

**PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY
AND THE PROBLEM
OF VALUES**

by

ALFRED STERN, PH. D.,

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ALFRED STERN, PH.D.,

*Professor of Philosophy and Languages
California Institute of Technology,
Pasadena, California*

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INTRODUCTION

This book tries to bring philosophy of history down to earth by showing that, in our epoch of gigantic ideological struggles and historical changes engaging the future of mankind, philosophy of history is everybody's concern. Our individual destinies depend to a large extent on the fate of the collectivity within which we live. Thus, philosophy of history becomes an essential part of our philosophy of life.

The author is convinced that philosophy of history is intimately linked with the field of values. Even a superficial approach to the problems of present history reveals that a choice between the different ideologies struggling in our day for supremacy is a choice between different *sets of values*. The examination of the relationships between philosophy and history and philosophy of values has not yet been undertaken on a broad front. It will be attempted in this book.

A few words should be said about the method our inquiry will follow. It is the author's conviction that any philosophical research lacking historical foundation is dilettantish. A scientist may well proceed without taking into account the history of his science, for past scientific theories are almost all obsolete because of their inability to cope with newly discovered empirical data. Philosophy, however, has to deal with the human condition in the world, the condition of a living, conscious, suffering individual who knows that he has to die. This basic human condition has not changed in history. Different philosophies only constitute different possibilities of conceptualizing and explaining this human condition, and, although the styles of these conceptualizations have changed in the course of history, past philosophical theories are not necessarily obsolete, for they still may be applicable to the unchanged basic human condition.

Thus, before a philosopher proposes a new doctrine of his own, he must discuss the most significant doctrines advanced before him; he must take into account their valid elements, reveal their shortcomings and refute their errors. Only then is he entitled to propose better solu-

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tions of his own. Thus, my doctrine will be developed gradually by a method half historical half dialectical. In the last two chapters, my doctrine will come to its final conclusions and will be synthesized into systematic unity. When explaining and discussing the doctrines of other thinkers, I shall keep in mind Seneca's maxim: "*ipso enim et in aliena castra transire, non tamquam transfuga, sed tamquam explorator*"¹ — I am in the habit of crossing over even into alien camps not as a deserter but as an explorer.

¹ L. Annaei Senecae ad Lucilium Epistulae, II, 5.

I. THE NEW HISTORICAL SENSE

One of the characteristic features of our time is the growth of its historical sense. The reason for this development is clear: we have lived more history than any other epoch in the evolution of mankind. In the past, during that short period of historical stability which — *cum grano salis* — characterized the forty-three years between the Franco-Prussian War of 1870/71 and World War I, a person could live without being interested in history. In our day such an attitude is no longer possible. We may try in vain to take no interest in history, but history takes an interest in us, in each of us. The last half century showed us that to understand history is of equal importance to those who make it and to those who endure it. Both need to know, in order to foresee and to act.

Does this bring us back to historical pragmatism, which, for a long time, has been abandoned? Intimately linked with the axiom of the immutability of human nature, historical pragmatism considered history as a collection of examples of practical use to mankind. For Polybius, the lesson given by history was, above all, a moral lesson for the benefit of the future ruler. By learning, thanks to the study of history, about the grandeurs and miseries of his own predecessors and of foreign princes, a ruler becomes able, according to Polybius, to endure with firmness the changes of fortune which — as Machiavelli was to tell us later — is a capricious lady. *Vultus fortunæ varietur imagine lunæ: crescit, decrescit, constans persistere nescit* — the face of fortune changes with the likeness of the moon: it waxes and wanes and cannot remain constant.

