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THE CALCULUS OF HISTORY

ONE EVENING not long ago my nine-year-old daughter, plagued by the intricacies of the early voyages to North America, put down her school-book with a sigh and wearily asked me: "What's the use of history?"

It was a good question. Far more honest, I'm afraid, than the lengthy, pompous, and unsatisfactory answer which was all that I, on the spur of the moment, was able to give her. Since she is a kindly child, she sensed my difficulty and did not press her obvious advantage, but after she had gone to bed that night I found that the question still troubled me.

As we grow older, perhaps, we are more keenly sensitive to our own inadequacies, but I was dismayed to find, upon reflection, that I was not even able to answer the more fundamental question "What is history?" Basically, of course, both questions may be the same question. When we say, for instance, that the practice of medicine is the art of preserving or restoring health, we have defined the thing itself by its use. Could we, then, say that history is the art of understanding the past? The trouble with that definition seemed to be that the understanding of the past is certainly a less self-evident good than health. After all, why should we concern ourselves at all with our yesterdays? Sufficient, surely, unto the day is the evil thereof.

Broadly speaking, the defence of any intellectual activity generally follows one of two lines. It may be defended on the grounds that it is a means to some desirable end—that is, that it is useful. Or it may be defended on the grounds that it is an end in itself, which in the case of history is to say that it gives in return for labour an adequate intellectual satisfaction or pleasure. I realized immediately that it would do me no good to advance the second of these considerations to my daughter. Someday she may change her mind about such studies, but at the moment she certainly has no pleasure in them. Moreover, my own inclinations are to agree with her. By this I mean that the pleasure to be derived from the study of history seems to be accidental rather than essential. It is a by-product. It is the pleasure that we feel in the creation of some useful tool or in the gaining of an augmented control over our environment.

Yet, if the end of history is use, what specific use are we to put it to? Bismarck is reputed to have said—and I can well believe it—“Only fools profit from experience. I prefer to profit from the experience of others.” Benjamin Franklin, who had much the same type of worldly arrogance, said “Experience keeps a dear school, but fools will learn in none other.” These high claims, however, can scarcely be substantiated. History has in fact produced no body of propositions that are indisputably and universally true or that have shown themselves to be infallible guides to action. The axiom that things that are equal to the same thing are equal to each other is, within its terms, both useful and beyond dispute, but the *obiter dicta* of historians by no means force a like assent. It may well be that all power corrupts and that absolute power corrupts absolutely, but this is a proposition for debate rather than a demonstrable truth. The Balkans, indeed, may not be worth the bones of a single Pomeranian grenadier, but few men—except perhaps the Pomeranian grenadiers—have been willing to agree unconditionally.

Even a little thought soon shows that it is easier to say what history does not attempt to do than to be positive about what it does. And it is very obvious that, whatever else the aim of history may be, it cannot be complete cognition. That, in the nature of things, is unattainable for the historian. In the first place his subject matter is too vast and too complex, and in the second, the relationships between phenomena are in time, and time, if not infinite, must certainly be regarded as such for the purposes of history.

The historian then must select events and compress time. Not even the most factual history of the most trivial occurrence can hope to be complete. The simplest historical event, the tiniest battle, is in its ramifications factually beyond our comprehension. Some aspects of it indeed we may grasp—the count in dead and wounded, what the commanders or certain prominent figures did, the final positions and conditions of the armies (although even here we are soon out of the factual and into the speculative when we speak of condition), but the detail—that is to say, the event itself—escapes us.

Even more serious a handicap is the fact that all historical phenomena are *sui generis*. They are fixed in point of time and are non-repeatable. Thus, anything in the nature of a controlled experiment becomes impossible. To do it justice the event would have to be re-lived, and that is an attempt beyond our powers. Modern science, like a lantern in a fog, can push back only a little way the encompassing circle of our ignorance. The techniques of chemistry and of criticism may expose the Donation of Constantine, as the techniques of geology may explode the delightful

hoax of the Piltdown Man, but this is merely negative assistance. More positively, the motion-picture camera may take us on a warm summer morning to the streets of Marseilles and may show us what happened that day to Barthou, the foreign minister of France, and to King Alexander of Yugoslavia. We may thus vicariously see the sudden dart forward of the assassin, the firing of the fatal shots, the grimaces of pain on the faces of the victims, the cutting down of the murderer under the sabres of the mounted guard. As we watch the film we feel that here at last we are approaching complete factual cognition.

