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Understanding History

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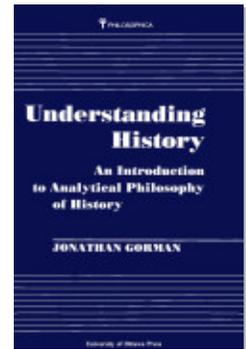
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Preface

THIS IS A BOOK FOR READERS WHO WISH TO understand history. "History" is an ambiguous word, in its everyday use. First, it can refer to the historical past itself, to the subject matter about which historians write. Second, it can refer to the study of that past, to the practice and writings of historians. So, first, there is a question about how to understand the historical past; and, second, there is a question about how to understand the practice and writings of historians. These two questions have been said to give us two kinds of philosophy of history, philosophy of "history" in each of its two senses. This introductory book is about both of these things.

An explanation is required as to why this book is about both. For previous introductory books — and I have in mind particularly those valuable contributions by W. H. Walsh and W. H. Dray¹ — have used the distinction between the two kinds of philosophy of history to distance themselves from the philosophy of the historical past itself. They have claimed to concentrate rather on understanding the practice and writings of historians. The reason for this refusal to contribute to the direct understanding of the historical past is of a special kind, and derives from a particular difficulty, not with history, but in philosophy.

Walsh and Dray shared the widespread idea that certain philosophers had set a bad example in philosophizing about the actual historical past. The philosophers they had in mind were those — such as Hegel and Marx — who claimed to have discovered a large-scale pattern to the historical process: a pattern allegedly covering past, present and future in an objective manner, a pattern which gave "meaning" to the complexities of human life, a reality which lay behind the superficial discoveries of ordinary historians. Such patterns were regarded by more rationally cautious philosophers as unfounded speculation; and dangerous speculation at that, providing as they did a supposed insight into the march of history, an "insight" which could induce extremes of political belief and motivate repression or violent political change. Against such thinkers Karl Popper dedicated his *The Poverty of Historicism* to the memory of the "countless men and women of all creeds or nations or races who fell victims to the fascist and communist belief in Inexorable

Laws of Historical Destiny.”² Rational caution rather required philosophers to leave the objective facts of historical development to be discovered by historians. Walsh, Dray and others built philosophy of history anew as an understanding of historical practice rather than of historical progress. It remains the case that there can be few more contentious areas of philosophy than the philosophy of history.

Certainly, philosophers should not engage in unfounded and rationally unconstrained speculation, about history or anything else. Walsh and Dray, who taught me much, were right to distance themselves from the historicists on these particular questions,³ and I wish to keep a similar distance. However, while the objective facts of the historical process should, in a sense, be left to be discovered by historians, there remain philosophical issues at this level. While rational analysis is the proper activity for philosophers, this does not exclude a substantive contribution to understanding the actual historical past. One cannot distinguish clearly between the understanding of the historical past itself and the understanding of the practices and writings of historians, because historical practices and writings are a central way of expressing for us what counts as the historical past and what counts as its understanding. To understand at least the best historical writing, therefore, is to understand what counts, by our best professional standards, as historical reality. Yet “what counts as historical reality” cannot be left entirely to historians, for whether there are “objective facts of the historical process,” and what these could be, are among the proper tasks for philosophical inquiry. Understanding history, in both senses of “history,” requires that we grasp the range of assumptions which historians (and the rest of us) make about historical reality and about how it is to be explained.

However, historians rarely make explicit these central presuppositions of their writings. It is the task for the philosophical analysis of history (again, in both senses of “history”) to recover and examine those presuppositions, and it is this which will concern us in this book. The recovery of the presuppositions will be, by the logical analysis of historical examples, treated at length. This logical analysis will proceed by asking “How do we know these things are so?” and this will be the central question that will direct our inquiry. The examination (as contrasted with the recovery) of the presuppositions will, in a sense to be explained, take the form of asking if they are true.⁴ This might suggest that philosophers have a touchstone for truth, and sit in judgment on historians. Some philosophers have given the impression that this is indeed the position, and historians have often been rightly resentful of such intrusions. However, it is a misunderstanding of philosophical analysis to think that it judges historians’ conclusions, and part of the

process of examining the presuppositions of history will in due course show this.

The essence of the structure of this book is thus the unpacking and answering of a philosophical question about historical knowledge by means of a developing logical argument, a logical development of ideas. This book is not, therefore, a historical survey of writings in the philosophy of history, but provides rather an overall philosophical perspective which shows how the different parts of the problem area fit together. The ability to see how important issues depend on each other in a logical way is one element of both philosophical and historical understanding, and my intended readership is thus students both of philosophy and of history.

