

PHILOSOPHY AND THE MEANING OF HISTORY

IT is the nemesis of a cliché-ridden prose that a term may become trite yet stay ambiguous. The phrase *philosophy of history* covers four distinct approaches to three subjects, and before its relation to a Thomist scheme of thought can be considered it will be necessary to analyze the contrasted senses of the adjective "historical" and to determine the meaning of "Thomist" and of "philosophy." Thomism may be conveniently defined as the application of the principles of act and potency to the study of the necessary and of the contingent. Philosophy¹ may be restricted to a consummated human study in an ultimate causality: "consummated," for as a science it implies the achievement of a certitude, not a content with an opinion; "human" since it is achieved through reason, not through the supernatural; "ultimate causality" since it is a search for origin, not for occasion, for undeviating principle rather than for contingent event. Such concepts are relatively simple, the complexity of history has commonly been expressed through a consistent use of analogy.

The three primary divisions of modern historical writing, the Chronicle, the Myth, the Culture Study, seem contrasted rather by their perspective than by their object. Each is in intention a form of record of the past; the first in terms of the past, the second as an explanation of the present, the third often primarily as a premature reflection of the future.

With Chronicle History a Thomist philosophy would seem to have no direct concern. Consciously objective in its method, it must in some measure remain confessedly conjectural in its conclusions since it is an attempt to record events precisely as they happened and to judge of them as they appeared to their contemporaries, not as they appear to us. In 1936 this form of study is still in a phase of transition, for it has shown that clearest sign of vitality—

¹ For the relation of *scientia* and *philosophia* to English *science* and *philosophy*, cf. St. Thomas's *Commentary in the Metaphysics*, lib. I, lects. 1, 3.

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the capacity to adapt. Its technique has been radically affected by modern scientific method, its purpose is being widened by a more vivid understanding of the nature and the extent of its primary sources. Personalized through the recognition of the value of private as opposed to official documents, it is becoming an attempt to recreate not merely the period but the human context.

The elaboration of its technique, the growth of criticism into a critical apparatus and, curiously, the dwindling of its sales, tend to professionalize scientific history. Almost an art, it may yet be a guild. Yet scientific history can never become a Thomist science precisely since it can never be a *cognitio certa et evidens*. The new mass of contemporary and conflicting testimonies renders its theorizing inevitably tentative. Thomist principles may be applied to it; the very contingency of its conclusions reflect the distinction between created essence and existence. Thomist method can be paralleled by the fresh sense of the significance of the minute and yet at the close its generalizations will still remain upon the plane of Thomist opinion an *adhaesio mentis cum formidine oppositi*.

A recent publication from the Oxford Press¹ will afford an illustration of this new scientific history. Mr. Armstrong edits, annotates and prefaces a manuscript that he has recently discovered in the Lille Archives. It is an account of the *coup d'état* of 1483 written by an Italian priest, Mancini, resident at the time in London, perhaps in the service of the French court. The discovery has been recognized as of primary value. The new change in technique is apparent in the 120 notes with their elaborated cross-reference, their spontaneous scholarship and their poised scepticism. The heritage of an eighteenth-century classicism can be traced in the rhythms of the translation. The document suggests the limits within which modern mediaevalism is restricted. However objective its methods, research tends primarily to the discovery of the subjectively true. The strained, inverted

² *The Usurpation of Richard the Third*, by C. A. J. Armstrong (Oxford University Press; 10/-).

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Latinity of the Italian priest conveys a sharply vivid impression of a Plantagenet London, but it is less the city in which he lived than the city that lived in him; the nobles clad *toracibus et cataphractis*, the archers with their hands and arms of iron, the crowds in Thames Street and the hunting women, come to us as reflected by him as distantly remote as the Numidians. The echoed gossip of that London spring, the King's use of emetic and the Duke's death in the jar of sweet Falernian, like the reputed sorceries at the court and the naïve stratagems of the Genoese, bring back a fifteenth-century shadow-land of distorted fact grouped round an isolated certitude, the self-revealed individuality of Domenico Mancini. At last analysis mediævalist research remains irremediably nominalist.