But all of this is, in reality, a double illusion. We deceive ourselves if we believe that it brings us appreciably nearer to the truth. Such a record does not reveal to us either the physical event itself or the meaning or force of the event. We do not see the dew-drops on the hedges of the Marseilles streets; we do not smell the sea; there are a thousand aspects of the occurrence that are denied us. And since they are denied us, we call them inconsequential. But they are not therefore necessarily so. Was it not, perhaps, some childhood memory, some recollection of sunlight on the snow, that caused the nameless boy who should have been the murderer of Alexander II of Russia to turn away that morning beside the banks of the Catherine Canal and not to throw his bomb? The terrorists in that case were wise to insure against such possibilities, to see to it that there was also a Rysakov and a Grinivetski to push the work forward to its completion. Yet in each case history deals only with the dead matter; the substance of life eludes us. The murdered king and the dying minister in the carriage are facts, and upon these our imagination, starved of reality, seizes. What the Tsar Alexander said as he lay bleeding in the snow we eagerly record, but of what he felt, of what he thought, what memories or what regrets came flooding into his pain-clouded mind we can only guess.

And is not this also the case in our own lives? Which of us, by taking thought, can explain the failure of first love, or the motivation of decisions, or the incalculable results of actions? We are all in a sense amateur historians. We try to piece together the remembered segments of our lives and make a pattern out of them. And all of us, just like the professionals, fail in this. We find, if we look attentively enough, if pride, or fear, or some arrogance of the intellect does not intervene, that there are patterns overlaid on patterns. As we peer into the profundities of any event, the sunlight, and refraction, and the inadequacy of our own eyes, but most of all the terrible depth of the water, prevents us from seeing the bottom. It is not in practice true that any road will take you to the

end of the world. It would be more fair to say that all roads lead ultimately to the Perilous Wood where all men lose their way.

To all of this it will be objected that there are moments of significant decision, that, although complete cognition is denied us, this is not a matter of any great importance since the business of history is to concern itself with the meaningful. History, it will be said, is the sieve by which we winnow out the chaff of trivial detail and are left with the grain of significance. It may even be admitted that the mesh of the sieve is undesirably loose and that grain as well as chaff is sometimes lost, but this does not invalidate the main line of the argument. Surely, there have been times when the fate of nations or of civilizations have hung in the balance, and these occasions we are surely justified in marking as momentous. These are the pins upon which the lace of history is stretched. If Adrianople had been a victory for the legions, if Sobieski had failed before Vienna, if the defenders of the Bastille had repelled the mob, if Napoleon had been victorious at Waterloo. . . .

Two main objections are commonly advanced against this school of thought. In the first place, it may fairly be argued that if history is the record of the significant, there must be some prior principle by which the significant is determined. Yet obviously such a principle cannot come from history itself but must be given. How then are we to test its validity, and what indeed is the principle? There is no area of agreement here, and we find that we have unwittingly strayed back onto the shifting sands of opinion and conjecture. The second objection is that there are in truth no turning points. History, it is said, contains no great events and no great men; it contains only trends. It would have made no difference if Rome had won a battle at Adrianople, for Rome was in any case doomed. If the Moslems had not been turned back at Vienna, they would nevertheless have been turned back elsewhere. Even if the Bastille had not fallen, the French monarchy would have, and if Napoleon had won at Waterloo he would, at the best, have had but a breathing spell.

Of course, it is only the tiniest step from this position to pure determinism, to say that the legions could not have won at Adrianople because they did not, that the victory of the Paris mob was pre-ordained and immutable. There is an attraction in this theory which is felt not only by Marxists or by Calvinists. Yet the theory of the trend is surely open to the same objection as the theory of the significant event—by what principle do we assess a trend? If we establish our trends empirically, the method may be criticized as operating on insufficient data, for if we are denied complete cognition, we must select events. And it is surely as pernicious to select events because they conform to some given principle

or trend as it is to select them because they conform to some given principle of significance. Indeed, of course, it is at bottom the same thing.