With Machiavelli, historical pragmatism became an object lesson. Since human nature is invariable, he said, all the ages are alike. Whoever knows one knows them all. When confronted with a concrete situation, the statesman will always find an analogous case in history. Machiavelli concluded that nothing would be more dangerous for a prince than to disregard the teachings of history. In his *Discours sur l'Histoire Universelle à Monseigneur le Dauphin*, Bossuet summed up the fundamental ideas of historical pragmatism by writing:

Even if history were useless to other people, it would still be necessary for princes to study it . . . If experience is necessary to acquire that wisdom which makes the good ruler, there is nothing more useful for their instruction than to combine their every-day experiences with the examples of past centuries.¹

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Hegel rebelled against historical pragmatism with the following arguments:

One advises rulers, statesmen, nations to heed the lessons of history. . . . But every period has such peculiar circumstances, each is to so large an extent an individual situation that one must and can decide only from within it and by growing out of it. In the tumult of world affairs, no general principle and no remembrance of similar conditions help us, for a pale memory has no power against the vitality and liberty of the present.²

Benedetto Croce struck an even heavier blow against historical pragmatism by showing that the present does not seek from history lessons to teach it what it should do but only the justification of what it has done. And Nietzsche went so far as to affirm that, far from imitating the examples of the past, the great action can develop only in a non-historic, anti-historic atmosphere. He who acts has to forget the past; otherwise he would be paralyzed by hesitation. In order to be able to act, the man of action must be unjust towards the past and see only his right to create a new future.³

There is yet another aspect of historical pragmatism much more concrete than that of Machiavelli, Bossuet and all their disciples: this is the pragmatism of the "monumental" conception of history. The term was coined by Nietzsche. The "monumental" conception of history gets its inspiration from the great examples of the past in order to be able to believe in the possibility of similar realizations in the future. Whoever adopts the monumental conception of history concludes that the grandiose action, having occurred once, has demonstrated its possibility and could therefore occur again in the future.

The way in which the youth of the nineteenth century saw Napoleon is certainly one of the most typical examples of a monumental conception of history. The fact that a Napoleon had been possible gave young

¹ *Oeuvres complètes de Bossuet* (Paris, 1836), tome X, p. 151.

² G. W. F. Hegel, *Sämtliche Werke* (edit. Glockner), Band 11, "Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte", p. 31 (Stuttgart, 1928).

³ F. Nietzsche, *Gesammelte Werke* (München, 1922), Band VI, "Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben", p. 238.

people between 1820 and 1895 the confidence that he would be possible again; it gave them faith in human grandeur and sometimes even the secret hope that they themselves might have been predestined to become the Bonapartes of their times. On Balzac's desk there was a portrait of that emperor who had converted his will into the law of a whole continent. Under this portrait young Balzac wrote the well known words: "What he has begun with the sword, I shall achieve with the pen."

For the Balzacian hero, Rastignac, who, from the height of the *Père Lachaise* cemetery, defied Paris by shouting "Now, let's fight it out!" ("*A nous deux, maintenant!*") Napoleon was a "professor of energy." Dostoevski's *Raskolnikoff* was also haunted by the monumental example of Napoleon when he tried to find out whether he, the intellectual, was still capable of acting.

In his book, *Russian Realism in World Literature*,⁴ George Lukács draws our attention to the fact that in many nineteenth century novels Bonaparte appears as the great example of the possibilities offered to extraordinary talents by a democratic society of reaching the highest levels of power. In this monumental conception of history, Napoleon became the standard against which to measure the democratic character of a society.

Although some forms of this monumental conception of history have survived, historical pragmatism in the narrow sense of a Machiavelli or a Bossuet has completely disappeared. Several factors contributed to this disappearance: Darwin's theory of evolution and modern Historicism with its insistence on the individuality and singularity of each nation and each historical situation shook the concept of a human nature, immutable through the ages, whose reactions would be the same under analogous conditions. And Bergson taught us that a living being which develops freely creates at every moment something new. From this springs the impossibility of foreseeing human actions under different historical constellations.

After the abandonment of the doctrine of the immutability of human nature thinkers of existentialist orientation like Heidegger, Ortega y Gasset and Sartre finally eliminated the very concept of human nature. They replaced the supra-temporal man "in general" of the Stoics by the man of a certain epoch and a certain place — that is to say by man *hic and nunc*. Instead of a human nature, they speak of "human reality" or "human condition."