It is not, however, intended only for such students. The book is sufficiently elementary to be of interest to general readers, and should also interest social theorists, for it extends the debate in philosophy of history in a new direction, that of non-Marxist economic history. The mode of presentation, while intended to be clear and elementary so far as the subject matter makes that possible, covers three new areas: a comparison of traditional narrative history with econometric history; an analysis of empathetic understanding in terms of cost-benefit analysis; and a justification of historical knowledge in terms of holistic empiricism.

This book has been slow to mature. Much is owed to the Queen's University of Belfast, which, at Professor David Evans's recommendation, gave me sabbatical leave in 1981-82. In the fall term of 1981 I gave two series of undergraduate lectures at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, as John Milton Scott Visiting Professor. One of these series was on the philosophy of history, and the other was on political philosophy. The elementary expression for an undergraduate audience of the empiricist direction of philosophy of history in the present book was worked out there, in the pleasant and stimulating surroundings of that excellent university in the beautiful country of Canada. My gratitude for the reception of my work there is particularly due to my students, and to Professors Páll Árdal, Ted Bond, Al Fell, Alasdair Macleod and Tom Robinson. While there I was able to deliver a paper on "the reality of the past" at the University of Ottawa (a paper which now appears *passim* in this book), and profited (although not, I suspect, anything like as much as I should) from discussions with Professors David Carr and Bill Dray.

There was not at that time, however, any content of economic history. In January 1982 I moved to Princeton University as Visiting Fellow and Senior Fulbright Scholar in philosophy of economics and political philosophy, working at what I then thought would be a very different level and for a very different audience. The nature and limits

of philosophy, as applied to particular disciplines, came to be important, and I recall especially, from among many valuable interactions, the help of Professors Paul Benacerraf, David Lewis and Carlos Prado. Herbert Simon, valuably interpreted by Daniel Hausman, was a particular influence while I was there.

The recognition that some of this research was of particular relevance to a wider audience came later, and the conversion of relevant parts of the research in philosophy of economics for an undergraduate audience in philosophy of history (while keeping an eye on the limits of philosophy) has taken place over subsequent years in my home university, among colleagues, students and friends as stimulating as ever. I must take this opportunity to express my sense of loss at the death of my friend and teacher Richard (W. H.) Walsh. His was a major influence on my thought in metaphysics and philosophy of history, and I continue to work within his capacious intellectual framework. He was one of the saviours of the big questions of philosophy and scholarship at a time when they were under attack by more superficial thinkers. I remember him and his kindness with great affection.

An early draft of this book was read in its entirety by David Evans, and I am particularly grateful to him for many years of support and encouragement. The final draft was written in the Donegal home of my friends Brian and Gillian Kerr. I especially thank David Carr, the University of Ottawa Press and various anonymous referees for their help and comments, and Anthony Sheehan for his help with the computer translation of text. My wife, Kyra, has saved me from many infelicities of thought and expression.

It is of the nature of philosophy of history to have implications throughout philosophy and other disciplines. Thus it is that several paragraphs in chapter 6 are put to different use in my "Ethical Responsibilities Versus Corporate Effectiveness," which is chapter 5 of *People in Corporations: Ethical Responsibilities and Corporate Effectiveness*, edited by Georges Enderle, Brenda Almond and Antonio Argandoña, published by the copyright holders Kluwer Academic Publishers in 1990.* I am most grateful to them for consent to publish this material here. Several paragraphs in chapter 7 are expressed in my "Philosophical Confidence," which appears in *Moral Philosophy and Contemporary Problems*, edited by J. D. G. Evans (Cambridge University Press, 1987). I am most grateful to the copyright holders, The Royal Institute of Philosophy, for permission to publish them here.

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NOTES

1. W. H. Dray, *Philosophy of History*, 1964, p. 1; W. H. Walsh, *An Introduction to Philosophy of History*, 1967, p. 16.
2. Popper, Karl R., *The Poverty of Historicism*, 1961. My former teacher Maurice Cowling remarks (*The Nature and Limits of Political Science*, 1963, p. 117) that this dedication betrays a wholly inadequate explanation of the historical matters in question.
3. It should not be thought that philosophers such as Hegel, described as "historicists" in this context, were thought to be of no merit. The contrary would be true.
4. Collingwood thought that such presuppositions would themselves be historical, absolute and uncriticizable (see W. H. Walsh, *Metaphysics*, 1963, pp. 160ff, R. G. Collingwood, *Essay on Metaphysics*, 1940, and R. G. Collingwood, *Autobiography*, 1939, chapter 8). I do not regard "presuppositions" as having the status Collingwood mentions; rather, I regard a presupposition as not having been properly recovered until one is in a position to pronounce it either true or false. Recovery entails criticizability.

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