Chapter 1

Historiography

Philosophy and Methodology of History, with Special Emphasis on Medicine and Psychiatry; and an Appendix on “Historiography” as the History of History

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Introduction

Science is a house built on piles above a swamp. The piles are driven down from above into the swamp, but not down to any natural or “given” base; and if we stop driving the piles deeper, it is not because we have reached firm ground. We simply stop when we are satisfied that the piles are firm enough to carry the structure, at least for the time being. (Karl Popper, Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge (New York: Harper, 1965), 106.)

“Historiography” has two currently accepted meanings: (1) “the history of academic history” and (2) “its philosophy, theory, and methodology.” While I shall to some extent deal with the first, my overwhelming emphasis is on the second. Nevertheless, a closing bibliographic addendum will point the reader toward some very useful histories of history-writing (i.e., the “Appendix”). It also includes “essayettes.”

This essay acquaints the reader with key issues in the philosophy and methodology of history. This is particularly apt for readers who are primarily clinicians: (1) to convey what is involved in the historical enterprise; (2) to facilitate a more rigorous and critical reading of the historical literature; and (3) to assist appreciation of the limitations and possibilities of applying historical insights to current clinical, investigative, and philosophical and ethical issues. Insofar as psychiatry—especially dynamic psychiatry—is in many respects a clinical-historical discipline, there are numerous parallels between academic historiography’s philosophical and methodological issues and those in clinical psychiatry. The term “dynamic psychiatry,” often used in my chapters herein, needs clarification; for it often carries different connotations in the U.K. and the U.S./Canada. In the former it tends to refer to Adolf Meyer’s “psychobiology” (which Meyer occasionally termed “dynamic psychiatry”). In North America, however, it has become interchangeable with “psychoanalytic psychiatry.” It is the latter, which I shall mean by “dynamic psychiatry.”

This chapter is divided into two sections, The Philosophy of History and The Methodology of History, with the distinction between the two being somewhat arbitrary. The former results from reflection upon methodology, as well as from the requirements of a priori epistemological commitments. The latter is shaped by previous epistemological decisions, as well by the demands of the subject matter. Throughout their ongoing course of development philosophy and methodology interact.

psychiatry along several parameters. All reference and content end-notes to this essay appear after the “Appendix.”

The Philosophy of History

Briefly to review one of the most active areas of modern philosophy is an impossible task. Hence I must limit myself to a few central issues, occasionally presented for expository purposes as dichotomies. I am concerned with the analytical, rather than the speculative, philosophy of history. The former elucidates the modes of historical reasoning and explanation, including especially the relationship historical hypotheses and interpretations have to the evidence used to motivate, substantiate, or refute them.

The speculative philosophy of history, by contrast, is seldom encountered today, though it was once virtually synonymous with “philosophy of history.” It has a long history beginning at least in biblical days, when all history was interpreted as manifesting God’s relationship with his chosen people. The classic statement of the speculative philosophy of history, St. Augustine’s fifth century City of God, remained dominant for over a thousand years. Recent instances of theistic historiography include Reinhold Niebuhr’s interpretation of history from the vantage of the allegorical “Fall” in the book of Genesis, which he restates as human “pridefulness.” In the Renaissance/Baroque, and especially Enlightenment and Romantic periods, a variety of secular speculative philosophies appeared, culminating in the works of Vico in the mid-eighteenth century; Herder and Kant in the late eighteenth century; Hegel and Marx in the nineteenth century; and Spengler and Toynbee in the twentieth century. Typically more concerned with global than period or local histories, such philosophies usually present the historical process as a series of progressive evolutionary stages, or as cycles of flowering, decline, and recrudescence.

Subject Matter

Historians take as their subject matter something with which psychiatric clinicians are intimately familiar: the symbolically mediated behavior of human beings, that is, those aspects of human action that must be understood in terms of ideas, images, affects, purposes, desires, memories, perception, interpretations, and attempts at adaptation, as opposed to the aspects that are adequately explained as biophysical happenings. These latter (as well as the manifold events of the physical environment) interest historians only insofar as they enter into individual and social constructions of, and actions upon, reality.

Historians are occupied with occurrences that are communicative, whether the communication be actual or potential, explicit or implicit, intentional or not, verbal or nonverbal. Chronicles, documents, diaries, letters, official archives and monuments, artifacts, and the like all signify meaningful human activities and events; but they are intelligible only to one prepared by education, technique, and attitude to ask the right questions and listen for the answers.

Such considerations move me to agree with Collingwood that the data of the historian and the physical scientist primarily differ in that the former have, as it were, an “inside,” that is, meanings and motives that precede and accompany the observed and reported events. Only the most plodding chronicler is satisfied merely to record dates and occurrences. To know that a “Julius Caesar” crossed the Rubicon in 49 B.C.E. is to possess a mere piece of “external” data. To understand Caesar’s history and intentions (and how these fitted into and were determined by the political, economic, and sociocultural ambience of ancient Rome) is to begin to appreciate the datum’s proper significance, to get “inside” it—all of which will be taken up in the subsection on History as Relationship. That much of history deals with broad social structural, cultural, and economic contexts and trends does not vitiate Collingwood’s insight, for these “forces” are produced by the symbolically mediated activities of individuals and collectivities. If such factors operate at all, it is through the motivations and interpretations of these individuals and the collectivities they constitute.

A second peculiarity of the field of inquiry in history, as opposed to that in the experimental sciences, is its mediate—as opposed to immediate—relationship to the “observer.” The historian does not work with the