Taken together, all these considerations would seem to provide a strong indictment against the usefulness of history. It is admitted that history cannot furnish us with any infallible guides to action, that it cannot give us complete cognition but must select events and compress time, that its very nature makes a controlled experiment impossible and—perhaps most serious of all—that its interpretation must rest, not upon deductive reasoning, but upon some given principle of significance. Thus history's factual basis is seen to be necessarily incomplete, while as a consequence its theoretical superstructure may prove to be as insubstantial as a dream. Surely, if so damning a case could have been made out against physics or biology, these sciences would long since have suffered the same eclipse as has overtaken astrology and numerology.

Yet history, which is almost as old as man, certainly shows no sign of being exterminated. This is because there is one fatal weakness in the case for the prosecution. These objections to history, which would all be valid against a science, immediately become irrelevant if they are raised against an art. No art claims to provide an infallible guide to action, to give us complete cognition, to advance by the experimental method, or to be capable of interpretation by deductive logic. On the contrary, all the arts select their subject matter and in each case their value rests upon some given principle of significance which is outside themselves. We do not analyse a Beethoven sonata or a Shakespearean sonnet to discover what beauty is, for no deductive reasoning can help us here. Rather, we recognize great art because its significance, and our acceptance of it, are torn from out ourselves. Instead of the standard of judgement being deduced from the art itself, as the principles of science are deduced from scientific observations, the standard of judgment is external to the art and resides in the observer. This would also seem to be true of the historian's selection of events. The judgments that he makes are value judgments, and this scale of values cannot be found within his subject matter but must be subjective.

In all these ways then, history is surely to be classed with the arts rather than with the sciences. Moreover, history, if it is to be more than a meaningless chronology of events, must deal with the qualitative rather than with the quantitative. History must strive more earnestly to answer the questions *Why?* and *How?* than the questions *What?* *Where?* and *When?* The real problems of history are concerned with intangibles, and it is just these problems that clamour most insistently to be answered. To ignore them is to make nonsense of the past. How does the lost cause

rally and snatch the flower of victory from the nettle of defeat? Why are the apparently vanquished so frequently justified in their impossible hope—as they were at Sempach, at Lepanto, and on the Marne, in the inexplicable victories of St. Joan or in the emergence of the Christians from the catacombs? Why and how are the mighty put down from their seats? Why does grass grow over Babylon and among the stones of the Colosseum? Why does freedom, stamped out like a prairie fire in some section of the globe, smoulder underground for generations only to burst into fresh flame at a later date and in a different place? These are questions that no mere science of measurement will ever assist us to answer.

Nevertheless, although history might gain an acquittal on the charges brought against it by pleading that it was an art rather than a science, such a verdict would not be really satisfactory. We would be left with the feeling that the accused had been released on a technicality. For there are certainly some respects in which history has an affinity with the sciences. Its basic data is factual rather than imaginative; it uses the scientific method in the framing of hypotheses; it must, to keep its integrity, be as rigid as any science in accepting or rejecting its factual material; and it must frequently employ one or other of the sciences to test its conclusions. Thus, before we are committed to so specific a line of defence, we would be wise to ask ourselves bluntly whether history is in fact an art or a science.

When we come to consider the question we find, I think, that the differences between a science and an art are differences in subject matter and in method rather than differences in aim. This is most apparent when we consider either science or art in its purer forms. Pure science is concerned only with the disinterested pursuit of knowledge; it is not interested in making television sets or atom bombs. Similarly, it would certainly be superficial to claim that the terrible catharsis of *King Lear*, the monstrous angels of Michael Angelo, or the tortured chords of the *Götterdämmerung* were meant merely for our entertainment. These great masterpieces have a more positive and lasting effect. They shake our dispositions with thought beyond the reaches of our souls. We experience them and we find that they have lightened our darkness, that we are never quite the same again. If there is a pleasure in their contemplation, it is a by-product, just as the machines and gadgets of industry are the by-products of pure science. And is not this true because the aim of both science and art is to increase our understanding? But whereas science tries to achieve this aim by the laborious pursuit of systematized and formulated knowledge, art attempts to reach the same goal by sudden flashes of insight. This difference in method is imposed by differences in

the subject matter. Science deals exclusively with the objective world, with what we call facts, while art is primarily concerned with the subjective, though no less real, world of man's relationships with the universe.

