II

HISTORICISM

The discussions of every age are filled with the issues on which its leading schools of thought differ. But the general intellectual atmosphere of the time is always determined by the views on which the opposing schools agree. They become the unspoken presuppositions of all thought, the common and unquestioningly accepted foundations on which all discussion proceeds.


The study of the history of man is now put before us as that by means of which we are to understand man himself, and know what we ought to do.

J. Grote, *Exploratio Philosophica*, I, xvii
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THE NATURE AND SCOPE OF HISTORICISM

1. THE MEANING OF “HISTORICISM”

It is generally agreed that one of the most distinctive features of nineteenth-century thought was the widespread interest evinced in history. The manifestations of this interest are not only to be found in the growth and diversification of professional historical scholarship, but in the tendency to view all of reality, and all of man’s achievements, in terms of the category of development. This mode of thought was equally characteristic of idealists and positivists. It permeated and softened the materialism of the period; it was also an essential element in attempts to compromise the quarrels between philosophy and science on the one hand and “genuine” religious belief on the other. The use to which the concept of development was put constitutes what I shall term “historicism.” The task of the present chapter will be to define the nature of this new mode of thought; in subsequent chapters we shall examine the variant forms which it took, and estimate its validity.

The term “historicism” has been used—and is still being used—in a variety of ways. Among the earlier works which were especially concerned with the history of this complex phenomenon, Ernst Troeltsch’s Der Historismus und seine Probleme (1922), Karl Heussi’s Die Krisis der Historismus (1932), and Friedrich Meinecke’s Die Entstehung des Historismus (1936) are perhaps the most frequently cited. In 1938, in The Problem of Historical Knowledge, I put forward a definition of historicism but made no effort to trace its history. Now I wish to return to an elaboration of that definition and to attempt to show the range of its applicability.¹

Given the variety of characterizations of “historicism” which already exist, the usefulness of any other definition will depend upon how well it unifies and clarifies the phenomena with which others have also dealt. Since almost all writers use the term in a manner which leads them to discuss certain figures as examples of a historicist view, the denotation of the term is to some extent fixed.
Although its connotations vary more widely, they always include reference to a specifically historical way of conceiving the world, and of evaluating its aspects, which first received influential expression in the latter half of the eighteenth century and became prevalent in the nineteenth. However, the thinkers who are invariably classified as clear examples of historicism are representative of a wide variety of philosophic positions, and they spring from diverse intellectual ancestries. For example, Herder, Hegel, Comte, Marx, and Spencer are all generally considered to provide classic examples of historicism, yet their philosophic systems are obviously antagonistic in many fundamental respects. The problem of defining the term is therefore a problem of finding a congeries of characteristics shared by these and other major figures whom historians of ideas would unhesitatingly class as representatives of this mode of thought, and which would at the same time be sufficiently precise to distinguish these figures from earlier writers whose ways of conceiving of the world, and of evaluating it, were different.

A definition of the term "historicism" which would be useful in this respect would also be useful in indicating why others, such as Burke, John Stuart Mill, or Carlyle, are in some contexts to be regarded as examples of historicism, while in other contexts they are not. A definition which would serve these functions would be as close as one could come to giving a successful definition of the term. The definition which seems to me to approximate that goal is the following: Historicism is the belief that an adequate understanding of the nature of any phenomenon and an adequate assessment of its value are to be gained through considering it in terms of the place which it occupied and the role which it played within a process of development.

In order to suggest how radical a thesis is contained in this position, it will be useful to contrast it with what has often been called "the historical sense," which has also been regarded as characteristic of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Possession of an adequate sense of history involved being able to shed the prejudices of the day, investigating past events in terms of the conditions under which they actually occurred. More specifically, it involved being wary of assuming that these conditions were identical with conditions which now obtain, or which obtained at some other time. Furthermore, those who prided themselves on a newly discovered historical sense tended to insist that if one is to make a judgment of value concerning any historical phenomenon, one should, in the first place, view it in its own context; and, further, one should avoid assuming that the moral practices or standards of worth characteristic of the present provide the sole basis on which to ground such a judgment. It would surely be admitted today that these principles represent precautions which must be taken if one is to avoid treating past events anachronistically; and an awareness of their necessity for a proper study of history did in fact arise hand-in-hand with the growth of historicism.

