History, Man, and Reason
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One problem, with which we have had frequent occasion to deal in the preceding pages, was the prevalent but by no means universal belief among nineteenth-century social theorists that there are laws which determine the direction in which any society or institution will tend to move over the course of time. That belief, as we have seen in Comte and Spencer, to mention only two, was intimately connected with the explanatory thesis of historicism; it will, therefore, be appropriate to open our critical discussion with an evaluation of it. We shall then be in a position to understand that there are interesting and compelling parallels between this sort of scientific necessitarianism and that earlier phase of historicism in which teleological conceptions had been favored, and no attempt was made to establish societal laws.

This meeting of two otherwise antagonistic positions is a phenomenon which has been made familiar by Karl Popper’s *Poverty of Historicism* and by Isaiah Berlin’s *Historical Inevitability*. However, there is one aspect of historicism which was of special concern to them, but which I shall avoid: the effect of historicist modes of thought on questions relating to individual freedom and responsibility. In my opinion, it was because of their concern with this issue that Popper and Berlin to some extent failed to isolate historicism from a quite different doctrine with which it had been associated: a theory of the nature of societies frequently designated as “holism.”¹ To be sure, the connection between historicism and one particular form of “holism” was very close during the period with which we are concerned; however, the two views have not always been jointly held.² I therefore regard it as important to separate them, and I shall confine my present discussion to a single topic: whether or not the explanatory thesis of historicism can withstand critical appraisal.³

I shall, as I have said, start from a consideration of the position of those who attempted to establish deterministic laws of development, and who claimed it was with reference to such laws that particular instances of historical and social
change are to be explained. I shall attempt to establish the fact that it is a mis-
take to assume that there are any laws of the sort which these historicists were
attempting to find. I shall then examine the modes of explanation which were
characteristic of the first phase of historicism and its teleological approach, raising
some issues which have equal applicability to a belief in the existence of direc-
tional laws. If these discussions serve to establish the fact that neither form of
historicism presents an adequate model for understanding historical events,
then it will follow that some of the disturbing ways in which historicists have
dealt with questions concerning freedom and responsibility will be recognized
to have been misconceived. At that point my discussion will have reached the
same type of conclusion which Popper and Berlin were concerned to defend.

1. THE PROBLEM OF DIRECTIONAL LAWS IN HISTORY

Turning now to the deterministic model of explanation adopted by those
historicists who wished to establish a rigorous science of society, let us ask whether
or not it would be reasonable to expect that there are any general laws which
define a direction of change, which are irreducible, and which would apply to
historical and social processes. In speaking of a directional law as “irreducible,”
I shall be referring to any such laws which would not themselves be explicable
through tracing the effects, at successive moments of time, of what I shall term
“functional laws.” The term “functional,” in this connection, derives from the
mathematical use of the notion of a function, as when it is said of empirical
laws that they state “the functional relationships between the variables.”
This does not imply that all functional laws must be stated in specifically quanti-
tative terms, as one can see from the fact that we may formulate laws such as
the following: “whenever a solid is dissolved in a liquid, the boiling point of
the liquid is raised,” or “whenever a magnetic rod is broken in two, the pieces
are magnets.” Since the difference between functional and directional laws does
not rest on a distinction between quantitatively formulated laws and those which
are not expressed in quantitative terms, it must be sought elsewhere. It will be
my contention that this difference consists in the ways in which the relation-
ships which they formulate are themselves related to actual processes of change.
Functional laws, I shall hold, express concurrent relationships rather than a
series of successive relationships, and they do so even when they deal with pro-
cesses of change; directional laws, on the other hand, formulate statements which
refer to a set of sequential relations.

That there are many cases in which functional laws do, undeniably, deal with
concurrent rather than sequential relationships can readily be seen in a case
such as Boyle’s law, which is one of the most frequently cited paradigm instances
of a functional law: the relationship between the pressure and the volume of a
gas (at constant temperature) is expressed as a concurrent relationship, not a
successive one. However, it is to be noted that Boyle’s law does enable us to un-
derstand changes over time, even though time does not enter as one of the
variables in the law: given a change in the volume, the pressure of the gas will change, and vice versa. Thus, concurrent relationships may serve to explain the successive states of a system. On the other hand, there are cases in which time does enter into the expression of a functional law, and yet it is perfectly clear that the law expresses a functional and not a sequential relationship. For example, the time \((t)\) which it takes a pendulum to complete one full swing varies with its length \((l)\), but this relationship between periodicity and length is clearly not to be construed as sequential. I call attention to these cases in order to make two related points, both of which it will be useful to bear in mind in what immediately follows: first, that laws which state concurrent relationships can be applied in the explanation of change, and, second, that it would be false to assume that the presence of time as one of the variables in a law entails that the law is directional rather than functional.

In the foregoing cases, the non-sequential character of the relationships expressed in functional laws should have been obvious. It is also necessary to consider instances in which the factor of time introduces changes in the magnitudes of the other variables. A frequently cited example is provided by Galileo's laws of falling bodies. In such instances it might seem difficult to claim that the relationships which are expressed in functional laws are always to be regarded as concurrent relationships. Nevertheless, it must be noted that what is stated in laws of this type are changes in the magnitudes of other variables per unit of time; they do not attempt to trace successive stages in a sequential process. In short, such laws are not, strictly speaking, chronological in character. Thus, although functional laws of this type involve changes in the magnitude of the other variables with respect to time (and thus differ from laws such as Boyle's law), they are like all other functional laws in one fundamental respect: at any moment whatsoever, every functional law formulates fixed relationships which concurrently hold among the variables. It is for this reason that such laws have, following Ferdinand de Saussure, frequently been termed "synchronic laws."

In contradistinction to these functional, synchronic laws, it has become usual to speak of "diachronic laws": laws which seek to establish a necessary sequence of relationships, that is, patterns of change. Such laws may, of course, take various forms, but perhaps the most general way in which one can describe their structure is to say that they attempt to formulate necessary relationships between a series of three or more successive states of an object or system, and in doing so they define the course of changes which (if nothing interferes) such an object or system necessarily undergoes. It is for this reason that I find it most suggestive to speak of them as "directional laws."

Taken in this sense, it is not difficult to find instances of directional laws. The second law of thermodynamics (the increase of entropy in a closed system) would be one; what is usually referred to as Kepler's first law (that of the elliptical orbit of the planets) might be another. As these two illustrations suggest, a directional law may define a tendency to move along a single axis of change, or, on the other hand, it may involve a cyclical form of movement; each of these alternatives, has, of course, been accepted in one form or another by philosophers.
of history. However, for our present purposes it is not important to discuss the variety of the forms which directional laws may assume, but to try to become clear about the relationships which such laws may be said to bear to functional laws. In this connection I should like to point out that since my concern is with *empirical* laws, the following discussion will not attempt to deal with the special problems which attach to the interpretation of the second law of thermodynamics.¹⁰

As one or more of the foregoing examples may suggest, what is formulated as a directional law need not be regarded as irreducible; that is, it may be known to be, or conjectured to be, a consequence of the constant operation of functional relationships. Given a set of initial conditions, and assuming that no factors not known to be present will interfere, the constant operation of functional relationships can serve to explain directional processes. For example, Galileo’s functional laws explain the constant acceleration of freely falling bodies and the parabolic paths of projectiles, and Newton’s laws of gravitation and of motion serve to explain Kepler’s directional law of the elliptical orbits of the planets.

