

PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

A Guide for Students

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INTRODUCTION

This book has a dual purpose. Primarily I hope to introduce the subject 'philosophy of history' to those history students, academics, and teachers who may to varying degrees be unfamiliar with an extensive branch of writings relating to their discipline. Nowadays such relative unfamiliarity is commonplace amongst historians. There are at least two (related) reasons for this – first, a claustrophobic compartmentalisation of disciplines, certainly in the Anglo-American world, where professional pressures tend towards narrow discipline bases – and second, specifically in historians, an air of indifference towards 'philosophy of history', either as an example of such compartmentalisation, or as a more deliberate stance emanating from some unfortunate encounter with philosophy, best forgotten. Such diffidence *may* be justified, but only on the basis of some familiarity with 'philosophy of history' – and a principal purpose of this 'guide' is to furnish precisely that.

This book, then, is offered as an *historians'* guide, but not because the ideas of our philosophers of history are, patronisingly, to be simplified because of 'fear' of philosophy – rather, because within the extensive literature of 'philosophy of history' it concentrates more on what might interest historians than philosophers. And as for being a *guide*, again the intention is not to condescend, but rather to map out what, with respect to even one of its two branches, has rightly been called 'a boundless land' of 'semi-monstrous' proportions.¹

A secondary purpose of this 'guide' relates more urgently to the contemporary nature of historical study, for it is under attacks sourced precisely from the two branches of philosophy of history, namely, 'speculative' and 'analytic'. First, from recent signs of a revival in 'speculative' philosophy of history which, as we shall see, tries to construct some kind of 'universal history' of the world (the rise and decline of great states, empires, and cultures), complaints have arisen that modern historians have lost that sense of the grand sweep of time – that their writings are narrowly focused specialist studies, more akin to the mentality of 'antiquarians' or 'laboratory workers'² than efforts to make sense of the unfolding of human history. Some even go so far as to suggest that 'history' proper is disappearing from schools and universities, replaced by a mish-mash of controversial contemporary 'social' studies ranging over ethnic, gender, and other ideological concerns, leaving

students bereft of any sense of an accepted past from which they can appreciate their present as emerging and thus achieve a salutary perspective.³

Another attack arises from the other branch of philosophy of history, namely, 'analytic' (or 'critical')⁴ philosophy of history which, as we shall see, attempts to bring to the surface and examine the validity of those presuppositions which underly the thinking and writings of historians. For example: what is a fact, can one be objective about the past, do historians explain things in a special way? Stemming from more general 'philosophical' positions, the answers given to such questions vary and are by no means necessarily subversive of historians' work. Yet some are, and perhaps no more so than those critiques inspired by many so-called 'post-modern' philosophers which amount to a thorough-going refutation of the very possibility of the discipline of history having any validity. Why? Because they claim that *any* discourse has an inbuilt subjectivism due to the reference-systems and value-orientations embedded in perceptions of 'reality' and the language expressing them. From this viewpoint, historians are talking rubbish – or at least, one historian's rubbish is as good or as worthless as any other's.

It is in the light of all these considerations that this 'historians' guide to philosophy of history' is offered – to help familiarise historians with the principal outlines of an extensive, multi-faceted literature so they can better assess its relevance for them; also, as a by-product, to provide historians with relevant food for thought where they are subject to attack on the nature of their practice – i.e., studying, writing, and teaching history. Each reader will doubtless sort out the dross from the gold within 'philosophy of history' in his or her own way despite any critical edge offered in this exposition. For my own part, I have elsewhere argued for a 'productive marriage' between the discipline of history and philosophy of history, but one based only on the 'right' foundations!

Finally, some might argue a further rationale for this 'guide' – namely, the arrival of the new millennium. For them, this 'event' cannot but stimulate reflection upon 'the meaning of history'. Be this an artificial stimulus or not, less dubious is the fact that we now have another century of history to survey, which by any standards has included momentous changes for most of the world, and raises issues for the future perhaps more palpably than any previous century. Churlish indeed would be the historian who took exception at being the first everyone else asks for insight, interpretation, and divination of meaning! Yet does his discipline so equip him? Should it? Grappling with a moral problem, I once asked a distinguished moral philosopher for advice. He replied that the last person to ask what one *ought* to do is the *moral* philosopher! Appearances notwithstanding, then, is the historian the *last* rather than the first person to ask about 'history'? Should we turn instead to *philosophers* of history, leaving the *actual* historians mute? Perhaps this 'guide' may be of some service to those historians sensitive to the issue.