However, the two positions are by no means identical. For example, those who would guard against misapprehending history due to our tendency to read the present into the past might none the less hold that individual events or specific periods of history can be understood in their concrete actuality without view-
ing them as aspects of some larger process of development. It would also be possible to be thoroughly cognizant of the factors which have led to faulty evaluations of past events without holding that moral judgments of historical personages, or evaluations of the achievements of specific periods of history, are to be based on the roles which they played within some longer-range pattern of development. In short, one can be willing to regard as erroneous all judgments which distort the nature of the past because of a faulty historical perspective, and yet hold that our understanding of a historical event, or our evaluation of it, is in the first instance concerned with the nature of the event itself, and not with its place within some process of change. The thesis of historicism, on the other hand, demands that we reject the view that historical events have an individual character which can be grasped apart from viewing them as embedded within a pattern of development. What is, then, essential to historicism is the contention that a meaningful interpretation or adequate evaluation of any historical event involves seeing it as part of a stream of history.

In the following chapters we shall be concerned to trace the various strands of thought which led to an acceptance of this position. However, in order to account for the convergence of what are in other ways radically opposed positions, it will be necessary to examine one concept which was fundamental to all of them: the concept of development.

2. The Concept of Development

The philosophic use of a term such as "development" frequently involves notions which are not included in our ordinary uses of that term. Nevertheless, philosophers rarely use an ordinary term in a wholly arbitrary way, whatever further specifically philosophic meanings they may read into it. For this reason it will be useful to begin by an examination of the manner in which the concept of development was used by nineteenth-century philosophers and then determine what is still the ordinary use of that concept by comparing and contrasting it with our use of the terms "change" and "progress."

The concept of development always involves the concept of change. However, not every type of change is an instance of development. What strikes us as a random, patternless change is not regarded as an instance of development. Furthermore, we do not take all patterned changes—for example, the changing of traffic lights from red to green to red to green—as instances of development. "Development" involves the notion of a change taking place in a specific direction, and, more particularly, it involves the view that what comes later in the process is an unfolding of what was at least implicitly present in its earlier stages. This is the etymological origin of the term, and something of its original significance remains part of its current meaning. There is, then, the suggestion of a linear quality in those processes which we designate as cases of development. It is for this reason that what appears to us as a purely cyclical process would not be characterized as a development, since that which is manifest at the end of the
process is not different from that which was explicitly present at the outset. On the other hand, even in a cyclical process we do sometimes single out some particular phase of the process and regard this phase as a development, that is, as an unfolding of such and such a quality up to a specific point in the process as a whole.

It is also to be noted that in speaking of things as developing we frequently read a value connation into the process, implying that its end-stage is “higher” or better than what was actually present in its earlier stages. Nevertheless, we do not invariably do so. We may, for example, speak of the development of some phenomenon which we consider to be of negative value, as a believer in a free-enterprise system might trace the history of the development of state interference in economic matters. Thus, the concept of development need not always have an evaluative component in its connotation, but it often—and perhaps usually—does so.

Turning now to the concept of progress, it might be thought that we can distinguish the notion of development from the notion of progress by virtue of the fact that while the former need not carry a connotation of increase in value, the latter invariably does. However, so far as ordinary usage is concerned, this does not provide an adequate basis for drawing a distinction between them. For example, there are times at which we speak of the progress of a disease, or speak with regret of the progressive undermining of an idea or of a social system. Thus, use of the term “progress” does not always carry the connotation that what has emerged in the course of a temporal process is of higher value than what was actually present in the earlier stages of that process. Nevertheless, it almost invariably does so when it is used with respect to long-run historical developments, and it can always be assumed to do so when it is used in connection with human history as a whole. To differentiate between the latter use of the term and its other uses, I shall capitalize “Progress” when it is taken to mean that there is a pervasive optimizing tendency in history.