It must, however, be noted that the example of what is usually referred to as Kepler’s first law has sometimes also been used to show that while it is true that such a law may, at some later time, be explained in terms of the operation of forces described by functional laws, *originally* directional laws can be formulated independently of functional laws; and if they are sufficiently accurate they will be accepted, regardless of whether or not their possible relationships to functional laws are known. While this contention may be true, Kepler’s law of the elliptical planetary orbits is probably not a good example to use as a means of establishing its truth. To be sure, Newton’s laws were formulated long after Kepler’s; in fact, the law of gravitation was taken as partially confirmed through the very fact that it served to explain Kepler’s laws. However, it must not be overlooked that while Kepler only discovered his third law at a later time, he published the first two laws simultaneously, and it is likely that what we now call his second law was discovered prior to the first, and in a sense served as its foundation. That law, unlike the law of the elliptical orbits, is clearly a functional, and not a directional law: it ascribes constant equality to the areas swept over by the radius vectors of the planets in equal intervals of time. Moreover, it would seem that Kepler’s discovery of this functional law was connected with his conjectures concerning a force emanating from the sun—a force whose constant operation, and whose diminution with distance, make it comparable to Newton’s gravitational force.¹¹ When these historical facts are considered, and when it is recalled that what we now refer to as Kepler’s first law did not merely state that the planets moved in elliptical orbits but also stated that the sun stood at one focus of these ellipses, it should be apparent that, in this case, the acceptance of a directional law may not have been independent of prior conjectures concerning functional laws. This, we may note, can have been true even though, at the time, there was no way of showing how one type of law was reducible to the other.
Now, I should not wish to claim that a relationship of this sort holds in absolutely all cases. For example, should we say that someone who, through observation, had learned the life-cycle of a particular species of plant or of insect would feel obliged to press for the reduction of his general description of that life-cycle to the operation of non-directional (i.e., functional) laws? Or, if one can formulate general statements concerning, say, a series of phonetic changes in a group of languages, as is the case in "Grimm’s law," would one not be inclined to accept such statements as being wholly legitimate examples of empirical laws, even without the formulation of conjectures as to how they might be shown to result from the operation of factors which can be stated in terms of functional laws? Actually, "Grimm’s law" has often been regarded in precisely this way. Given such cases, it might seem most prudent to hold that scientific inquiry should always be free of methodological prejudices, admitting whatever types of laws are useful, and not attempting to force any form of empirical generalization into a mold which had not developed out of inquiry itself. While attractive in other ways, a neutralism of this sort fails to take into account the possibility that there are genuine difficulties in regarding an empirical law which attempts to define a series of directional changes as constituting an adequate explanation of the changes one observes, however regular they may be. It is with at least some of these difficulties that I shall now be concerned.

Let me approach these difficulties through pointing out two basic formal characteristics in which functional laws differ from directional laws. The first is the degree of abstraction from concrete events which is, in general, characteristic of functional laws; the second is the fact that functional laws must be treated as conditional, not as categorical, in their application. What each of these characteristics involves will become clear as we proceed; and we shall see that the difficulties which arise with respect to directional laws are related to the fact that they differ from functional laws in these respects. Thus, we may say that directional laws can be charged with two fundamental errors: the mistake of insufficient abstraction, and the mistake of taking laws to be categorical rather than conditional, in their application. I now turn to a consideration of the degree of abstraction which is characteristic of paradigmatic cases of functional laws.

As a point of departure, let us note that in any case in which we attempt to formulate a functional law that is to be used to explain particular objects, events, or processes, that law must deal with types of objects, events, or processes: the relationship which is said to hold must be claimed to hold not only of this particular entity, but of all entities which are of a similar type. This is the first level at which functional laws may be said to be abstractive: they abstract from the times and places of the occurrences with which they deal, designating relationships which hold whenever and wherever the same set of relevant circumstances may occur. However, if such a law is to be of any explanatory significance, it will involve a further degree of abstraction from the events to which it refers: the type of event with which one deals cannot be characterized in terms of all properties possessed by any one of its instances, since one could then never effec-
tively generalize from case to case. Thus, any law will not only abstract from the time and place of the instances to which it is to be applied, but will also abstract from many of their characteristics, confining itself to some of their aspects which are not only presumably repeatable in principle, but can be known to be repeated in fact. Even in those cases in which our law-like statements are very crude, both of these levels of abstraction can readily be recognized. If, for example, we explain the fact that a particular object floats or sinks by saying that it is made of cork or of solid iron, we have in the first place said something that presumably applies to all objects of these types; and, in the second place, we have characterized the type in terms of what we consider to be the specific factor which is relevant to its behavior when immersed in water: its composition, not its color, or shape, or size, or the like. Similarly, when we explain the transformations which a particular plant or insect undergoes in the course of its development, referring to the fact that it belongs to a particular species, we not only assume that such developmental changes characterize all members of that species, but we are abstracting from the differences in the environments in which individuals of the species mature, and from whatever differences among individuals (such as size, or variations in color) which we do not regard as essential properties of the species. Thus, there are basic similarities between functional and directional law-like statements, in so far as the first two levels of abstraction in their formulation are concerned.

Nevertheless, it must be noticed that, in some cases, there is a very significant difference between explaining the development of a plant or of an insect in terms of the species to which it belongs, and explaining the floating of a piece of cork or the sinking of a piece of iron through reference to its species, that is, with reference to its being made of cork or iron. The cases in which such a difference exists are those in which we attribute the contrary forms of behavior of cork and iron to a specific factor, viz., the light bulk of the one and the heavy density of the other, rather than to the general fact that one is “cork,” and the other “iron.” In such cases we have abstracted what we take to be a single qualitative factor, and we attempt to explain an occurrence in terms of that factor. On the other hand, when we explain the development of an individual plant or insect by reference to its belonging to a particular species, there is no isolable factor of a similar sort to which we are making reference. It is here that we reach the third and most essential level of abstraction in the classical examples of functional laws. It is because of the fact that there are isolable factors—factors such as pressure and volume, or velocity, time, and distance—which constitute aspects of the most diverse sorts of occurrences, that functional laws can be extremely specific in what they state, and yet be extremely general in their applicability. As one can learn from Galileo’s method, the first step that must be taken, if one is to find constant functional relationships, is to resolve complex occurrences into their simple aspects, each of which can be considered in abstraction from the others, however diverse the concrete appearances of these occurrences may be.  

Now, I would not claim that, in principle, it is impossible for laws of direc-
tional change to be formulated in terms of abstract features, rather than in terms of sequences among complex entities; that it is possible to do so is clear from Spencer's consideration of factors of growth, complexity, and differentiation of function in the most heterogeneous sorts of objects and events. However, it must be pointed out that this has not been the characteristic way in which, in most instances, developmental laws have been formulated. In the social sciences, such laws have in general attempted to establish a particular series of successive stages through which institutions pass, and this has involved tracing, or attempting to trace, the nature of these institutions in previous societies. The only verification which would be possible with respect to such a developmental law, would involve sifting further historical evidence to show that, in all other societies, these stages had also existed, and had existed in the particular order predicted by the law. Thus, such an approach involves "an immediate reference to the historically given reality and to the actual course of events," as Kurt Lewin remarked with respect to an allied mode of explanation, which he termed "Aristotelian." On the other hand, in the Galilean resolution of complex phenomena into their basic aspects, there is an abstraction of particular attributes from the concrete objects or events which possess them: terms such as pressure, velocity, temperature, or mass apply to a host of otherwise disparate objects. Since functional laws are stated in terms of relationships between these abstracted attributes, they are not necessarily tied to specific types of objects or occurrences.