⁴ G. Lukács, *Der russische Realismus in der Weltliteratur* (Berlin, 1952), p. 135.

When, at the beginning of our reflexions, we said that, in our day, the comprehension of history is equally important to those who make it and to those who endure it, when we said that both need to know in order to foresee and to act, this did not imply a revival of historical pragmatism. We do not believe that historical analogies are a sure guide in life and we do not think that the monumental conception of history is of interest to the bulk of our contemporaries. This conception of history as an *adventure* may haunt the minds of certain exalted youths who are impressed by the bloody monuments of a Hitler or a Mussolini. That is all.

Far from being an *adventure*, history was recognized by most of our contemporaries as a *destiny*, a tragic collective destiny from which the individual can hardly escape. If they recognize the importance of understanding history, it is less *past* than *present* history, less the *historia rerum gestarum* than history as *res agenda*, as the whole of the collective forces which act and, while acting, engulf us. After having gone through two world wars and being confronted with the threat of a third one, my generation finally learned to understand history as a perpetual collective development of which each individual is, willy nilly, a part. At the cost of great sacrifices, we now understand that history is a rapid, turbulent river, flowing from the past through the present, toward the future and dragging us along in spite of ourselves.

To understand this history in the sense of knowing in order to foresee and to act simply means to have studied its forces and currents in the immediate past in order to be able to anticipate, with some probability, to which side we shall be thrown by the next wave.

This anticipation is possible. It is not necessary to be what Hegel called "a Manager of the World Spirit" (*ein Geschäftsführer des Weltgeistes*)⁶ to foresee, under certain circumstances, the next phase of historical evolution. Any intelligent observer of the German scene from 1918 to 1932 could anticipate the tragic events which occurred between 1933 and 1945. Having studied the forces and direction of the historical currents of their epoch, some of these observers were even able to elude the gigantic wave *in statu nascendi* — for example by anticipated expatriation. The German writer, Erich Maria Remarque, left Germany several years before Hitler seized power. In 1932, the German Jewish historian and writer, Emil Ludwig, acquired Swiss citizenship, so that — as he expressed it — he would no longer be called a "German" during a second World War. This war broke out seven years later. Thus, the proverb

⁶ G. F. W. Hegel, *Sämtliche Werke*, Band XI, p. 61.

historia vitae magistra ("history is life's teacher") has not lost its validity. It not only makes us more erudite but also more cautious.

Some years ago newspapers discussed the cases of some prominent Frenchmen who had emigrated to Canada or to South America in order to escape World War III. Was this anticipation right or wrong? History will judge. Anyway, these people have acquired a new sense unknown to their fathers: a historical sense which guides them in life. Just as the sea-gull has a sense for meteorological storms, man, in the middle of the twentieth century, has developed a sense for historical storms: he feels the coming of wars and revolutions.

Let us describe more precisely that new historical sense: in what respect is it different from that about which people began to talk almost a century and a half ago?

In 1814, the famous German jurist Friedrich Carl von Savigny, the founder of the historical school of law, defined the historical sense as the faculty "of firmly grasping the specific character (*das Eigentümliche*) of each epoch and of each juridical form".⁶ This historical sense was purely theoretical. Our historical sense which is both theoretical and practical is, above all, the consciousness of man's temporality, his historicity — not as an individual, but as a member of a collectivity. Our new historical sense is the consciousness that the collectivity to which we belong has a past, that it has a future and that its present is a connecting link between these two dimensions; it is the consciousness that the present we are living in is laden with the heritage of the collective past and that it carries in its womb the germ of the future. Our historical sense is the consciousness that we are a part of this evolution of the collective past towards a collective future and that — to a large extent — it determines the course of our individual lives.