Now the strange thing about history is that it is concerned with both these worlds. It does not fit neatly into either category. History attempts, as far as possible, to establish its facts by the scientific method, to systematize and formulate them in relation to the objective world, but when this has been done its real work still lies ahead. The facts were merely the tools for its task. Now it must attempt to explain, to understand—and this endeavour at once takes it into another realm. The olive trees of Athens stand stripped of their bark and mutilated in the Peloponnesian War, a thin circlet of gold which is the crown of England is found lying beneath a thorn bush on Bosworth Field, in the Katyn Forest near Smolensk the spades uncover the common graves of Poland's chivalry. These are the objective facts, but what are the subjective causes? If these facts are to mean more to us than a tale told by an idiot we must understand the treason of Alcibiades, the tragic failure of Richard III, and the blood lust of Stalin.

History then uses the scientific method without at the same time abandoning hope of help from insight. It is neither pure art nor pure science, for it is something more than either. This is so because the historian literally takes all knowledge for his province. All is grist that comes to his mill—the coin with Caesar's face, the bill of lading signed by a Venetian merchant in the fifteenth century, the latest speech of the newest dictator, the chronicles of Thucydides, and the folk legends of Grimm. There is, indeed, a sense in which all the diverse arts and sciences of mankind are, as it were, but footnotes to history. For history is nothing less than the contemplation of life.

And this contemplation of life finds its justification in two different ways. It acts both upon the subject, who is the student of history, and upon the object, which is the external world. Subjectively, the study of history should above all else be a means of gaining a sense of perspective and proportion. When even our most terrible troubles are seen in their historical context, they seldom appear as large or as overwhelming as when they are viewed from the myopic standpoint of the present. Today the heresy of Communism seems to be threatening the very existence of Western civilization, but the student of history knows that Western civilization has faced such threats before. And where now are the Albigenses or the Monophysites or the Tartars? If we consider only the sorry events of the past decade, we find that, so far from the world having been made safe for democracy, freedom appears to be diminishing day by

day. But the student of history is not convinced by such gloomy opinions. He takes a longer view. He knows that the world has never been safe for democracy, and he has a strong suspicion that it never will be. There is no real safety to be found in all history, but there is something better—courage and hope. The historical perspective is thus the best of all antidotes both to rash hopes and foolish dreams and to the obverse of these, which is panic and despair. For history, more surely even than great literature, is an attempt to see life steadily and to see it whole.

Apart from the beneficial results which the study of history should produce in the wisdom and judgment of individuals, it is also true that history itself makes history. The event itself does not solely determine what its consequences will be. What we believe to be true of the event, what we select as its significant factors, as its "lesson"—these also help to determine what results will flow from it. As Marc Bloch so pithily put it, "Prevision destroys prevision." We do learn from the past. Britain, for instance, would probably never have learned how to create a Commonwealth if it had not been for the revolt of the Thirteen Colonies, and the United States might not have learned in time that distant bells could toll for her if it had not been for the bombs that fell at Pearl Harbour. And, although this type of knowledge is not exact or readily reducible to any formula, it is nevertheless important.

So if the truth—the infinitely complex, incomprehensible, multidinous truth—is blurred or is comprehended only in outline or vaguely, as a shape seen through mist, this is perhaps not too serious a handicap. If history can never reveal to us any absolute, if all it can do is to serve as a sort of crude calculus that will bring us closer and closer to our goal, it is still abundantly justified. For that goal is the understanding of life itself, and if this is more difficult of attainment than a knowledge of number, it is also infinitely closer to our deepest desires.

When my daughter asks the question again (and if I know her, she will), I think that I shall tell her that history is useful because it helps us to come to terms with the world we live in and to understand our own lives. Since she is a child, she may understand that. She may, indeed, understand it better than I do.