The fact that the method which is characteristic of the modern physical sciences is an abstractive method is now so familiar that it need not be labored; however, it might be thought that another method which does not attain the same level of abstraction, but explains behavior in terms of the concrete natures and differences among species, could (in some cases at least) still hold its own. Thus, it might be claimed that it would be mistaken to abandon the search for laws of directional change, as long as there is any hope of finding such laws. While one cannot entirely reject this position, the issue is not whether one can formulate laws of directional change, but whether such laws are not simply generalizations of what usually occurs because of the operation of those factors whose relationships we attempt to state in terms of functional laws. The question is, then, one which concerns the reducibility of one type of law to the other. Yet, even here, the specter of unwarranted dogmatism can easily be raised. As we have already noted, if we are called upon to explain a particular change occurring in some form of insect, we are apt to offer a generalization concerning the developmental sequence of stages through which specimens of that species pass, and we may be at a loss to suggest any means by which to account for this particular change in terms of the effects of functional laws. Although this may be the case, a charge of unwarranted dogmatism is still not in order, for we shall shortly see that directional laws run into very fundamental difficulties when we find what appear to be exceptions to them. Before showing why this is the case, it will be useful to indicate the second general point at which it becomes clear that directional laws must be regarded as fundamentally different from functional laws. This difference can be summarized
expressed by saying that functional laws are always conditional with respect to their application, although they are categorical with respect to the relationships which they formulate, whereas directional laws are categorical with respect to their applications, as well as with respect to the sequential relationships which they affirm.\textsuperscript{17}

To say that a functional law is categorical with respect to the relationships which it formulates is merely to say that such a law states an invariant relationship between the factors with which it is concerned: for example, wherever and whenever a gas is kept at a constant temperature, its pressure and volume bear a constant relationship to one another.\textsuperscript{18} A directional law is, in a similar manner, categorical with respect to the relationships which it formulates: whenever and wherever one finds a set of conditions of a specific type, one can say that it will have been preceded or that it will be followed (or both) by some other sets of specified conditions, so that one can trace a series of changes proceeding in a definite direction. Thus, such a directional law is also categorical. However, the two types of law differ in the manner in which they apply to concrete cases. From the knowledge of a functional law, unaided by any further detailed information concerning specific matters of fact, one cannot predict or explain any concrete event whatsoever. Edgar Zilsel stated this point in an exceptionally pithy manner:

Astronomers cannot predict from Newton’s law what the position of the planet Mars will be on next New Year’s Eve. In addition to the law they need the knowledge of the positions, velocities, and masses of a few celestial bodies at some given time: they need knowledge of “initial conditions” as the physicist puts it. Knowledge of a law, therefore, is not a sufficient but only a necessary condition of prediction.\textsuperscript{19}

It is obvious that what Zilsel indicates with respect to prediction also holds of explanation: laws, taken by themselves, do not explain specific occurrences, nor do they explain why other specific events did not occur. Furthermore, it is important to note that we must know not only the initial conditions to which Zilsel makes reference, but also the boundary conditions which obtain in a given situation, that is, whether or not there is some factor, not currently affecting the process, which will later affect it. If one remembers these facts, it becomes obvious that a functional law does not provide explanations or predictions regarding actual events, except in conditional form. Applying Galileo’s laws, we can only say that if a body situated relatively near the earth were in a position of rest, and were to fall freely in a vacuum, and if its fall were not interrupted, then it would have a velocity \(v\) at time \(t\). Thus, to explain a specific event, it becomes essential to raise questions as to whether, in fact, these conditions are fulfilled; and when we are dealing with freely falling bodies which are not in a vacuum, in some cases we may not be in a position to say anything at all concerning the distance that some specific object (e.g., a leaf) will traverse, nor what velocities it will attain over any particular intervals of time.

If there were irreducible directional laws, the same stringent limitations would not obtain with respect to them. To be sure, we would have to make some initial observations concerning the state of the system in order to place it in a pattern of
developmental stages, but once having made those observations we could extrapolate on the basis of the law to say what, in general, had previously occurred within that system, and, furthermore, in what direction the system is tending. It is in this sense that the application of a directional law to actual occurrences may be said to be categorical, not conditional. For example, if there were a directional law defining a sequence of stages in the forms of marriage, then, in order to explain the existence of a particular form of marriage, one would relate that form to its necessary antecedents, and one would also know what subsequent form of marriage might be expected to replace it: one would not account for these changes in terms of specific historical conditions, appealing to the ways in which (under these specific conditions) changes were brought about through the operation of psychological, ecological, or functional factors, or by the effects of external contacts. An explanation by means of a law of developmental stages would be analogous to an explanation of why a particular planet follows a particular trajectory over one section of its course through appealing directly to the fact that this trajectory constitutes a segment of the planet's elliptical orbit. While such an answer would, under certain circumstances, allay further questioning—and would thus, in one sense, be "an explanation"—what one can regard as its explanatory power is in no way comparable to an explanation which is based on Newton's laws of motion and gravitation, operating constantly over successive moments of time.

It may appear unfair to say that those who believe in developmental laws neglect to take into account initial and boundary conditions, seeking to explain past occurrences and to predict future occurrences through the direct application of such laws. And it must be acknowledged that among contemporary social evolutionists there is some tendency to speak of evolutionary developments as occurring "when conditions permit," or to say that their occurrence depends upon "other factors remaining constant." Furthermore, there is also a tendency, although it is rarely made explicit, to relate laws of development to a set of basic functional laws.

In spite of these changes in the classical forms of social evolutionism, it remains important for us to examine the conception of laws of directional change in its unalloyed nineteenth-century form, since the acceptance of such laws was integral to the dominance of historicism.

What, then, is to be said against laws which do not have the highly abstractive character of functional laws, but seek to deal directly with concrete institutions or societies, and which, in addition, are categorical rather than being conditional in their application? The answer, I suggest, lies chiefly in the fact that these law-like statements fail because of their inability to handle instances which appear to provide exceptions to them. Such instances are of various types, but in each case, as we shall see, the deficiency in the directional law must be compensated by an appeal to factors whose effects can be adequately understood only in terms of functional laws.

Let us start from the fact that there are instances in which, over many successive observations, there appear to be no cases in which the stages of development in some type of biological organism fail to conform to our expectations, and we
therefore regard the law of directional change which predicts this sequence of forms as being more than adequately fulfilled. To be sure, there will be cases in which individual members of the species die at some early stage in their development, but we may be convinced on the basis of all previously examined cases that had such an organism lived it would have completed the normal life-cycle. Under these circumstances, premature death would not be taken as providing a counter-instance to the law which had been formulated. However, it is to be noted that such a law would then have to be phrased (or be interpreted) in a conditional form: An organism of type $A$ will, in all cases, go through stages $a_1$, $a_2$, $a_3$, etc., to $a_9$ (its natural death) unless something intervenes to bring about earlier death. The introduction of this conditional clause is not as trivial as it may at first seem; as we shall find, it entails the consequence that a directional law will not be adequate to explain particular instances of a development independently of the initial and boundary conditions which characterize those instances. Furthermore, the introduction of these conditional factors will show that our explanations of particular instances must be stated in terms of functional relationships, not directional laws.