It is possible that the acquisition of this historical sense is a questionable gain for human happiness. Nietzsche envied the animals, unhistorical beings, which know neither past nor future and live only in the present. Having no memory of a grievous past and no conception of a fearful future, they must be happy. In order for happiness to be happiness, one thing is indispensable: "... the ability to forget, or expressed in a more erudite form, the faculty of feeling ... in a non-historic way."⁷

Hegel tried to invalidate this thesis in advance by declaring that world history is not the domain of happiness, and that the periods of

⁶ F. C. von Savigny, *Vom Berufe unserer Zeit für Gesetzgebung und Rechtswissenschaft* (Heidelberg, 1814), p. 48.

⁷ Nietzsche's *Gesammelte Werke* (München, 1922), Band VI, p. 234.

felicity are the "empty pages of history".⁸ Since the pages of the history of our century are full to the point of overflowing, we may understand why we are not happy. It is the price we have to pay for acquiring the historical sense.

It is obvious that the historical sense of our epoch has no longer anything in common with that erudite antiquarianism which threatens to change the past into a kind of gravedigger of the present: it has nothing in common with that sterile rumination which has been criticized so often, for instance, by Nietzsche, by Goethe and by Descartes. Let us not forget the remark of the father of modern philosophy that "if one is too curious about things which have been practised in past centuries, one usually remains very ignorant of those which are practised in this one".⁹

What we call the "new" historical sense is very close to that phenomenon which Sartre calls the discovery of man's historicity. According to the famous Existentialist, this discovery was made by the majority of Frenchmen from the year 1930 on. Up to that moment, says Sartre, they had secretly thought that to be historical was good for the dead. But the international crisis, especially the invasion of China by the Japanese, the rising of Nazism in Germany and, the Spanish civil war, opened their eyes. In his essay "*Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*" ("What is Literature?"), Sartre described in the following way that awakening of the consciousness of man's historicity in the French mentality:

Suddenly it became necessary to envisage those first years of World Peace as the last years of the period between-two-wars; ... We noticed that our individual lives which had seemed to depend only upon our efforts, our virtues and defects, ... were governed ... by obscure collective forces ... At a single blow we felt ourselves bluntly '*situated*'. ... There was a collective adventure which appeared in the future and which was going to be *our* adventure. Historicity reflowed upon us. In everything we touched, in the air we breathed ... we discovered something like a taste of history ... The pressure of history revealed to us suddenly the interdependence of nations ... an incident in Shanghai was a scissors' cut into our destiny — but at the same time it placed us back, in spite of ourselves, into our national collectivity.¹⁰

This masterful description by Sartre of the discovery of man's histori-

⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, *Sämtliche Werke* (ed. Glockner) (Stuttgart, 1928), Band XI, p. 56.

⁹ R. Descartes, *Discours de la méthode* (Paris, 1898), I, p. 13.

¹⁰ J.-P. Sartre, *Situations*, II, "*Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*" (Paris, 1948), pp. 241—244.

city by the French expresses concretely what we have tried to define abstractly under the name of the new historical sense.

In the American mentality the historical sense awakened a little later, but, nevertheless, with great vigor, after the end of World War II. Since Russia had emerged from this war as a first-rate world power based on an ideology opposed to that of the United States, the Americans finally understood that their style of living — the famous “American way of life” — was not a natural product like the earth, but an historical product resulting from certain circumstances of their collective past. In a changing historical world the survival of these circumstances and of their product is no longer considered absolutely certain.

In the Soviet Union, the historical spirit has been solidly established since the October revolution of 1917, for Dialectical Materialism, the official state philosophy, is a fundamentally historical conception of society and even of nature. “According to this conception”, said Engels toward the end of the nineteenth century, “socialism was no longer an accidental discovery of this or that ingenious brain, but the necessary outcome of the struggle between historically developed classes.”¹¹

More recently, Stalin wrote:

The dialectical method regards as primarily important not that which, at the given moment, seems to be durable and yet is already beginning to die away, but that which is arising and developing, even though at the given moment it may not appear to be durable.¹²

This dialectical method which regards things from an evolutionary angle, this way of investigating what they were and what they are likely to become, is a fundamentally historical method.

