

CHAPTER IV

SPECULATIVE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

In Chapter I, it was contended that the main problems as to history may be grouped with reference to the two questions : How is history possible? And 'What is the significance of history, if it has any'? In Chapter III, it has been maintained that history is possible because of ultimate factors of reality : the physical world, human beings as minds. Attention is now turned to the second group of these problems. The second main problem is : Is there a meaning, or are there meanings in history?

As a preliminary to philosophy of history I must point out the simple and familiar fact that the word 'history' is itself ambiguous. It covers (1) the totality of past human actions, and (2) the narrative or account we construct of them now. This ambiguity is important because it opens up at once two possible fields for philosophy of history. In the first sense, it would mean a philosophical reflection on the 'actual course of historical events'¹. Such a philosophy of history, we find in the 'traditional' form. The philosophical reflection on the course of historical events leads to the

1. Walsh, An Introduction to Philosophy of History, p. 16.

traditional philosophers attempt to construct what may be called the 'Metaphysics of History'. History, as understood, in the second sense, i.e. as concerned with the 'process of historical thinking' or 'process of scientific thinking' would lead to a philosophy of history, which is 'critical' in character. The critical endeavours to make clear the nature of historian's own inquiry, in order to "locate" it, as it were, on the map of knowledge. Critical philosophy of history is very closely bound up with the question whether historical inquiry is, or is not, "scientific" in a sense in which physics, biology, psychology or even applied sciences like engineering are. This question I have discussed in my preceding Chapter II. Further discussion is not necessary here. Let us discuss here the questions of speculative philosophy of history. The speculative system seeks to discover in history, the course of events, a pattern or meaning which lies beyond the purview of the ordinary historian. The fundamental point with which these philosophers were concerned can be put if we say that they sought to discover the meaning and purpose of the whole historical process. History as presented by ordinary historians seemed to them to consist of little more than a succession of disconnected events, or utterly without rhyme or reason. There was no attempt in 'empirical' history, as it was called, to go beyond actual happenings to the plan which lay behind them,

no attempt to reveal the underlying plot of history. That there was such a plot they thought obvious, if history was not to be regarded as wholly irrational; and accordingly they set themselves to find it. The task of philosophy of history, they thought, was to write such an account of the detailed course of historical events that its 'true' significance and 'essential' rationality were brought out. As we have seen already, it is easy enough to criticise such a project; and in fact the programme was condemned both by working historians (who saw in it an attempt to take away their jobs) and by anti-metaphysical philosophers (who thought it wholly incapable of realisation). But the fundamental problem it raises — the problem, to call it by a crude name, of the meaning of history — is one which clearly has a recurrent interest, and no survey of our present subject could neglect it altogether². In this connection, let us know first the development of philosophy of history in speculative sense.

It is true that history was scarcely a dominant theme in any philosophy before that of Augustine, and there is little subsequently of very great interest before the early eighteenth century speculations of the Italian Philosopher Vico. The neglect of Vico's work by his contemporaries, who were still

2. Walsh, Op.Cit., pp. 26-27.

concerned mainly with absorbing the lessons of Post-Renaissance natural science, justifies the usual practice of regarding the rise of philosophy of history as a serious study as the work of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries : the work chiefly of the German idealists, Kant, Herder, Fichte and Hegel. Significantly, this was also a period in which independent interest in historical studies proper was growing rapidly - a development which culminated in the emergence of history in the nineteenth century as a discipline, self-consciously pursued, with its own methods, concepts, and professional guardians³.

If we ask why history was then thought to constitute a problem for philosophers, the answer is because of the apparently chaotic nature of the facts which made it up. To nineteenth-century philosophical eyes history appeared to consist of a chain of events connected more or less loosely or accidentally, in which, at first sight at any rate, no clear plan or pattern could be traced. But to accept that description of history, i.e. to take it its face value, was for many philosophers of the period a virtual impossibility, for it meant (so they thought) admitting the existence in the something of the ultimately unintelligible⁴.

A philosophy of history in this special sense meant, as will be evident, a speculative treatment of detailed

3. William H. Dray, *Philosophy of History*, p. 60.

4. Walsh, *Op.Cit.*, pp. 117-118.

historical facts, and as such belonged to metaphysics rather than theory of knowledge. In Hegel himself it was only part of a comprehensive project, conceived with incredible boldness - to display the underlying rationality of all sides and aspects of human experience. The philosophy of history took its place in this project alongside the philosophies of nature, art, religion and politics, to all of which the same general treatment was applied⁵.