Take first those cases in which a law of developmental stages will not be fully instantiated because an organism has been killed. To speak of the organism being killed implies that something external to its normal organic processes interfered with these processes, inducing its death. This obviously is a case in which the expected boundary conditions were not maintained: something which was not predictable by the law itself interfered to negate the completion of the sequence of stages. But what is equally important to notice is the fact that our explanation of the organism's failure to survive will have to be based on some relationship between the intrusive factor and those processes which normally sustain its life. Thus, in those cases in which organisms fail to develop due to external causes, the exception to the normal pattern will be explained in terms of functional relationships, not patterns of directional change. Similarly, if an organism dies prematurely "from natural causes," our explanations will have to take into account initial and boundary conditions, and will also involve functional laws. In such cases we attribute the shorter life of the organism either to its original constitution or to the effects of what happened to it during the course of its development. Furthermore, in tracing the effects of such conditions, we are not explaining the organism's premature death in terms of a directional law; on the contrary, when something interfered with its normal pattern of development, we are forced to shift our attention from that pattern to special factors which are to be found in this case, but not in others. In all exceptional cases, then, we are led to look for functional relationships as explanations of why the particular directional law, which normally holds, does not hold in these instances.

The fact that exceptional cases must be explained in terms of functional rather than directional laws has a further consequence of major importance: it follows from this fact alone that in normal cases, no less than in unusual or abnormal ones, we must assume that the same set of functional relationships is present and is relevant to what occurs or fails to occur. I do not wish to suggest that we must
in all cases know what these constant functional relationships actually are, nor how their presence or absence is able to affect the pattern of development which occurs. I only wish to point out that it would be a mistake to assume that such relationships are only needed to explain exceptional cases: the exceptional circumstances could not serve to bring about an unusual result unless, in some way, they deranged, interrupted, excited, or otherwise altered a set of ongoing processes which sustain the usual course of development. Thus, in explaining an abnormal case by appealing to the fact that a specific condition altered some particular process, we presuppose that this process was essential to the usual pattern of development. Consequently, it is through a set of functional relationships, not through a directional law, that we must ultimately explain what occurs in particular instances. We may not be made aware of the need to do so if the pattern of development holds without exception; on the other hand, let there be any dislocation of such a pattern, and we will immediately be forced to take into account the constant operation of functional relationships. Thus, in so far as we are interested in explaining concrete cases (and we do not confine our attention to loose generalizations concerning "what usually happens") we must ground these explanations in functional rather than directional laws.

It may appear doubtful that so strong a conclusion could be established on the basis of examples which are as apparently trivial as the interrupted patterns of development which I have discussed. However, if my conclusion was warranted in these cases, in which the only change in pattern was that occasioned by premature death, it can be expected to apply in all other cases as well. If one bears in mind the differences which exist between functional and directional laws, one can see why functional laws serve to explain concrete instances, whereas directional laws do not. A directional law, it will be recalled, is closely tied to actual concrete cases, seeking to trace a necessary course of sequential developments in these types of instance, wherever and whenever they are found; whereas a functional law abstracts particular types of factors from concrete instances and attempts to state the fixed relationships between these factors. Paradoxical as it may sound, it is precisely because a functional law is abstractive and is not directly concerned with actual cases, that it can serve to explain such cases. For, if one tries to generalize about actual events which conform to a given type (say, about all swallows, or all revolutions, or all wars)—and if one then attempts to use such a generalization as an explanation of what occurs in an instance which conforms to this type, one has not advanced beyond a classificatory explanation, which is, of course, where one had actually started. If, on the other hand, one has abstracted a given type of factor from a set of concrete instances, and is able to formulate a functional law expressing a constant relationship between this factor and some other factor or factors, then such a law can serve to explain cases which are extremely different from those through which this relationship had been discovered: genuinely new cases will thus be brought under the law.

In the second place, the fact that functional laws are conditional rather than categorical in their applications entails that not every instance which may at first sight appear to constitute an exception need in fact be a case in which the law
fails to apply: the initial or boundary conditions may be such that the effect which usually ensues will not do so, even though the law is correctly stated and is genuinely applicable in this instance. For example, the fact that an object is at rest on a table, or the fact that balloons may rise, does not signify that the earth's gravitational force does not affect them precisely as it affects a freely falling body. On the other hand, the categorical manner in which directional laws are applied, makes it necessary—whenever there is an apparent exception—to draw a distinction between “normal” and “abnormal” instances. A functional law, however, does not license exceptions: as we have already noted, it is the apparent exception which provides the testing ground for the law. As a consequence of this difference, it is possible to say that functional laws, when taken in connection with the relevant initial and boundary conditions, serve to explain concrete cases in a way in which a directional law never does. We may summarize this fact in saying that functional laws serve to explain each individual case because they hold in all cases, whereas a directional law, since it permits of exceptions, can never tell us why a particular instance was a normal case and not an exception. Furthermore, in those cases in which it is possible to have a sufficient knowledge of initial and of boundary conditions, a functional law will also permit us to predict a future event with accuracy, whereas predictions which are based on a directional law can only be said to hold in normal cases and, as a consequence of this fact, they fail to provide an adequate basis for prediction in individual cases.

The points which I have been making have more importance for the history of the social sciences and for understanding the defects of historicism than might be suggested by the very simple and crude examples on the basis of which I have developed this argument. However, our earlier historical survey of theories which attempted to explain social change in terms of directional laws should suffice to show that it is no straw man which is here under attack. The theories with which we have been concerned were necessitarian: they were not content to dismiss apparent exceptions as due to chance, nor were they couched in probabilistic terms (that in x percent of the cases a society would conform to a particular sequence of stages). They attempted to formulate universal laws on the basis of which it was possible to explain specific transformations which social institutions had undergone, and to predict the direction in which they would also subsequently move.

It should now be clear why no such laws can be expected to hold in any cases which are of importance to the understanding of social institutions and social change. In the first place, it would be unrealistic in the extreme to think that the history of any social group can be treated as a closed system in which there will not be any changes in the boundary conditions over protracted periods of time. Even were we to take the most isolated societies and postulate that there had been no contacts between them and other societies during a significant portion of their histories, it would still be the case that because of their interaction with their natural environments, changes would have been introduced in the amounts and availability of their food supply, that droughts, disease, and the like, would have
affected the size of their populations in an irregular manner, etc. In the second place, it would be equally unrealistic to assume that the actual conditions obtaining in all societies at any one stage in their development would be so similar as to warrant overlooking their differences. However, if one fails to take into account such initial conditions, it is unrealistic to assume that their subsequent development would also be the same. (For example, it is because we think that all members of the same species are essentially similar, that we expect them to undergo the same pattern of development.) As we have noted, we do in fact take into account differences in initial or boundary conditions when we seek to explain why one society may not have gone through all stages of that pattern which is assumed to be normal. Similarly, one would almost surely have to take such conditions into account to explain why one society developed more rapidly than another, or why there were at least minor variations in the forms which the pattern assumed in different societies. An acceptance of overriding directional laws involves a neglect of such differences in initial conditions: it is mistakenly assumed that such laws necessitate what happens regardless of what differences there may be in the actual conditions obtaining in different societies.

While these two points should be sufficient to undermine the belief in ultimate laws of directional change, the following observations may help us to understand the appeal of such laws. First, the manner in which directional laws are most frequently formulated allows for a number of built-in safeguards against their disconfirmation. For example, while a given sequence of stages in the evolution of social institutions may be prophesied, it is rarely the case that the respective durations of these stages is also prophesied; as a consequence, it remains in many cases possible to assume that a given stage will in the future be forthcoming, although it has been delayed. Furthermore, in those instances in which development has not proceeded in accordance with one's prognoses, it is possible to speak of a social institution as being "a survival," exemplifying arrested development, or of a society as being "a living fossil." To cite merely one further way in which an unwavering belief in a directional law can be squared with a lack of adequate evidence, we may once again cite what we have previously noted with respect to Spencer's method: his tendency to substitute a comparative method for any attempt to trace actual patterns of successive historical change. By the compilation of resembling instances, chosen without regard to their historical connections, it may appear that there had been a single developmental pattern, even though such a pattern would, as we have seen, be likely to have been an artifact of the system of compilation itself.