What the terms “development” and “progress” have in common is, then, the idea that a given process of change has a pattern, and this pattern in turn has a directional property. Such a directional property is not, however, simply a question of something succeeding what came earlier, but involves the belief that what was present in the earlier stages becomes more marked or more explicit in the later stages. Such a notion is, I submit, present in both the idea of development and the idea of progress. To be sure, if the original etymological significance of the two words still clung to these terms one could, on that basis, distinguish between development and progress. We would then speak of those processes in which there was an unfolding of that which was already at least implicitly present as a case of development, and we would speak of those cases in which there was the element of advancing toward something new as progress. However, there seems to be little warrant in either ordinary or philosophic usage for drawing this distinction; and, as we shall soon see, there was no fundamental conflict between the views of those who conceived of history as subject to a law of Progress, and those who, on the analogy of the growth of living things, regarded
development as an inherent tendency within cultures to unfold that which was implicit within them.

One further element in our ordinary notions of both development and progress deserves to be noted. Any process characterized as an instance of either is viewed as a relatively continuous process which proceeds not through random variations, but steadily, naturally, and through successive stages toward its goal. What we take to be the successive phases or stages in a developmental or progressive process are successively closer approximations to what we regard as the last stage of that process. This is clear from the fact that if we are tracing a development and find some point in the process at which what has been fore-shadowed as the end of the process is temporarily supplanted by a "regression" to an earlier stage, we do not consider the latter as part of the development, but as a hiatus in it. Such a break in the directional process is only regarded as being a phase of the development if what then succeeds the break represents an advance over what immediately preceded that break, rather than being merely a return to the status quo ante; in these cases the break is viewed as a phase of the development, constituting a necessary check in the process. It is so regarded because it gave rise to a fuller manifestation of that toward which the process was tending. Thus, "development" and "progress" are both concepts which involve the notion of goal-orientation.

So much for what I take to be our ordinary usage of the term "development" and our ordinary conception of the processes to which this term is applied. It is now necessary to seek out some of the philosophic assumptions which are usually associated with our use of this concept. These philosophic assumptions may not be of great significance with respect to our ordinary uses of the term, but in the context of more technical discussions it is necessary to become acquainted with them.

In the first place it is to be noted that whenever we speak of a development we must always have in mind the idea of something which develops. To be sure, this "something" need not be a concrete entity (that is, a "thing" or "substance"); it could, for example, be an attitude, an art form, a disease, or the like. These alternative possibilities introduce a distinction which it is important to draw if we are to understand the fundamental presuppositions of historicism.

To clarify this distinction, consider the case in which a historian writes a specialized history, such as a history of some concept (e.g., "historicism"), or of a literary form (e.g., the novel), or of some attitude or widely shared conviction (e.g., the feminist movement). In such histories we need not suppose that the development that has been traced represents a series of transformations undergone by some substantival entity: the series of events itself is the sole subject of the history. Similarly, if a historian traces the history of sculpture in a given country over a certain period of time, or traces the growth of some form of technology, or the like, he might adopt the same attitude: the true subject of his history is simply the set of related events he has traced. However, histories of this type are sometimes interpreted in a quite different way. Whether rightly or wrongly, there have been those who have tended to view the development of a na-
tion’s art or technology as we sometimes view a series of works by a single artist: as successive expressions of a developmental process which occurred within him. Were the historian to use this analogy with respect to the series of events which he had established, the development which he traced would not merely be the history of a certain concept, or literary form, or shared attitude in a given country, or area, over a certain period of time; it would be a history of a developmental process taking place within an enduring entity underlying the specific changes. The true subject of development would then be the entity itself, not merely a series of changes.

Now, it so happens that those who embraced historicism used the concept of development in the second of these ways. For them, the observable change in some aspect of nature or some aspect of human endeavor was a symptom of some more basic developmental process: behind the qualitative changes which they could directly observe were changes in whatever basic substance or process gave rise to these qualities. Thus any directional pattern of change in the arts, or in political life, or in technology, was taken as expressive of a pattern of change within a developing entity—for example, in the culture as a whole, or in the spirit of a people, or in Humanity, or Reality.

