attempt to explain events, not merely describe them, and it does so according to a pattern no different from that found in the natural sciences: it brings events under general laws that allow us to show how they follow from their antecedents. Given such a law, the event to be explained should be logically deducible from its antecedents.

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Critics such as *William Dray (1989)* objected to Hempel's "covering law theory" (as Dray called it) on several grounds. Dray did not dispute the claim that history often tries to explain events, but, following Collingwood, he argued that a satisfying historical explanation often consists of reconstructing the reasons behind an action rather than finding its external causes. Further, it is hard to find general laws, of the kind that would be comparable to physical laws, being articulated in historical work.

Hempel conceded that historical accounts bear little surface resemblance to scientific explanations, that they seem to offer merely probabilistic rather than deductive explanations, and that their accounts are often just "sketches" of more complete explanations. But in doing so, he revealed the strongly prescriptive character of his account—a character it shared with much of the epistemology of his day.

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The implication was that if history could not live up to the standard of natural science, it could not qualify as genuine knowledge. Dray's larger objection to Hempel's approach was that philosophers should pay attention to what historians actually do, and to the wide variety of conceptual strategies in their work, rather than prescribing standards derived from abstract logical analysis or reducing their work to an imitation of a different, and equally idealized, endeavor. In this he was a harbinger of a trend in analytic epistemology that eventually extended even to the philosophy of natural science itself.

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Nevertheless, the discussion of history among analytic philosophers in the 1950s was dominated by the theme of causal explanation, and above all by the contrast with the natural sciences. Hempel's proposal set the tone. Even those such as Dray, who argued for the autonomy of historical knowledge, shared this preoccupation. Thus the confrontation of "positivists" with "humanists" continued. At the same time, the discussion extended to other, related topics.