Part I begins by distinguishing between 'speculative' and 'analytic' philosophy of history, concentrating on the former, offering reasons why it might invite study by

historians, and then offering a guide to its principal areas and noted individual contributions. Part II begins by explaining in general terms what 'analytic' philosophy of history is, again offering reasons why it might invite historians' attention, and then offers a guide to the principal issues it revolves around. Part III revisits both branches of philosophy of history, but brings matters up-to-date by exploring contemporary contributions from both its speculative and analytic angles which, it happens, differently announce 'the end of history'.

For ease of reading I have as far as possible restricted notes to references only, although for academic purposes these are necessarily extensive in those chapters where, in interpreting them, I have laboured to allow thinkers to speak for themselves.

SPECULATIVE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

What is it and why study it?

Introduction: the two branches of philosophy of history: speculative and analytic

When the famously 'enlightened' Frenchman, Voltaire, coined the term 'philosophy of history', he meant something akin to what we might now call 'critical cultural history'. In his 1769 *Essay on the Customs and the Spirit of Nations* he surveyed ancient and classical cultures (primarily in terms of their customs and religions), including China and India, as well as feudal times in Europe up to the reign of Louis XIV (1643–1715). Rather than present this huge historical vista as some kind of inherently meaningful pattern or story, his intention was to extract morally useful lessons from such 'history' (for example, to downplay sentimental or overawed respect for tradition and authority, and to highlight moral shortcomings and absurdities in his own society, thereby raising not only the present but also the future, 'in the light of history'). In short, he was interested in this approach to 'history' because of the new *perspective* it offered regarding human progress. His own views on the latter could be pretty gloomy, and how much hope his 'philosophical history' gave him for the better future he desired is a doubtful matter. But one thing is clear – he meant his readers to *think about* history, not simply to read and research it 'for its own sake' as a residue of interesting facts and events.

A second aspect to Voltaire's 'philosophy of history' was closely related to the above, namely, his awareness that the *method of study* required for such a 'history' at least needed to be rational – that is, able to sidestep superstition and religious orthodoxy and to examine long-held beliefs. Therefore he recognised the need to attend to how the historian *works* on his material and how he thinks about what he is doing – that is, an aspect of his 'philosophy of history' concerned history as a discipline or method, in addition to 'history' as 'what happened'. In the event, however, his own views on the discipline of history were not especially innovative.¹

Embryonic as Voltaire's coining of the phrase was, the essentials are already there to explain what 'philosophy of history' is. Leaving aside temporarily the term 'philosophy', we see that philosophy of history is concerned with the two different meanings of the term 'history'. On the one hand it treats of it as meaning past events, circumstances, and facts – in other words, 'history' as the material or 'object'

to be studied; and on the other hand it treats it as the academic *discipline* which studies the former. In short, the meaning of the term 'history' is twofold, and can be expressed by saying that history as object is what the subject of history studies. Philosophy of history is concerned with *both* versions of 'history', thus consisting of two branches. Where it treats of history as 'object', it is usually called *speculative* (or *substantive*) philosophy of history, and where it treats it as a 'discipline' it is best called *analytic* philosophy of history.

'Philosophy'

The other term involved in our subject-matter is 'philosophy'. This is a term which has become more precise than in Voltaire's time, when it simply meant something like 'thoughtful knowledge' – and it is perhaps partly because of this that the term is intimidating to some. For example, doubtless some scientists are neglectful of philosophy of *science* because they are nervous of 'philosophy', just as some historians are de-motivated regarding 'philosophy of history'. But here we can return to our glimpse at Voltaire, for a third aspect to his philosophy is that he meant his readers to *think rationally* about both the material and the discipline of history – and there is a reassuring sense in which that is *almost* 'all' what we call 'philosophy' is, namely, to think rationally about something. All we need add is that such thinking only becomes 'philosophical' when there is not already a recognised 'method' for finding answers to questions – in other words, where the matter under scrutiny does not fall under existing academic disciplines or other accepted 'rules' of thought. For example, we now have scientific disciplines to approach such questions as 'what is illness?', 'what are stars?', and 'where did mankind come from?', (respectively, medicine, astronomy, and biology). Likewise, other disciplines such as social sciences, languages, and indeed history provide accepted approaches to different questions. Also, apart from academic disciplines, we have familiar ways of tackling questions such as 'when is the next flight to New York?', 'why did you spend so much money?', and 'where are my gloves?'. In all these cases we do not 'philosophise'. What this shows is that philosophy approaches those issues for which, in the absence of existing 'rules', we simply have to rely on our capacity to 'think out' a problem as best ('rationally') as we can. Thus it is that over the millennia 'philosophers' have pondered about justice, happiness, dreams, art, motion, the State, and much more. It is true the emergence of modern science and social studies has diminished the area of philosophical enquiry, but plenty of 'inaccessible' questions remain for philosophy to flourish (for example, perennial *moral* issues), as well as new ones emerging. Not least among them are whether there is such a thing as 'world-history' in any meaningful sense, (thus, 'speculative philosophy of history') and whether the practice of the subject, 'history' – i.e., the discipline of history – is fully valid, (thus, 'analytic philosophy of history').