This conception is not an unnatural one, even if the form in which it has just been stated may make it appear extravagant to the contemporary reader. Surely its defenders might point out that only such a conception is compatible with what we ordinarily mean by “development.” That concept, as we have seen, involves the notion of a change which is relatively continuous, instead of proceeding by random variations. If, however, the historian is permitted merely to trace changes with respect to some particular quality without relating the successive manifestations of this quality to some underlying process, is there real continuity in what has been traced? To be sure, in time there may be a heightening of the particular quality with which he has concerned himself, but might it not be argued that this in itself does not constitute “real continuity”; that it is, on the contrary, a mere stringing together of beads selected by the historian for the design they will make? On the other hand, if we view a series of changes as phases in one underlying process which manifests itself successively in each of them, then what has been traced is an actual process, not some creation of the historian’s interests and imagination.

That it would not be unnatural to argue in this way may also be seen from the fact that we have an inveterate tendency to ask with respect to any change not merely what changes, but why it changes as it does. If each separate change were taken as the ultimate subject of a historian’s account of a developmental process, it is questionable whether we would ever reach a general explanation of why the whole series of changes occurred as it did. In some instances the cause of a particular change might be the direct influence of, say, one work of art upon another; in other instances it might be attributed to the impact of the same historical influences on the independent work of two different men; in other cases still other types of explanation might be given. However, the feeling of necessity which we have when we witness the continuity which is present in a process of
directional change seems to suggest that there must be some more basic explanation, some sufficient reason why the whole pattern of change assumed the form it did. This conviction finds satisfaction in the belief that these changes are manifestations of an underlying process which itself develops according to its own inner laws.

I am not myself inclined to accept the cogency of these arguments. In tracing the development of historicism and of other nineteenth-century concepts I shall not be using the method which they seek to defend. In fact, in the final chapter of this discussion of historicism I shall criticize the view they represent. Here, however, it is merely a question of making somewhat more plausible the thesis that the comprehension of any "genuine" development must be more than a matter of tracing a succession of changes; that, on the contrary, the historian is concerned with a developmental process in which some subject manifests itself in successive forms, each of these forms expressing a tendency which is characteristic of the whole.

3. Two Sources of the Developmental View

It can be said that there were two distinct and presumably opposed sources of the view that the category of development provided the basic means of understanding reality and human history. One can be identified with the Romantic rebellion against the Enlightenment, whereas the other was, in some respects, a continuation of the Enlightenment tradition. The first arose in the late eighteenth century, primarily in Germany; one of its most characteristic features was its tendency to view historical development on the analogy of the growth of living things. Though he went far beyond it, it was to this movement that Hegel also belonged. The second, which involved an attempt to establish a science of society which would be based on the discovery of laws of social development, had its first major exponents in Saint-Simon and Comte, and was also represented by Marxism. However, it is doubtful whether either or both of these tendencies would have been sufficient to establish historicism as the dominant mode of thought in the nineteenth century had it not been for Darwin's theory of the origin of species. Largely as a consequence of that theory, evolutionism became firmly entrenched as a way of looking at all aspects of the world; and while evolutionism is not necessarily identical with historicism, when this mode of thought became dominant, historicism flourished.

Before turning to a consideration of this sequence of events, which will occupy us in the next chapters, it will be useful to introduce each of the two pre-Darwinian sources of the developmental view, showing that each had a clear affinity with historicism. Here we shall first consider the general position of those who, in opposition to the Enlightenment, tended to use analogies drawn from the growth of living things as a source of insight into nature and human history.