Each of the foregoing factors has lent some degree of specious plausibility to the thesis that there are laws of directional change in social institutions. However, there is a more important reason why this thesis has continued to remain plausible; it consists in the fact that there are cases in which functional relationships foreclose certain possibilities for further development, and open others. For example, in societies in which there is no written language, what we regard as historical knowledge cannot be present, nor can such societies establish the same sorts of reciprocal relations with a literate society as are possible among two or
more literate societies. Similarly, the lack of metallurgy precludes the development of certain other forms of technology, just as the lack of domesticated animals would preclude certain forms of agriculture. Given such limitations of the available possibilities, it is not surprising that one can arrange societies in a kind of serial order which roughly corresponds to steps which can be traced in the actual histories of those societies for which we have more or less continuous archaeological and historical records. However, since these changes can be explained in terms of the effects of functional relationships, they are not to be taken as confirming evidence for laws of necessary directional change. Like the cases which have already been noted, the sequential order of the individual stages is to be comprehended as the result of a series of relationships operating concurrently within a society faced by certain needs and characterized by a particular set of historically and environmentally generated conditions: it is not the result of a law defining a set of stages through which any society will assuredly pass.

If this argument has been sound, the explanatory thesis of historicism cannot be maintained by any one who seeks to understand social institutions and social change through an appeal to scientific law. Historicism, it will be recalled, involved the belief that, in order to understand any phenomenon, one must view it in terms of the place which it occupied and the role which it played within a process of development. We have seen, however, that in order to understand an actual pattern of development, we cannot view it as a single process formed in accordance with a directional law; if we are to explain it by means of a reference to laws, we must do so by showing how particular functional relationships, operating on specific initial conditions, shape each of the successive steps of change. Once completed, these successive steps may be regarded as having defined some definite pattern, but that pattern would be a consequence of other forces, and would not itself represent a directional tendency. Thus, insofar as we wish to use models of explanation which are derived from scientifically acceptable modes of explanation, we shall not seek to explain any phenomenon by placing it within the context of a developmental series: we shall, on the contrary, explain every phenomenon in terms of the specific conditions and the functional laws which, at each moment of time, was responsible for its being precisely what it was. In all cases in which such phenomena can be shown to have conformed, with some degree of regularity, to a directional pattern, this pattern will have its own explanation in repetitive factors, but will not itself serve as the basis for an explanation of what has in fact occurred.

Now, if this is true with respect to those cases in which some clear pattern is actually discernible (as, for example, a pattern is discernible in the life-cycle of a plant or of an insect), it is even more clearly true of those cases in which we deal with complex sets of historical events in which no single pattern is equally discernible, and where—if one were not already committed to the view that there must be some pattern—no such pattern would in fact be found. In such cases, the explanatory thesis of historicism would suggest that until some pattern is found, no understanding of particular events would be accessible. Following the classic model of scientific explanation, this would not be the case: the specific successive
events would be no less fully understandable than they would if they had suggested there was some necessary course of developmental change. Thus, whether or not a pattern seems to characterize the sequence of events with which one must deal, if we are to proceed along the lines of traditional scientific explanation, we must proceed by explaining each event in terms of whatever functional laws are applicable to it, and our explanations will be couched in terms of how these laws, operating within the total set of initial conditions, bring about the successive changes which they do. Thus, instead of seeing the history of specific social institutions, or of specific societies, as implicitly containing any necessary directional tendencies, any such tendencies would themselves have to be explained in piece-meal terms.

2. Problems Concerning Patterns of Change in History

The failure of all attempts to understand history in terms of laws of development would have occasioned neither surprise nor dismay in those thinkers whose historicism rested on teleological principles of explanation, and on metaphors of organic and spiritual growth. As a consequence, if we are to criticize their acceptance of the explanatory thesis of historicism, we cannot effectively do so on the basis of the arguments thus far advanced. However, there exist other grounds on which their views may be criticized; and, as we shall see, most of these further objections also apply to those whose historicism had been dominated by the assumption that there are ultimate laws of directional change. This similarity between the metaphysical, teleological view and the scientifically oriented view of human history derives from a single shared assumption: that, in all normal cases, there is a sequence of stages through which development necessarily proceeds. For the one school, such a developmental pattern rested on the fact that there were controlling laws of directional change; for the other, such patterns did not represent any form of external necessity, but was the expression of an inner, autonomous, self-fulfilling tendency.

In order to understand the latter position, it may be useful to start from Aristotle's distinction between that which exists “by nature” and that which exists by other causes. All of those things which exist by nature were taken as having within them an inner impulse to change; and this change was conceived by Aristotle to be purposive, in which the earlier steps in the process were for the sake of that which was to come later. It would be mistaken to assume that this purposiveness was the result of some externally imposed plan; it was by virtue of their own inherent natures that objects tended toward their appropriate goals. In contrast to this Aristotelian view, the form of teleological explanation which was most frequently found in the later seventeenth and in the eighteenth centuries conceived of purpose in nature on the analogy of mechanical contrivances; objects were capable of attaining specific ends because they had been created to do so in accordance with a preconceived plan. In so far as this later form of teleological explanation dominated the interpretation of natural processes, historicism could not arise, for such processes would have had to be understood
and evaluated with reference to that plan. Historicism, however, involved the rejection of any such fixed points of reference, and of all external points of view: it was held that the significance of what occurs in a developmental process was to be understood and evaluated in terms of a logic inherent in the process itself. It was the doctrine of divine immanence, in contrast to the doctrine of a divine plan, which helped to introduce this new point of view: it is therefore not surprising to find Hegel praising Aristotle's teleological conception of nature as being nobler than that which had come to dominate modern thought, "for with him the principal point is the determination of [the] end as the inward determinateness of natural things. Thus he comprehended nature as life, i.e., as that which has its end within itself."  

There are, it seems to me, two fundamental presuppositions which underlie this Aristotelian and Hegelian conception of developmental processes, and I have already called attention to the first of them in my earlier discussion of one of the ways in which the concept of "development" is used. It consisted in the fact that there was presupposed an underlying substance or subject which changes. Thus, a pattern of change conceived in the terms made familiar by Aristotle and by Hegel is not to be construed simply as a sequence of related forms; these successive forms are regarded as having an inherent connection with one another because each of them is viewed as a phase in a single, unified process, and because each expresses some necessary feature of that process.