But though it is with the name of Hegel that this type of speculation is now most readily connected, it would be wrong to suppose that Hegel was its originator. To make such an assumption would, in fact, be doubly erroneous. For firstly, philosophy of history as treated by Hegel in his famous lectures in the 1820's had been familiar to the German public at least for the best part of half a century : Herder, Kant, Schelling and Fichte had all made contributions to it, and their questions and conclusions had a profound effect on Hegel's own views. And secondly, as Hegel well knew, the basic problem with which both he and they were concerned was a very ancient one, which had occurred to philosophers and non-philosophers alike. 'That the history of the world, with all the changing scenes which its annals present', we read in

5. Walsh, Op.Cit., p. 118.

the concluding paragraph of Hegel's lectures, 'is this process of development and the realization of Spirit - this is the true Theodicea, the justification of God in history'. To justify God's ways to man, and in particular to show that the course of history could be interpreted in a manner not inconsistent with accepting divine providence, had been a recognised task for theologians and Christian apologists for many centuries. The writers of the Old Testament had been aware of its importance, it had been treated at length by St. Augustine in his City of God, and it had provided the theme for Bossuet's Discourse on Universal History, published in 1681, as well as for Vico's New Science (1725-44). "To produce a philosophical interpretation of history along these lines was, it had long been thought, an obvious requirement in any solution of the general metaphysical problem of evil"⁶.

However, the first flowering of speculative philosophy of history was also, in a sense, its last. Never after Hegel were its claims so bold, or so brilliantly presented. It means that philosophy of history in its traditional form did not come to an end on the death of Hegel. The nineteenth century saw a number of more pedestrian attempts to get the measure of history as a whole - those of Comte and Spencer, for example;

6. Walsh, Op.Cit., p. 119.

and it was continued, though in a very different guise, by Marx, and has been practised again in our own day by such writers as Spengler and Toynbee. But the very development of first-order historical studies, to which the rise of speculation originally owed so much, in the end raised serious problems for it. For it became more and more difficult to represent speculative constructions as soundly based in the light of increasingly critical standards for the acceptance of historical fact. Twentieth century system builders like Toynbee and Spengler have made notable attempts to meet this kind of criticism; and there is little doubt that Toynbee, in particular, has at his disposal a range of historical data which has never been approached in the history of speculation. Unfortunately, this has scarcely been matched with corresponding philosophical insight. Our own century has also seen a lively recrudescence of more straightforwardly religious attempts to declare the "meaning" of history : an approach which had gone out of style with the Enlightenment. The work of Niebuhr exemplifies this latter development. "Philosophy of history, in fact, like other parts of metaphysics, appears to exercise a continuous fascination on human beings despite the repeated cry of its opponents that it consists of a set of nonsense statements. And a defence of a further enquiry into the traditional problems of the subject might well be developed along those lines.

Admitting emphatically the traditional problems, Prof. Walsh says that "there is a sense in which philosophers of every school should allow that philosophy of history is the name of a genuine enquiry"⁷.

These historical remarks draw attention to a way in which speculative philosophies of history are sometimes classified : by reference to the "source of authority" or final basis of argument they recognize. The systems of Hegel, Toynbee, and Niebuhr differ markedly in this regard; they are (or at least claim to be), respectively, metaphysically, empirically, and religiously based. Thus the meaning Hegel finds in the course of history can only fully be expounded by means of metaphysical notions like "World Spirit", which are derived from his general philosophical position. Toynbee's view of history, by contrast, is represented as a conclusion forced upon him by an empirical survey. And at least part of it, the assertion of certain historical laws, claims a status analogous to that of an empirically validated scientific hypothesis. Niebuhr is so much at odds with both of these approaches that at times he denies that he offers, in any comparable sense, a "philosophy" of history at all. He claims only to show how Christian faith, which transcends rational

7. Walsh, Op.Cit., p. 16.

argument, can give a meaning to otherwise meaningless occurrence. He nevertheless appears to be thoroughly involved in the issues raised by the other two approaches. For he denies that metaphysical reflection or empirical investigation can make sense of history at all. Classifying the features of speculative systems, Prof. Maundelbaum says that a simple providential theory which regards whatever happens as "the will of God" would be an example of this : history is regarded as meaningful because of the "omnipresence" of the divine in it"⁸.