In short, (and contrary to many philosophers who 'philosophise' precisely about 'what is philosophy?' – the answer is provided by the history of thought), there is no mystery enveloping 'philosophy' making it an esoteric subject which, for example,

scientists and historians should respectfully leave to 'the experts'. It has no special *subject-matter* of its own (unlike all other viable academic disciplines), neither any special *method* (again, unlike all other viable disciplines). Rather, it simply means seeking knowledge or understanding, through the exercise of reason, of those matters otherwise inaccessible via known paths or rules of enquiry – and in the sense that this means trying to think something through 'on our own', it is a uniquely 'democratic' activity, open to everyone.

All this, however, is not to say philosophy is easy. Many brilliant thinkers adorn its history, and we tread respectfully in their wake to avoid thinking and saying silly things. Also, their reflections and arguments amongst each other over time have generated a special vocabulary better to denote certain recurring complex and/or abstract ideas, and not only is it as well to become familiar with some of this vocabulary in order to understand *their* writings, but its persistence shows its usefulness to our *own* efforts to 'think things through in a rational way'.

Speculative philosophy of history

If, then, 'philosophy' is more to be embraced than feared, let us look further into that branch of philosophy of history called *speculative* philosophy of history. As already intimated, this consists of thinking about the actual 'content' of (human) history to see in what sense 'it as a whole' is explicable or meaningful. It is hence not surprising that some who have attempted this employed the term 'universal history', and that one recent scholar described it as 'the central aspiration to afford a total explanatory account of the past'.² Although not all speculative philosophy of history is so overtly ambitious, those who engage in it are variously attempting to reach conclusions about the following kinds of questions: does history demonstrate a single giant unfolding story? If so, does the 'story' have an ending? And is that ending utopian, cataclysmic, or simply mundane? Or does history go round in circles ('cycles')? Can history be divided up into distinct periods such as 'the Dark Ages', and if so, what are they? And what does this tell us about the course of history? Is the history of the world necessarily a history of *progress* of humanity; if so, why? If not, why not? Do 'laws' govern historical development, or is it already begging the question to see history as 'developing'? Is the course of history *determined* by forces outside human control, or can individuals' actions make a difference? Can we learn anything from the flow of history, or is every situation unique?

In their turn, these large questions have generated a recognisable body of subsidiary issues. Is there such a thing as 'Fate'? Or 'Providence'? Has 'human nature' remained the same throughout history? Can we talk of different mentalities over the ages, such as an early 'mythical consciousness' as distinct from the modern 'scientific' outlook? Can the history of humanity be seen as analogous to the growth of the individual from infancy, through childhood and youth, to maturity, and then old age? Why is it that great cultures have invariably declined? Is it inevitable?

Speculative philosophy of history, then, stems from the impulse to make sense of history, to find meaning in it, or at least some intelligible pattern. And it should not surprise us that at the heart of this impulse is a desire to predict the *future* (and in many cases to shape it). By any standards, then, this branch of philosophy of history is audacious, and there is a sense in which the term 'speculative' is not only appropriate but also carries derogatory implications for those historians and others who insist on a solely *empirical* approach to the past, i.e., on 'sticking to the facts'. In short, to some, the very project of speculative philosophy of history can appear misguided on the grounds that it is 'theoretical' in the bad sense of the term – factually unfounded, impossible of proof, prey to imaginative flights of fancy, and premised on an unrealistically encyclopaedic knowledge of history throughout recorded time and over most of the globe. To others, however, it is a worthwhile undertaking because it is so natural to a reflective being. Just as at times one gets the urge to 'make sense' of one's own life, either out of simple curiosity about its 'meaning', or through suffering a particularly turbulent phase, or because weighty decisions about one's *future* are looming, so some are drawn to reflect, not on themselves, but on the history of their species – mankind.