In contrast to the strong vitality of English scientific history, the Myth would seem to belong to an outworn genre. This is perhaps to be regretted, for in England it has commonly been associated with a tradition of great prose. In its essence it is an attempt to explain the present by recounting a story from the past. It has seldom been fiction, the level of its factual accuracy has often been high. It is only that the perspective is askew, for the story will mirror almost obtrusively the tastes as well as the convictions of the storyteller. Cobbett's history of the Reformation is unintelligible without Cobbett, the History of England leads like an avenue to Holland House, and the greatness of the Decline and Fall can only fully be appreciated by those who share in the recognition of theocratic gloom.

For history as Myth implies a dawn-like assurance in the efficacy of contemporary values. Possibly it is precisely for this reason that it is fading. It is perhaps significant that this autumn's example³ should come from an earlier Europe than our own and reflect the happy certitudes and high ethic of penultimate liberalism. Such an achievement with its wide confidence and buoyant prose and well-defined horizon brings its own justification. To search it for its minor errors

³ *History of Europe*, by H. A. L. Fisher; single volume edition (Oxford University Press).

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would be as irrelevant and perhaps as brutal as to dissect the *Fioretti*.

It may be due to the self-conscious insecurity of so much modern civilization that the Myth is being replaced by the Culture Study, which in its more popular form is an attempt to gauge the future from the past. The success of the *Decline of the West* may be in part explained by the persistent ingenuity and sporadic insight of Herr Spengler; the theorizing of the earlier Keyserling gained a certain charm from his perhaps too conscious breeding. Yet at least the weaknesses of the school could be illustrated this summer from the most recent work of M. Berdiaev.⁴

This slightly turgid study is in itself a cultural amalgam, thoughts may at times be Spengler's, the mind seems that of Mr. H. G. Wells; the cultures summarized have the clear lines of his Utopias, while their makers—"Aryans," "Semites" and "Hindoos"—are as remote as his Selenites, and once again we meet the birth pangs of a struggling deity. Still, the method of presentation retains an endearing simplicity. The premisses are attractively naïve and often original: "Carlyle, the most concrete and particular of historians, says that John Lackland came upon this earth on such and such a day. This is indeed the very substance of history" (p. 13). The argument follows a clear line of assertion: "How was it that the Greeks neither knew nor were capable of knowing the idea of history or of the historical? Simply because, in my opinion, the Hellenic world possessed no real knowledge of freedom" (p. 29). Throughout the neat lines of the structure bring some of the aesthetic satisfaction of Meccano.

It is unfortunate that the conclusions are obscured by a few of the artifices of the mystagogue: "and thus the mystery of the anthropogonistic process is completed, a divine movement which brings about the genesis of God" (p. 57); "Our world aeon is coming to an end, the membrane separating it from other worlds will burst like a ripe fruit" (p. 205). But at least it is suggestive that the "mysticism" seems

⁴ *The Meaning of History*, by N. Berdiaev (Geoffrey Bles; 8/6).

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related rather to that of Mme. Blavatsky than to that of conventional orthodoxy. M. Berdiaev has provided not the Philosophy but the Theosophy of history.

A scientific and therefore a more restrained approach is represented in the recent volume of essays dedicated to Ernst Cassirer.⁵ Fittingly they are heterogeneous. Many of them it would be irrelevant to analyze since they are separated irrevocably from Thomism by their clear defined post-Kantian horizon. Yet one grouping seems to indicate a line of possible *rapprochement*. The art studies by Dr. Erwin Panofsky and Dr. Saxl through the simple objectivity of their approach and the recognition of the value of the minute are on a plane very close to the Thomist; the treatment of time-forms in *The Philosophic Character of History* by Dr. Raymund Klibansky may suggest how these planes might be linked. For Dr. Klibansky develops a distinction between the *Geschehenszeit*, the *Ordnungszeit* and the *Schicksalzeit*, the time-in-which-things-happen, the time-in-which-things-are-ordered, and the time-form of history, which can at least be related to the familiar Thomist distinction between Time considered as a mere duration and Time considered as the measure of movement. It is significant that to Dr. Klibansky the time-form of history is quantitative secondarily and primarily qualitative, and the time-aspect of each civilization is "specifically conditioned" towards a clearly defined end. For to the Thomist *Tempus ut mensura* remains formally the measure of the growth of a perfection still realizable and so not yet realized—*actus entis in potentia prout in potentia*.