If we observe the stages in the growth of a plant or an animal, we find that it appears to be in some degree autonomous with respect to the environment. Under
normal environmental circumstances it seems to develop according to its own nature; if obstacles to its development threaten to block it, it will in many cases surmount these obstacles, continuing to grow until it reaches that state which is the fullest realization of the potentialities which we ascribe to a living thing of its kind. And when, for some reason, it fails to achieve this end, we think of it as "stunted," as precluded from reaching its goal, that is, from the goal which others of its kind, in more favorable environments, were able to reach. This common-sense view is close to the Aristotelian conception of the nature of living things, and it is to such a common-sense view of organic growth that those who used the organic analogy appealed.

Now, if this view of organic growth is taken seriously, then the way in which to explain a particular state of an organism at a particular time is to relate that state to the whole pattern of growth which that type of organism will normally display. Only if it fails to achieve its normal development do we feel the need to invoke external factors as the causes for what has occurred. What holds of our explanation of why a particular state has occurred holds also of our explanation of why one particular state has succeeded another: this particular pattern of change is taken as an expression of an inherent tendency in the organism. Once such a view has been adopted, it becomes impossible to explain why any particular state is what it is except through relating it to the pattern of the developmental process as a whole. And this, of course, is the thesis of historicism with respect to the explanation of historical events. Similarly, in evaluating particular features of an organism, we must view these features in terms of what they contribute to the development and functioning of the organism as a whole; and this too provides a parallel with the manner in which historicism claims that specific events are to be evaluated.

Turning now to the connection between historicism and the views of those who continued the traditions of the Enlightenment, we must take note of a special form of determinism which was accepted by those who sought to establish laws of development. Like most of their predecessors—since Hume's influence was not yet felt—they tended to assume that all natural laws were actual agencies which controlled or governed events. Unlike most of their predecessors, however, they assumed that the laws which would serve to explain social organization and change were not to be derived from a consideration of the psychological dispositions of men, but referred directly to the course of history. Such laws, they believed, defined the direction in which change necessarily proceeds; these laws themselves, it was assumed, controlled the sequence in which events could occur. For those accepting these assumptions, it was not sufficient for a historian to trace the immediate causes of some specific historical change, for these causes were themselves the consequences of the basic underlying law of social development. Therefore, it was the latter which provided the only acceptable basis for the explanation of events which could be regarded as significant for human history. This meant, however, that every event had to be viewed in relation to the direction of the historical process as a whole. Thus, this form of determinism led to an acceptance of the explanatory thesis of historicism.
At this point we can also see how it led to an acceptance of the evaluative form of historicism. In order to be significant, an event would have to be an exemplification of the overriding forces inherent in the developmental law: if any event were merely "accidental" and not directly related to the dominant laws of social change, it would not be worthy of attention; it would not have contributed to history at all. Thus, the assumption that there are laws which control the direction of historical change leads directly to historicism, as I have defined that term: to understand or evaluate any phenomenon one must consider it in relation to the place which it occupied and the role which it played within a larger process of development.

It is important to note that this deterministic conception of social change could only be upheld so long as it was assumed that "history" was not in fact a series of different streams, diverging and converging, and frequently affecting one another; but that, instead, all peoples could be said to be part of a single history, the history of Mankind. The latter conception, which had been characteristic of the Enlightenment, was in fact explicitly adopted by Comte, for whom Humanity was actually a substantival entity, "Le Grand Être." It was also adopted by all later social evolutionists who regarded social forms of organization as different stages in a single pattern of evolutionary development. And, as we shall see, this evolutionary view, like the determinism with which it was associated, was a chief factor in the dominance of historicism at the end of the nineteenth century.

Thus, in the period with which we are concerned, historicism tended to spread through all schools of thought. On the one hand, those who rebelled against the Enlightenment on the basis of its mechanical conception of nature and its view of man, tended to conceive of history in terms of analogies with the growth of living things, and this naturally led to an acceptance of historicism. On the other hand, those who regarded themselves as representing a continuing advance in the scientific aims characteristic of the Enlightenment adopted a form of determinism which also led to an acceptance of historicism. It is to the attempt to trace these currents of thought that we shall now turn. In the end we shall re-examine and criticize the usefulness of the organic analogies and the soundness of the deterministic assumptions which we have here only briefly introduced.