Although in different ways, the historical sense predominates today in France, in the United States and in Russia. In other countries similar tendencies are noticeable.

However, in different countries and in different classes this historical sense has different emotional tonalities, just as it had a different character in other historical epochs. The historical sense of the representatives of the Enlightenment was full of gratitude for the heritage received from history and full of confidence in its future. Voltaire never tired of expressing the happiness he felt as the child of an enlightened century which — with its art of living, its social pleasures, its liberties — including the “liberties of the table” — had vanquished the barbarity of

¹¹ F. Engels, *Socialism Utopian and Scientific* (New York, 1934), p. 52.

¹² Stalin, *On Dialectical and Historical Materialism* (New York, 1940), p. 8.

ancient times. From the triumph of the culture of the sciences, inaugurated in the sixteenth century, Condorcet drew his conviction of an indefinite progress of mankind.

Summing up these feelings of gratitude and of optimism on the part of the philosophers of the Enlightenment with regard to history, Friedrich Schiller wrote in 1789:

Unknowingly and without aiming at it, all previous centuries endeavoured to bring about our humanitarian century. We possess all the treasures which diligence and genius, reason and experience have harvested during the long life of mankind.¹³

Although our epoch is the heir of even richer treasures, it does not have that feeling of gratitude with regard to history. Worse than that! With nuclear science, the last result of the industrial revolution, our age seems to have inherited a Pandora's box, concealing forces which it cannot control. The emotional tonality of the new historical sense such as it predominates in the middle of the twentieth century — at least in the Western democracies — is determined by the fear of our contemporaries that they will no longer be able to dominate the historical forces released by their own dynamism and by man's feeling of being crushed by the forces of history, although they are human forces.

¹³ F. Schiller, *Sämtliche Werke* (Stuttgart, 1913), Band VII, "Was heisst und zu welchem Ende studiert man Universalgeschichte?", pp. 30—31.

II. HISTORICAL REALITY

Up to now we have used the term “history” in the usual sense, as it is understood by everybody. Now a more precise definition becomes necessary. What characterizes the great majority of current definitions of history is the fact that they imprison their object in the past. Herodotus, father of history, began his first book by writing:

What Herodotus, the Halicarnassian, has learnt by inquiry is here set forth: in order that the memory of the *past* may not be blotted out from among men by time ...¹

This same tendency to limit history to the knowledge of the past is obvious among the majority of contemporary thinkers. André Lalande, for example, defines history as the “knowledge of the different stages successively achieved in the *past* by any sort of object of knowledge: a nation, an institution, a living species, a science, a language, etc.”² For Raymond Aron “history in a narrow sense is the *science of the human past*”³ and for Henri-I. Marrou it is the “knowledge” of this past (*la connaissance du passé humain*).⁴ Faustino Ballvé defines history as *estudio de la vida de la humanidad por documentos*⁵ — the study of the life of humanity by documents —, for Huizinga it is “the intellectual form in which a civilization renders account to itself of its *past*”,⁶ and according to Collingwood history deals with “*res gestae*”, i.e., with “actions of human beings that have been done in the *past*”.⁷

Each of these definitions has its merits. What interests us at this moment is, however, the fact that they all limit history to the past.

¹ Herodotus, Book I.

² A. Lalande, *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie* (Paris, 1928), 1, p. 303.

³ R. Aron, *Introduction à la philosophie de l'histoire* (Paris, 1938), p. 17.

⁴ H.-I. Marrou, *De la connaissance historique* (Paris, 1956), p. 32.

⁵ F. Ballvé, *Diez Lecciones de Economía* (Mexico, 1956), p. 1.

⁶ J. Huizinga, “A Definition of the Concept of History”, *Philosophy of History* (Oxford, 1936), p. 9.

⁷ R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1946), p. 9.