The relevance of speculative philosophy of history

Whether speculative philosophy of history is worthwhile or, instead, a fundamentally flawed exercise, it is surely an understandable venture. Here I revert to the analogy of the individual's reflections on his or her life. Firstly, attempts to discover a theory or 'philosophy' of history are intrinsically interesting because they try to make sense of the overall flow of history – even in some cases to give it meaning. And there is a sense in which to do particularly the latter is to offer answers to the question, 'what is the point of life?' (not of yours or mine, but of human life in general). The importance of such a question is either self-explanatory or nil, depending on an individual's assumptions. Some see it as *the* ultimate question to be answered, whereas others see it as symptomatic of an arrogant anthropomorphism which demands that 'life, the universe, and all that' be reduced to the petty model of merely human dimensions, where intention and reason are seen as the governing principles. But that individuals differ in this way is exactly the point, in the sense that speculative philosophy of history raises the issue directly into the light of argument, allowing us to examine our initial assumptions regarding the value or futility of such 'ultimate' questions. For example, one might ask sceptics whether they at least accept the notion that, on the whole, 'history has delivered' progress in the arts, sciences, economics, government, and quality of life. If the answer is 'yes', how do they account for it? Is it chance (thus offering no guarantees for the future)? Or if there is a reason for it, what is this 'reason' which is 'going on in history'? Similarly, if the sceptics answer 'no', then why not? Again, is it chance? Or is there some 'mechanism' underlying the course of history which prevents overall continuous progress? If so, what is it, and can it be defeated? And as for those

who do believe in a history which delivers progress, what do they have to say about the immense catalogue of horrors still to be found in the world?

Whatever answers are given, whether from the enthusiast's or the sceptic's viewpoint, they cannot but be interesting to us in their own right, for since we are beings conscious of the passing of time and of the varying of events and circumstances, we cannot but wish 'to make sense' of this aspect of our being-in-the-world. In short, to be 'conscious' of this or that is to 'make sense' of it, in the most basic sense that human-beings are of necessity perpetually, instinctively engaged in the practice of 'understanding', or contriving meaning in, what they experience. Thus it would be strange indeed if historians, whose object is the past, did not find speculative philosophy of history intrinsically interesting, whether impressed or not by particular examples of it.

To pursue our analogy, there is a second reason why an impulse towards speculative philosophy of history, worthwhile or not, is at least understandable – namely, there are certain periods in history when many who are part of them feel their times are especially turbulent or in some way remarkable (just as when an individual, for example, falls seriously ill, undergoes a severe loss, wins the lottery, or retires). At such times, interest in 'making sense of the past' has a practical point – namely, the felt need to come to terms with the present through gaining a perspective on how one has got there. Such reflections serve the function of restoring, or confirming, a meaning to the present otherwise lost or at least jeopardized by an unprecedented flow of events. Only too aware of the *particular* narrative of events leading to our present situation, we attempt to regain our bearings by seeking more reflective *generalised* explanations for the state we are in. This urge to 'take stock' of affairs in turbulent times is 'natural', I suggest, for either of two reasons – first, the need not only for individuals but also for communities (local, regional, national, and even international) to preserve their sense of identity; and second, the need to find excuses or deflect blame, where the unsteadiness of the present is unpleasant and perceived as resulting from failure. This latter is probably no more than a particular case of the general need to preserve a sense of identity, for in finding 'excuses' for the parlous state one might be in, one is meaning 'it wasn't me, sir!' As we will see, if by a 'theodicy' is meant 'a justification of the ways of God to man', many speculative philosophies of history contain elements of 'a justification of the ways of man to man', (for which we might coin the term 'histodicy').³ For example, 'America is still the land of the free despite some of the things it has "had" to do . . .', just as 'I am still "me" despite some of the things I have done . . .'.

To complete our analogy, a third reason why speculative philosophy of history is understandable is that there are periods in history when many intuit the coming to an end of an epoch, and the possibility, even necessity, of fashioning a new future. Thus the range of their vision extends beyond the short or medium term, and they look at themselves (either as individuals or, by analogy, as 'cultures', or even as 'mankind') in terms of their 'historic' possibilities. This involves an attempt

to supersede the 'details' of the past in order to abstract overall 'trends' and general 'laws' from which to predict the future. A variety of positions can follow, most of which have been proposed at one time or another by different philosophers of history. The prediction may be one of gloom, which we can do nothing about; or of gloom, but one we can at least mitigate; or of a gloom which can be entirely averted. Alternatively the prediction may be one of endless 'progress' which only has to be nurtured, or of limited progress in limited areas. There is even the 'prediction' that 'history' has stopped – that, at least politically and economically, mankind has reached a culmination from which we can expect no further fundamental changes or developments either in terms of regress or progress.