If Cultural History is defined as the attempted record of the half-achieved development of a human grouping through the social activity of its members, a Thomist philosophy of it is perhaps admissible. Such a science would be analogically historical, since linked with time-sequence it would be retrospect, not forecast; it would be Thomist, since linked with time-sequence as the measure of growth it would remain the

⁵ *Philosophy and History*, edited by R. Klibansky and H. J. Paton (Oxford University Press).

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study of an act in potency. It might be a philosophy, for it could deal with a relatively ultimate if secondary causality, the cultural laws reflected in the interlocking series of ascertainable effect. A Thomist acceptance of the possibility of such causality seems a corollary from the four articles *De Fato* in the *Summa*.⁶ "It is manifest that the ordering of effect can be considered in two ways. First as being in God Himself and thus the ordering of the effects is called Providence, secondly as being in the mediate causes ordered by God to the production of certain effects and thus it has the nature of Fate."⁷ Because a philosophy of history would be a merely human study it would find its object in fate and not in providence, in the finite and the created rather than in the divine. Again, "the disposition of second causes which we call fate may be considered in two ways, firstly in regard to the second causes which are thus disposed or ordered, secondly in regard to the first principle by whom they are ordered."⁸ Because a philosophy of history precisely as historical must be linked with phase-sequence it must find its object not in fate reflecting the unchanging but in fate as reflected in change; the reciprocal relation of mediate cause to mediate cause mirrored by effect in an inevitably transient civilization.

Such a study in the sources of cultural achievement and decay would be a natural development from the school of the great Commentators. Although the conception of fate as a *dispositio immobilis rebus mobilibus inhaerens* is by origin Boethian it is woven into the texture of St. Thomas's thought, since it is a segment of the distinctions between causalities, a sequel of the recognition of the contrasted relations of the letter to the pen, to the writer and to the writer's world-view. Yet a development may be logical and still be premature. If it is possible to maintain that cultural laws parallel to the nineteenth-century laws of nature exist and are discoverable, it would be hopefully temerarious to suggest that they have been discovered. Cultural evidence is no more and no less

⁶ *Prima Pars*, q. 116; cf. *Contra Gentes*, lib. 3, cap. 93.

⁷ *Prima Pars*, q. 116, art. 1.

⁸ *Loc. cit.*, art. 2.

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necessarily subjective than any form of individually garnered knowledge. Precisely since it illustrates mass movement rather than individual choice it may gain a certitude that detailed record-history will still lack; it is so far easier to forecast the reactions of the group than of the man.⁹ Yet it still remains conjectural, if not from an inherent necessity at least from a half-achieved technique. "Historical" science in its contrasted forms is still in embryo.

Although this article has been an attempted solution of contemporary, if minor, problems, its method has been, at least in intention, that of thirteenth-century Paris. The thesis chosen was "Whether there can be a Thomist Philosophy of History." The terms first defined were *Thomist* and *Philosophy*; the term distinguished by its contrasted senses was *Historical*. It has been concluded that scientific history is of necessity too conjectural, and Myth-history too subjective, to form the groundwork of a Thomist science. Cultural history has been subdivided into its practical and speculative forms: practical when it is an attempt to gauge the future; speculative when it is motivated by a half-achieved desire to attain to an inherent truth in time-forms of development and decay. It has been suggested that with this last subdivision there may yet be a Thomist *rapprochement*, foreshadowed in the *Summa* by the treatise *On Fate*. Yet such *rapprochement* must still wait on the spasmodic growth of modern evidence.

A Thomist Philosophy of History cannot yet be a fact, but at least it may remain a possibility.

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⁹ *Prima Pars*, q. 115, art. 4 ad 3. A Thomist reaction to the modern controversy between historical determinism and catastrophism is perhaps suggested by St. Thomas's treatises on the influence of the heavenly bodies. For this would seem to have been the form in which the problem of the cyclic determination of the past impinged upon thirteenth-century speculation. Besides qu. 115 of the *Prima Pars*, see *Contra Gentiles*, lib. iii, cap. 84-87.