The second basic presupposition connected with treating history in terms consonant with the Aristotelian and the Hegelian views of developmental processes is the fact that the later stages of these processes were considered as being higher realizations, or fulfillsments, of what was only implicit in the earlier stages. To be sure, significant differences existed between the Aristotelian doctrine of the relation of act to potency and Hegel's dialectical emphasis on the role of negation in change. Nevertheless in both cases the end was conceived as representing a higher and more perfect level than had been attained in any of the developmental stages preceding it. This did not entail that, according to Hegel (or even according to Aristotelianism), the value of each of the earlier stages was wholly relative to the value of the end. Since the end could not be attained in one leap, but only through transformations from one stage to the next, each stage had its own value. That value, however, could only be adequately appreciated through understanding how each stage in the development was related to the goal-directed process of which it was a part. And since, as we shall later see, historicism challenged any attempt to separate what was taken to be valuable and what was to be regarded as true, a similar thesis was upheld with respect to historical understanding: it is only in terms of the later stages of development, when latent powers have become fully explicit, that we are in a position fully to understand the nature of a developmental process, and adequately interpret the earlier stages of that process. This familiar teleological theme is, of course, most manifest in Hegel:

"The living substance . . . is that being which is truly subject, or what is the same thing, is truly realized and actual (wirklich) solely in the process of positing itself, or in
mediating with its own self its transitions from one state or position to the opposite. . . . It is the process of its own becoming, the circle which presupposes its end as its purpose, and has its end for its beginning; it becomes concrete and actual only by being carried out, and by the end it involves. 28

Without reference to such an end, the unity of the process, and consequently the significance of each of its phases, would be lost; for, on Hegel’s view, a process consists of an interplay of different moments, but cannot be broken into parts. 29

Before attempting to criticize the acceptance of these presuppositions by those who conceived of the historical process in teleological terms, I should like to point out that, strangely enough, the same presuppositions were frequently accepted by historicists who condemned both metaphysics and teleology. Consider, for example, Comte’s view of history, or that view which came to be characteristic of Marxism. In both cases one finds not only that all of history was treated as a single process, including all peoples, but this process was viewed as the development of man’s true social nature, much as Hegel had viewed it as the development of Objective Spirit. Furthermore, both Comte and the Marxists shared Hegel’s view that, during any phase of this developmental process, the various attributes of society were organically related to one another, forming a coherent whole. Even the reference to the end of the process as an essential means of understanding its nature was not confined to those who accepted the teleological view: in Comte’s system, and in Marxism, the understanding and the evaluation of earlier phases of the historical process demand that we grasp the tendency of history as a whole. Given these similarities between those whose basic philosophic views are in other respects so different, it would seem difficult to find any one point of view from which to criticize the acceptance of their presuppositions. However, it is not impossible to do so. In the first place, I believe that there are unacceptable consequences if one conceives of history as the development of some form of substantival entity, and of historical events as manifestations of this continuing development. Since my objections to such a view will be based on empirical grounds, it can be argued independently of an acceptance or rejection of either set of philosophic views. With respect to the second presupposition—that one must relate the stages of a process to the terminus of that process if one is to understand these stages—I shall show that it too may be criticized without specifically referring to the metaphysical views with which it is most frequently associated. I shall argue that this presupposition, whether held by teleologists or by strict determinists, rests on what I shall designate as the retrospective fallacy.

As we have noted, the view that the processes of historical change represent the successive manifestations of an underlying entity which changes has one of its sources in analogies that can be drawn between organic growth and historical development. In the case of organic growth there is, of course, a visible entity which has a life-cycle, and the successive changes constituting this life-cycle are clearly attributes of it. In history, on the other hand, it is by no means obvious what sort of entity can be regarded as underlying the specific changes with which historians deal. There are many histories—of nations, of epochs, and of civiliza-
tions, of science or of industry, of the various arts, of legal institutions, etc.—and the question of where one can find the subject of history seems to be almost senseless. Yet, one can see that when these various histories are traced out, they are not wholly self-contained, but have connections with one another, and sometimes seem to share in a common development. Readers of Toynbee's Study of History will recall that at the outset of that work he sought the proper "unit" for the study of history, and took as its identifying mark that it should be a field of study which would be intelligible in itself. This is to say that such a unit would have its own history, and that the specific changes which would be traced were changes in it. The substantival entities which had a history, and which underlay the detailed changes which historians normally traced, were designated by Toynbee as "civilizations." Others have regarded a Volksgeist, or spirit of the people, as the true bearer of history, with the various events in the life of a nation or people as expressions of the continuing unity of that spirit as it manifests itself over time. And for others, as we find in the case of Hegel, the substance of history consisted in the development of the realm of Objective Spirit, with each nation-state that successively achieved greatness representing one of its essential phases. For those who stood closer to the Enlightenment tradition, as did Comte, that which developed was Humanity, which transcended all national boundaries, and which shaped itself through progressive intellectual and moral development; while Spencer conceived of progress in the superorganic realm as a sequence of types of social organization which, like organic species, formed a single evolutionary development, ascending from the earliest and the most primitive to the most recent and advanced. On each of these views, a true understanding of the human past depended upon showing how the specific events which had occurred were related to a single developmental process, with the connections among them being determined by the ways in which each was an expression of that which underlay them all. It was on the basis of such a conception that Hegel, Comte, and Spencer, as well as many others, regarded traditional historiography as lacking in depth, and as lost in superficial detail.

All such conceptions are faced by fundamental empirical difficulties which they cannot overcome and cannot avoid. These difficulties take many forms, but their scope and severity may be suggested by three types of consideration, to which others might easily be added. In the first place, those who look upon human history as representing a single developmental process can be justly accused of not being able to find a place within that process for much that has occurred in the human past. This is not merely that details are omitted from consideration; the conception of a single developmental process does not permit one to view large tracts of the past as having any genuine historical significance at all. Consider, to choose merely one example, the drastic restriction in the scope of history which was characteristic of Hegel's outline of the development of Objective Spirit: not only were vast regions of the world denied any place in that development, but each region which was actually included was regarded as having belonged to the realm of true history during only one period of time. These familiar aspects of his
Philosophy of History were boldly anticipated in a brief section on World History in Hegel's Philosophy of Right, from which the following passage is taken:

[A] nation is dominant in world history during [only] one epoch, and it is only once that it can make its hour strike. In contrast with this absolute right of being the vehicle of this present stage in the world mind's development, the minds of the other nations are without rights, and they, along with those whose hour has struck already, count no longer in world history (Sect. 347).

While so militantly forthright a proclamation of a restrictive principle of selection is not to be found in other linear views of historical development, all have involved similar restrictions. And, in fact, it is necessary that they should do so. Putting the matter quite generally, since a linear conception of historical development demands that one view history as proceeding in a single direction, it commits one to looking backward upon the past as if it had constituted a single lineage. Western philosophers of history have seen this lineage in terms of modern Western man, and what could not be regarded as having had a role in his development was not regarded as having been part of the historically significant past. Regardless of what other perspective one may adopt, precisely the same sort of restricted view will follow if one interprets human history as a single developmental process which stretches straight from the past to the present.33

Nor can one avoid restricting the scope of the significant past, even if one abandons a linear conception of history, so long as one maintains the assumption that human history is a development inherent in some form of substantival entity. For example, if one regards history as the development of discrete civilizations, as did Toynbee, or if historical events are taken to be the expressions of the spirit of various peoples, each of which has its own birth, its own fulfilment, and its own decline, much that has occurred in human societies will nonetheless be regarded as lacking in genuine historical significance, for it will not have formed part of the life of those entities which are taken to be the bearers of history. For example, it is never claimed that the events in the lives of all peoples have manifested a specific Volksgeist, nor that any one nation has, throughout its existence, ever maintained the vigor of its spirit; those who hold that the spirit of a people is the true locus of history will therefore regard much of the human past as entirely "dead." The same point is obvious with respect to Toynbee's characterization of civilizations, since not only did he exclude all primitive societies and all so-called arrested and abortive civilizations from his purview, but there exist long periods in the lives of some civilizations which were not counted as belonging to history at all.34 Thus, even a pluralism of substantival entities excludes from the realm of the significant historical past a great deal that can be the subject of legitimate historical investigation.