Is speculative philosophy of history worthwhile?

From the above, then, I suggest speculative philosophy of history is an understandable intellectual exercise and, to that extent, defensible. Broadly, its project is interesting in its own right since it purports to 'make sense' of history, and to that extent suggest answers to 'the meaning of life'. The latter issue has naturally occupied human beings (and always will) insofar as they are 'self-conscious' – i.e., 'meaning-constructing' beings. And in an increasingly secular age where religion is less appealed to for answers to that question, speculative philosophy of history is all we have left. Also, as suggested, for those who dismiss the question of 'the meaning of life' on the a priori grounds that there simply isn't one, perhaps the burden of proof is on them to *show*, from history, its meaninglessness (i.e., demonstrate it a posteriori). But in doing so, they would be engaging precisely in that which their a priori stance would appear to denigrate, namely, speculative philosophy of history!

We also saw two broadly *practical* reasons for engaging in speculative philosophy of history – namely, the urge in rapidly changing times to restore a sense of continuity, or at least intelligibility, in defence of a society's identity; and secondly, the impulse to predict the future, and hopefully influence it, on the basis of identifying general forces governing history.

From all this it is not surprising that certain themes recur in the writings of many speculative philosophers of history – the search for meaning or design in the flow of history, various theories of progress, the notion of recurring cycles, the issue of individual agency, the discovery of 'laws' of development which 'determine' history, and the question of the changeability of 'human nature'; in their turn, these themes generate subsidiary notions regarding the role of chance, Fate, or Providence, different periodisations of history, theories of different 'national' or 'cultural' characteristics of peoples, variously coloured predictions for the future, and attempts to make sense of human suffering.

As suggested, this is all intrinsically interesting. But one further theme which cannot but press itself on historians in particular, is whether, not only this or that example of a 'theory' of history, but the general rationale underlying *all* speculative philosophy of history (understandable as the impulse is) is *worthwhile* in the first

place. According to the philosopher Hegel, writing in the early nineteenth century, historians only 'skim the surface', (i.e., record and analyse 'the facts' without comprehending their part in the larger scheme of things) – and in the Introduction I mentioned similar concerns voiced *today* about the teaching and writing of history. What is the point of studying history, it might be asked, if not to emerge with something to say about its overall meaning, direction, and significance? In short, one could turn the issue on its head and ask whether the study of history is worthwhile if it is *not* pointed deliberately towards wider horizons of understanding. Fascinating as the minutiae of the Crimean War might be, or the task of inferring a satisfactory account of the social origins of Victorian prostitution, are such piecemeal historical studies worthwhile in themselves? The practice of many historians today suggests they think it is. Others will argue that they study and teach, for example, the history of the Crimean War in order to enhance understanding of, and gain perspective on, aspects of European history both before and after that war. To that extent, then, they are moving towards finding a grander 'design' or 'significance' to history. Alternatively, some may value studying history not because of any such leanings towards 'theorising' or 'speculating' about its course but because of that 'civilising' effect the discipline is supposed to have in virtue of being one of the 'humanities' subjects revitalised in the Renaissance. There may be other justifications for studying history⁴ – but the point is made. If some historians question the value of speculative philosophy of history, the shoe can be put on the other foot – but in a more charitable spirit, for no speculative philosopher of history would question the value of the study of history, only the value of how it is undertaken in any particular instance.

Although the following chapters of Part 1 are far from being a *history* of speculative philosophy of history, they are at least suggestive of the framework such a history might employ. This is because they are chronological in order, thereby offering the possibility of conveying the sense in which the same thing (in this case, speculative philosophy of history) has changed over time, and of suggesting explanations for how and why. However, as elaborated upon at the beginning of the next chapter, rather than adopting the stricter definition of 'speculative philosophy of history' which a proper history would probably require, for the more general purposes of a 'guide' I have adopted a looser notion in order to accommodate what may be proposed as 'dominant general attitudes' towards the meaning of history in addition to specific speculative philosophies of history crafted by individual thinkers. As for the latter, this guide draws attention mainly to the most celebrated examples. But sufficient guidelines emerge from their study, I hope, to enable those interested in the genre to pursue lesser known examples from an informed perspective.