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# Philosophy of History And System of Logic

FOUNDATIONS OF HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE. By Morton White. Harper & Row. 299 pages. \$6.95.

Philosophy of history suffers from the fact that its practitioners are either philosophers or historians, and almost never have an adequate familiarity with the questions asked and the methods used in both disciplines. This book is no exception. Prof. White is clearly a philosopher and has almost no concern with the problems which engage historians. His title is very misleading, since "historical knowledge" is concerned with the accuracy of a historian's picture of the past, an epistemological problem.

Prof. White is concerned almost solely with logical problems. His book consists, chiefly, of logical analysis of statements, most of which are not historical statements. In the few cases where he does concern himself with statements made by historians (chiefly pages 64-66), his criticisms are concerned with logic. J. B. Bury, we are told, was guilty of a "logical mistake," while Marc Bloch was "involved in a logical inconsistency." To avoid such errors, "we must hold tight to this logical truth, that explanatory statements do not imply generalizations."

The trouble with all this is that historians are not concerned with trying to be logical, but with trying to construct a convincing picture of the past. Since they are so largely concerned with change, and may be concerned with various irrationalities, they see no need to follow a system of logic, which, like two-valued Greek logic, is not applicable to motion, change, and other irrationalities. Nor are historians much concerned, as White is, with establishing the cause of a historical event.

Historians, as I know them today, are generally very suspicious of single causation (or even of multiple causation in the sense White sees it.)

There are many meanings of the word "history," as there are many systems of logic. Prof. White ignores this, just as he ignores almost completely the two chief concerns of any historian: (1) That this work be sufficiently similar to the established versions of the subject to satisfy other historians, and (2) that it be sufficiently different, in ways which can be supported by examination of historical evidence, so that it will interest other historians. Prof. White has nothing to say about these two concerns, the evaluation of evidence and the historical consensus. The reason for this failure becomes clear when he finally gives us a definition of what he means by history on page. 223:

"Since a history asserts causal connections, we may conceive of a history as a logical conjunction of statements most of which are singular causal assertions."

This statement ignores the connections between written history, historical evidence, and what actually happened in the past, and it emphasizes two matters ("logical conjunction" and "causal connections"), one of which is excluded by the fact that our system of logic is organized in exclusive binary categories. While the subject of history is not so organized, the other is a concern of historians only in a minor and diluted fashion:

-CARROLL QUIGLEY.



## PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

Philosophy of history covers the area where philosophy and history overlap. It applies the techniques of philosophy in critique to the methods and materials of history. It is still at a primitive level because each discipline is woefully ignorant of the other.

Philosophy of history uses all areas of philosophy, but chiefly epistemology and metaphysics.

"History" may mean:

1. The infinite myriad of existential, non-repetitive events of the past.
2. The evidence which has survived of those events.
3. The evidence which is generally known of that which has survived.
4. The picture someone has made of the past from the known evidence.
5. Any verbal presentation of that picture, or any part of it.
6. The moving social consensus of the past arising from debate over verbal presentations.

Of these, 3 and 4 are subjective, 1, 2, and 5 are objective; 6 is both; and 1 is unknown and largely unknowable.

The purpose of history is double and partly inconsistent:

- a. an effort to find in the past the origins of what we have today;
- b. an effort to reconstruct a picture of some moment or period of the past as a functioning community, different from our own, which nonetheless fulfilled the desires (or needs) of the people of that time.

All successful history must do both of these. Together they give us both perspective and insight on our own position, make it possible for us to see how we got where we are, as well as where we are, and help us both to avoid making the errors of the past and to conceive of ourselves living in a different situation in the future.

Although this, as #6 above, is the aspiration of history, we constantly fall short of it for 2 reasons:

a. The picture which any historian makes is always based on a selection from the surviving evidence, and is thus incomplete, biased, especially when he is not aware that he is being selective and does not see the unconscious assumptions on which his selection is being made. In theory, this is countered by the debate and discussion of fellow historians, but this is not effective when all (or most) have the same or similar unconscious preconceptions. (A basic element in all evidence is that observers notice what they expect to see).

b. Specialization, either by period or by topic, makes it less likely that unconscious bias will be recognized or that the issue will be debated or discussed by those with different biases or assumptions.

As a result, most history is, even when based on intensive research, simply support for biased and partial versions, or reactions against these (and therefore not much more adequate). Most history is "the debris of past controversies" or rationalizations of past events for purposes other than establishing the truth. This included such basic factors as periodization or the customary exclusion of many vitally important aspects of life such as law, property arrangements, agricultural history and food supply, child-rearing and family patterns, cognitive systems.

The metaphysics of history involves finding the place of history, and the dynamic element, in general metaphysics in its largest sense. It would show that human history is but a part (and a very revealing part) of the unfolding of the cosmic manifold along the direction of increasing abstraction and autonomy.