In the second place, the variety of features present in any culture are so diverse that one cannot plausibly maintain that all of them are to an equal degree manifestations of a single underlying process. As a consequence, the assumption that historical understanding depends upon relating specific events to some unitary
process of development will lead to a neglect of some—and, indeed, of many—of the aspects of life which are present in any particular culture. To be sure, this has not usually been denied by those who depict history as consisting, basically, in a developmental process; what is claimed is that in any society there are many aspects which can be safely neglected by those who seek to understand what has been essential in man’s past. This claim has usually been coupled with the view that there is some one central factor—for Hegel the nation-state, for Marxism the means of production, for Comte the stage of intellectual advancement—which dominates the direction of change, and which, over time, molds all other manifestations of culture. Thus, history is regarded as including two quite different sorts of phenomena: those which are of genuine historical importance in either fostering or tending to obstruct historical change, and those which are epiphenomenal only, since they do not play an effective role in the process. It is at this point that conflicts arise between empirical historiography and the types of view with which we are here concerned. In the field of empirical historiography, the question of the relative importance of any event is only to be discovered through tracing its specific effects: that it is an event of a certain type, whether technological, political, intellectual, or artistic, does not suffice to indicate its importance or lack of importance in the network of relationships with which historians are concerned. And, of course, the importance to be assigned to any such event will vary in relation to what particular series of changes is the subject of the historian’s account. On the other hand, when history is viewed as a single developmental process, the division of historical phenomena into those which have an absolute importance, and those which do not, becomes a hard and fast distinction; as a consequence, much of what we find to have been historically significant at a particular time in the life of a particular society will be relegated to an inferior historical status on the basis of a prior conception of the nature of history as a whole.35

In the third place, the conception of history as a process of autonomous self-development takes inadequate account of the possibility of significant external influences upon any social order. These external influences may take a variety of forms. There is, for example, the phenomenon of cultural diffusion, where that which has been developed elsewhere, and was brought into a society through cultural contact, is assimilated into that society in either an unaltered or an altered form. In such cases there will have been the introduction of an external influence; in most cases it would be difficult to hold that such an element would have been created in either its assimilated form, or in any equivalent form, without cultural contact. There also are cases in which, for example, military invasions change the tempo or the direction of ongoing processes, or in which subjugation and external domination interrupt developments, or extirpate much that had been characteristic of the life of the invaded society. The view that invasions and domination can only kill that which has already outlived its allotted period of vigor (as those who believe that all history represents the effects of inherent developmental patterns tend to suggest), is not a view which has much plausibility. It is certainly not a view which should appeal to those who cite
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organic analogies, since the lasting effects of a period of drought or of a disease must also be taken into account when one is tracing the development of a specific individual plant or animal.

There also are other, more subtle forms of external influence, which deserve special comment and which may be compared with ecological factors in the environment. For example, a given developmental process may be affected by the fact that a similar process has gone on in another society. In some cases the existence of a parallel development will, if known, serve as the model for imitation and thus instigate or accelerate an imitative process; in other cases it might presumably serve as a warning of what is to be avoided, if possible. Furthermore, there are less conspicuous ways in which parallel forms of development may influence one another; for example, if two societies are tending in a single direction, but have started at different times or are proceeding at different rates, the fact that one reaches a particular stage of development (e.g., in colonization or in industrialization) before that stage is reached by the other, its earlier fruition may permit it to gain a sufficient competitive advantage to allow it to choke off a similar development on the part of its neighbor. Each of these types of fact concerning history is sufficient to show that one cannot interpret historical change solely in terms of autonomous processes of development; taken together, they suggest that the influences which can be exerted by so-called external factors on the processes of historical change are widespread, and that they can be extremely penetrating.

But how, then, shall we conceive of history, if not in terms of developmental tendencies? The foregoing criticisms suggest that if we wish to base our views on the methods and the results which characterize empirical historiography, the human past will not be taken to have been a single developing process, nor a set of such processes going on independently of one another. It will, on the contrary, appear as a very complex web whose individual strands have separate though interlacing histories; as a consequence, no one group of peoples, and no one set of aspects of social life, will be seen as constituting the subject matter of history. More specifically, one can say that the complex relations among peoples, whose individual histories may for generations run along independent paths before coming into contact, after which they may or may not again diverge, precludes the possibility of looking upon the past as constituting a single historical sequence. Furthermore, because of the diversity of the elements within cultures, it is also rarely if ever possible to construe all of them as sharing a common developmental pattern: some, which may have been closely connected in their origins, will tend to become independent of one another, others may enter into new relationships, and the pace at which change proceeds in any one series of events may differ greatly from that which characterizes others. Thus, the many individual strands of continuity that must be traced if we are to understand what actually happened in the human past, form an indefinitely complex network. In this network, no event is likely to have a place in only one of the crisscrossing lines of causal connection, and it could therefore be extremely misleading to view specific events solely in terms of the positions which they occupied in
one among these strands. It might, for example, be the case that the actual causes of some specific event belong within one strand of facts, while its most important consequences could only be seen if we were to trace its effects in quite a different direction from that which its actual causes might have led one to expect. Or, its causes may themselves be complex, resulting from the meeting of two previously independent lines of development; in such a case, if one were to attempt to understand that event in terms of only one of those two earlier strands, one would necessarily have misunderstood it. Such possibilities are, I submit, left wholly out of account by historicism, which proceeds on the assumption that any event is to be understood and to be evaluated in terms of its place in some particular process of development.37

That such an assumption should have been so widely held in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries was connected with the belief that it was possible to look upon Humanity as having had a single history, which embraced all special histories. We have traced some of the forms which that conviction took and have seen that the Enlightenment conception of history, the use of organic analogies, the belief in necessary developmental laws, and the spread of evolutionary modes of thought, all contributed to its nineteenth-century dominance. Nonetheless, it is surprising that during a period in which there had been spectacular growth in almost all forms of empirical historiography, the assumption persisted that there had actually been one single dominant line of development in human history. To explain the persistence of such an assumption we must, I believe, take into account an extremely prevalent human error which is not in the least restricted to speculative thought and which I shall call “the retrospective fallacy.”

This fallacy, crudely put, consists in looking at a series of events in terms of its ultimate outcome, interpreting each of the earlier events with reference to that outcome. It is readily understandable that we should have a tendency to do so, for knowing what did in fact eventuate, we seek out the lines of connection between it and previous events, and we are thus led to consider these events in their roles as contributing to what occurred later. Our tendency to view organic growth in this way leads, of course, to a teleological form of explanation. When we view the historical past in the same way, we are led to an acceptance of historical determinism: knowing what occurred, and having traced the steps that led to its occurrence, the chain of events as a whole seems to be characterized by an inner necessity. However, if we do not look at a series of events in terms of that in which this series eventuated, but examine each of these events as it was related to the occasion of its occurrence, the series will present an entirely different aspect. At each step in the series, alternative possibilities may be seen to have been open, and we may find that which of them did in fact materialize was dependent upon the occurrence of extraneous events. Thus, in adopting what may be called a prospectively oriented view, the end of any process of change is to be regarded simply as the result of a sequence of events which did occur; it will not provide any point of reference with respect to which the earlier events are subsequently to be interpreted. The retrospective fallacy is a fallacy because it rests on the fact
that, when we have learned the actual outcome of a series of events, we tend to forget that other conclusions might have been possible: we ascribe a privileged position to that outcome and we view all earlier events as if they had been controlled by it.