Besides the above discussed question, the speculative philosophers ask still another question : what purpose or value or justification can be found for a process having the pattern and mechanism history is alleged to have. At this point speculation becomes inseparable from metaphysics, ethics, and religion. It is significant in this connection that, although only Niebuhr, of our three examples, (three well-known authors of speculative systems : Hegel, Toynbee and Niebuhr) declares himself frankly to be looking to religion for a clue to the "meaning" of history, the other two accounts are also in their own ways thoroughly religious. For Hegel, the aim of speculative philosophy of history is "theodicy - justification of the ways of God", so that we may be "reconciled with the

8. A Critique of Philosophies of History, Journal of Philosophy, XLV, No. 14 (July 1, 1948, pp. 366-78).

fact of the existence of evil". For Toynbee, the problem is how any spiritually significant purpose can be served by the "vain repetitions" of the cyclic life of civilizations⁹.

As the foregoing remarks have indicated that what projects customarily referred to as "philosophy of history" frequently have in common is the aim of giving a comprehensive account of the historical process in such a way that it can be seen to "make sense". Yet the notion of "making sense" of the past is itself unclear, and is open to a range of different interpretation¹⁰. Similar critical examination of speculative problems, has been given by Prof. Dray. The speculative systems answer to the question: "Has history any meaning"? in fact vary so widely that it has sometimes been doubted that they all interpret the question in the same way. In any critical examination of speculation, however, it is equally important to recognize that, even within a single system, this vague governing question breaks down into more determinate, component ones. And a philosopher's answer to one of these may often be deemed more satisfactory than the answer he gives to others¹¹. To make an obvious distinction: it is one thing to

9. W.H. Dray, *Op.Cit.*, p. 65.

10. Patrick Gardiner, *Theories of History*, p. 7.

11. Dray, *Op.Cit.*, pp. 63-64.

suppose that history has a meaning in the sense that all that has happened or is going to happen has been (or is) preordained or intended by some "hidden hand" - whether this hand be the hand of Providence or that of Hegel's "Cunning of Reason"; it is quite another to suggest merely that its course up to date has shown a trend in a certain direction and (perhaps) to prophesy on the basis this observed tendency what its future development will be; and it is another thing again to claim that historical events conform to particular causal laws, in terms of which past occurrences can be explained and future changes predicted. Further, while some theories of the historical processes have been propounded, as it were, "in isolation", others can only be understood as forming part of a wider scheme in which they have a definite place : Hegel's theory, for example, falls into the latter category¹².

In addition to this, let us discuss the Hindu conception of history. According to Hinduism, "human history has an inner meaning, and that meaning discloses a purpose that increases with the march of time. That the time-process is not an end-in-itself, that it is the medium for the progressive realization of a great purpose, and that this purpose is of ultimate value not only for individuals but for the collective

12. Gardiner, Op.Cit. p. 7.

humanity as well¹³. "The realisation of the non-dual, eternal Brahman-Atman is the goal set for man. This is called moksha or release"¹⁴.

Similarly to the Jews and Christians, however, history was primarily a history of salvation and, as such, the proper concern of prophets, preachers, and teachers. The very existence of a philosophy of history and its quest for a meaning is due to the history of salvation; it emerged from the faith in an ultimate purpose. In the Christian era political history, too, was under the influence and in the predicament of this theological background. In some way the destinies of nations became related to a divine or pseudo-divine vocation¹⁵.

It is not by chance that we use the words "meaning" and "purpose" interchangeably, for it is mainly purpose which constitutes meaning for us. The meaning of all things that are what they are, not by nature, but because they have been created either by God or by man, depends on purpose. A chair has its meaning of being a "chair", in the fact that it indicates something beyond its material nature : the purpose of being used as a seat. This purpose, however, exists only

13. T.M.P. Mahadevan, *Time and Timeless*, Preface V.

14. *Ibid.*, Preface VI.

15. See H. Kohn, *The Genesis of English Nationalism*, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. I (January, 1940).

for us who manufacture and use such things. And since a chair or a house or a town is a means to the end or purpose of man, the purpose is not inherent in, but transcends, the thing. If we abstract from a chair its transcendent purpose, it becomes a meaningless combination of pieces of wood.