The same point may be made in another way, and one which better succeeds in avoiding the problems inherent in questions concerning either teleology or determinism. It may be said that the retrospective fallacy consists in assuming that if we read the past "backwards"—that is, if we start from any particular state of affairs and trace the connections between it and the events which preceded it—we shall arrive at exactly the same view of this series of events as if we had been observing it in the order in which it occurred. In denying that this is the case, I do not wish to be understood as suggesting that the causal connections which we find when we look back upon past events could not (in principle) also have been seen had we been observing these events in the order of their occurrence. (Were there this difference between the two views, the consequences for historiography would be disastrous.) However, granted that the actual causal connections are in both cases the same, there is at least one very significant difference between a prospective view of events and the manner in which a series of such events appears if we view it retrospectively only: on the basis of a purely retrospective point of view, the past becomes greatly simplified. In looking back from the vantage point of the present, we tend only to take account of connections between actual events, and we are not forced to explore the many possibilities which, at every point in time, remained open for future change if some other events, elsewhere, had not occurred when they did and as they did. Historians are obliged to take such possibilities into account, and are forced to wonder "What would have happened if . . . ?"; but this is merely to say that their method of dealing with the past is not limited to a retrospective point of view. What historians attempt to do is to build up a view of the past which takes into account not only the particular relationships which obtained among those events which did occur, but they seek to establish what factors might have inhibited their occurrence, had such factors been operative at particular times and places. In comparison with the investigation of these relationships, some of which were actualized and others of which were not, a purely retrospective view offers a simplified picture: it is only after the fact that, so to speak, the nap of history seems to lie flat and be uniform in texture. This simplified picture, in which all unactualized possibilities appear never to have been real, leads to the view that there is some form of inherent developmental tendency in events, and that human history has a direction and meaning which escapes empirical historiography.

It should be evident from what has just been said that the acceptance of determinism in history will be characteristic of all who adopt a purely retrospective point of view—it does not depend (as has often been claimed) on an inappropriate application of scientifically oriented forms of explanation to human actions. The proper interpretation of deliberation and choice in human history is obscured if we look upon the past solely in terms of what did eventuate, without tracing each step in the series of events as it happened, seeking out what
possibilities had originally been present. Nor is this difference between a retrospective and a prospective view of events confined to cases which involve human deliberation and choice: in any series of events which does not form a closed system, there is a similar contrast between the unity and necessity which a process appears to have if we view it retrospectively, and the aspect which it presents if we view it as it developed, tracing its course in a step-by-step chronological sequence. The difference may be suggested by an analogy. If one considers a great river system as it appears on a physiographic map, one finds that if one starts from the conclusion, where that system empties into the sea, and follows back along each of its main tributaries, and traces out each of their branches, and follows back along each of the streams which fed these branches, one is always ascending to higher ground. There thus appears to be a unity of principle which gives intelligibility to the course of the system as a whole. However, should one wish to understand the formation of these river beds in the past, or should one wish to account for the gathering of the waters into a single system, one cannot proceed in that direction: one must start from each of the separate sources, tracing their various channels and junctions, for it is not until they meet that these streams and branches and tributaries form one river. That they meet where they do, can only be understood through having followed the course of each, noting the contours of the land and the resistances which at various points diverted them, proceeding along each originally separate stream, along each branch and tributary, following as they gather into a single river, and together reach the sea. In reading history backwards, as in following the course of such a river system in the opposite direction from that which determined the flow of its individual parts, one will be led to a system of interpretation that has little relationship to the principles which were responsible for the end-result which one sees and endeavors to explain.

Once one recognizes the difference between tracing the connections of a series of historical events in the order in which they developed, and viewing them retrospectively only, it is not possible to regard long-term changes as providing a basis on which to understand the specific events which actually occurred: the whole with respect to which these specific events are supposedly to be interpreted actually exists only because of the successive parts which it is alleged to explain. Thus, if what I have said of the retrospective fallacy is true, the explanatory thesis of historicism is left without justification.

We are now in a position to recognize the difficulties inherent in that aspect of historicism which constitutes its evaluative thesis and which, up to this point, we have not specifically discussed. That thesis, it will be recalled, asserts that an evaluation of any phenomenon demands that we view it in relation to what it contributed, or failed to contribute, to the larger processes of development of which it was a part. An acceptance of the moral theory of historicism consequently presupposes that one can, in fact, assign to each phase of man's social life some place in a larger developmental process. The assumption that it is legitimate to construe either the past or the present in terms of any single developmental series is what my preceding arguments have been designed to refute. Thus, if those
arguments have been correct, the foundation which the evaluative thesis of historicism presupposes has been removed.

This point is of sufficient importance to deserve further elucidation, paying particular attention to its application to questions of evaluation. Suppose that one traces each step in a series of events in order, examining the conditions under which each occurred, what alternative outcomes appeared to be open, what knowledge was available concerning these possible alternatives, and the like. Having adopted this prospective point of view, and therefore abstracting from the actual results which subsequently occurred, how would one evaluate the patterning of institutions, the decisions which were taken, the competing forces which existed at any particular time? Not knowing what was to occur, one could only evaluate each of the various features of past social life in terms of the particular context in which it actually existed. To be sure, one might later recognize that there had been possibilities for action which were not recognized at the time. However, once a historian places himself in the position of looking at a series of events prospectively, his evaluation of each aspect of the past will be similar in structure to the ways in which we evaluate the situations we ourselves face: we envision various alternatives and assess them in comparison with each other. In contrast to this, those whose evaluations derive from a retrospective point of view assess the various features of past social life with reference to a single linear series whose origins and outcome are already known; thus, they do not judge events in terms of what, at the time, were the actual alternatives, what actions other than those taken might have been preferred to them, or what functions they currently served. Thus, the retrospective point of view actually leads to a form of anachronism: it leads us to look at actions and at institutions not in terms of their own contexts, but in relation to what they inherited from the past and what they bequeathed to the future. Consequently, our evaluations of them are not, strictly speaking, evaluations of them; these evaluations derive from our attitude toward that process in which we see them as embedded. For this reason, the evaluative thesis of historicism has always appeared to its critics as presenting a peculiarly perverse and distorted standard of judgment: individual actions and states of affairs are not judged for what they are, but in terms of the extent to which they are believed to have contributed to what has actually come to pass. As Mill said of Thiers, and of others, "they have arrived at the annihilation of all moral distinctions except success and not success," and this form of criticism of historicism has been widely shared.

It must be acknowledged that those who accepted the evaluative thesis of historicism were not unprepared to meet such criticisms, for they were no less willing to apply their basic contention to all past standards of evaluation than they were to apply it to other aspects of social life. Thus, Mill's claim that they had annihilated moral distinctions, or my claim that they substituted evaluative attitudes toward the historical process for evaluations of specific institutions or actions, would be countered by their claim that whatever standard one might propose for evaluating institutions and actions is itself a standard which developed historically, and is therefore relative to its place in the history of human
societies. The only way in which one could escape from an anachronistic evaluation of the past, they would claim, would be to view every aspect of human history in terms of the meaning which lies within that process taken as a whole.\textsuperscript{39}

To this, I hope, I have already provided a sufficient answer: that it is in fact a mistake to suppose that we can legitimately view the human past as a single developing process. However, so far as the specifically evaluative thesis of historicism is concerned, there is another quite different way in which it can be attacked. That is to show that the view of human nature which it presupposes is mistaken. That view, it will be recognized, involves the assumption that man is almost indefinitely malleable, being formed in and through the changing forms of his social environment. It is to a consideration of the history of that doctrine, and to its criticism, that I shall next turn.