The same is true in regard to the formula structure of the meaning of history. History, too, is meaningful only by indicating some transcendent purpose beyond the actual facts. But, since history is a movement in time, the purpose is a goal. Single events as such are not meaningful, nor is a mere succession of events. To venture a statement about the meaning of historical events is possible only when their telos becomes apparent. When a historical movement has unfolded its consequences, we reflect on its first appearance, in order to determine the meaning of the whole, though particular, event - "whole" by a definite point of departure and a final point of arrival. If we reflect on the whole course of history, imagining its beginning and anticipating its end, we think of its meaning in terms of an ultimate purpose. The claim that history has an ultimate meaning implies a final purpose or goal transcending the actual events. To this ultimate meaning Prof. Lowith¹⁶ says that this identification of meaning and

16. Karl Lowith, Op.Cit., p. 6.

purpose does not exclude the possibility of other systems of meaning. To the Greek, for example, historical events and destinies were certainly not simply meaningless - they were full of import and sense, but they were not meaningful in the sense of being directed toward an ultimate end in a transcendent purpose that comprehends the whole course of events.

The temporal horizon for a final goal is, however, an eschatological future, and the future exists for us only expectation and hope¹⁷. The ultimate meaning of transcendent purpose is focused in an expected future. Such an expectation was most intensely alive among the Hebrew prophets; it did not exist among the Greek philosophers. In the Hebrew and Christian view of history the past is a promise to the future; consequently, the interpretation of the past becomes a prophecy in reverse, demonstrating the past as a meaningful "preparation" for the future. Greek philosophers and historians were convinced that whatever is to happen will be of the same pattern and character as past and present events; they never indulged in the prospective possibilities of the future.

Founders of religions and their faithful followers have been holding for many centuries past and practically to the

17. Augustine Confessions XI. Also Lowith, Op.Cit., p. 6.

present day that men are not the makers of themselves; they are tools in the hands of the unknown or unknowable God. Let us know the Christian ideas of history in this connection as explained by Prof. Collingwood. "For the Christian, all men are equal in the sight of God : there is no chosen people, no privileged race or class, no one community whose fortunes are more important than those of another. All persons and all peoples are involved in the working out of God's purpose, and therefore the historical process is everywhere and always of the same kind, and every part of it is a part of the same whole"¹⁸. Further he says that "each human agent knows what he wants and pursues it, but he does not know why he wants it : the reason why he wants it is that God has caused him to want it in order to advance the process of realizing His purpose"¹⁹.

From the above discussion, I conclude that the speculative accounts have generally claimed that there is in historical events a "significance" or meaning which goes beyond the understanding ordinarily sought by historians. On the face of it the programme mentioned above - the project for penetrating below the surface of history to its hidden meaning - seems scarcely respectable. It savours of a sort of mystical

18. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, p. 49.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

guess work, and thus has its execution appeared to many hard-headed men. But we miss the point of these enquiries if we leave out of account the main factor which gives rise to them. It is the feeling that there is something morally outrageous in the notion that history has no rhyme or reason in it which impels men to seek for a pattern in the chain of historical events. If there is no pattern, then, as we commonly say, the sufferings and disasters which historians narrate are 'pointless' and 'meaningless'; and there is a strong element in human nature which revolts against accepting any such conclusion²⁰. No doubt it is open to critics of the programme to argue that those who devise it are guilty of wishful thinking; but this is a charge which cannot be accepted without an investigation of the results alleged to be achieved.

The purpose of the present discussion is to consider some important problems of speculative systems and not to write a complete history of the subject. I shall accordingly omit at this point all reference to such writers as Herder, Kant, Schelling and Fichte, and proceed at once to an examination of the relevant views of Hegel, Toynbee and Niebuhr. I am interested to comment on modern writers like Toynbee and Niebuhr on universal history whose works have been the subject

20. Walsh, Op.Cit., p. 119.

of very wide interest and discussion. While to discuss the problems of such system - building without reference to examples of it would seem to put the cart before the horse. By way of compromise, in the remaining chapters (except the concluding one) outlines will be presented by some of the main doctrines of three well-known authors of speculative systems : Hegel, Toynbee and Niebuhr. Each outline will be given to a large extent in the author's own terms and will be followed by some critical comments. By way of appendix to this speculative philosophy of history, I propose to undertake a brief consideration of religious conception of history especially some concepts of the Christian and of the Hindu conception of history explaining the points made about it in the present chapter.