INTRODUCTION

It is more than thirty-five years since I published my first paper in philosophy of history, and I am pleased to be able to gather nineteen of the twenty-two of them together in one volume. Otherwise, they would continue to be scattered about in all manner of publications, any number of them lost to an audience their author obviously hoped to influence. In the very early years of my career, I published three papers in the *American Anthropologist,* and it is no exaggeration to say that virtually no one in philosophy knows they exist. I am delighted to be able to save the papers which follow from that fate.

I have always been interested in philosophy of history—I know I wrote a term paper in that area when I was an undergraduate at Brooklyn College—but I would never have expected in my student days that it would become such a dominant interest for so many years. I was a graduate student, at Yale, in 1952, when Patrick Gardiner’s *The Nature of Historical Explanation* was published, and I had already sufficient interest in the subject to acquire a copy. In those days, there was an Oxford philosopher on the Yale faculty, and spotting him on the street, I stopped him to ask if he knew the author or knew who he was. He didn’t recognize the name and asked if I knew to what college he belonged. The book provided that information so I told him, and the name of the college called to his mind a person concerning whom he said—I cannot quote him exactly after all these years—he always worked on the periphery of philosophy. He quickly qualified that by adding something like: at least British philosophy.

1 The omitted three are in direct response to critics, and there seems no point in re-publishing them without the criticisms toward which they are directed. The omitted papers are “Social Science, Ontology and Explanation: Some Further Reflections,” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, vol. 4, no. 4, December 1974, pp. 359–68; “Against Historical Realism,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 40, no. 3, March 1980, pp. 426–9; and “The Way to Historical Being and Time,” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, vol. 16, no. 1, March 1986, pp. 101–5.

I cannot remember what my reaction to that was, but I have thought of that conversation many times over the years always with amusement. But perhaps my amusement is premature, misled by the extraordinary interest there now is in the subject in contrast to how little there once was. If there was a significant piece of writing in the English language dealing with our subject which preceded F. H. Bradley's *The Presuppositions of Critical History* (1874), I confess that I do not know what it is, and I believe that the first significant contribution to our subject by an American is Maurice Mandlebaum's *The Problem of Historical Knowledge*, which was published as recently as 1938.

It is not too much to suggest that what started the outpouring of interest in philosophy of history—I refer, of course, to philosophy of history only in the critical sense—in the English-speaking world was the appearance, in 1942, of C. G. Hempel's classic paper "The Function of General Laws in History." Given the character of philosophy of science as it was practiced at that time, Hempel's position made perfectly good sense. To begin with, the focus of attention in philosophy of science was on explanation, a problematic which was confined to what was called the context of justification. Those who thought in that way were quite explicit that the context of discovery, the way in which one's thesis came into being, was of no philosophical interest. And so Hempel simply ignores the context within which the historical past comes to be known, and attends only to what is presupposed by historians when they try to explain a swath of the historical past no matter how it comes to be known. Virtually the entire thrust of the philosophical interest in history—surely, in the English-speaking world—was on the problem of explanation. It does not mean, of course, that everyone followed in Hempel's direction and sought to talk about the general laws which justify the move from what is explained to what explains it. Some supposing that in point of fact historians did not actually explain by means of covering laws, turned to historians' own writings to discover what they really did. And that led some to focus on the way in which historical events or actions seemed to be the outcome of what historical actors chose to do, thus making philosophy of history a branch of action theory.

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And others, noticing the way in which historians wrote up the results of their investigations as narrative, began to attend to history as a mode of discourse making it subject to literary criticism and analysis. The point of that orientation, of course, is that one explains what one explains by showing how it is required by the narrative.

In sum, the thrust of philosophical reflections on history has been almost entirely on the why of history, almost entirely on the way in which historical facts are to be explained. When I began to think about the problems of history, I, too, inclined to think in terms of the why, although it may be worth noting that my very first paper on the subject, "A Note on the Status of Historical Reconstructions," clearly anticipates my later interests. To begin with, I had not yet thought my way out of the view—an utterly absurd view I now incline to think—that the context of discovery cannot be of interest to philosophy. That I had the good fortune to have been a student of Hempel in graduate school no doubt contributed to the formation of the attitude I brought with me to my earliest work on history. That interest is reflected in the papers which constituted the first part of this volume. But not all of the material included in that part are exclusively concerned with that. In going over this material in preparation for the present volume, I was amazed to discover how much of "Evidence and Events in History" anticipates what would become my veritable preoccupation with the what of history, and "Ideals of Order: History and Sociology" is likewise, not exclusively concerned with the why of history.

As I continued to think about the problems of history I came increasingly to reject the view that the context of discovery has no philosophical relevance. On the contrary, I came increasingly to think that the nature of historical explanation is not all that interesting, and that it raised no special questions that were not raised in other areas in which matters had to be explained. The covering-law orientation simply extended to history a point of view that had been developed in reflections on explanation in the natural sciences. Indeed, if one sees lurking behind the covering-law point of view the epistemology of David Hume and its particular sense of causality, one might argue that what is being extended to history is the sort of explanation we find in everyday common sense. And the action-theory orientation extends to historical figures the sort of explanation that is used wherever human behavior is rendered intelligible. It would thus appear that there is really nothing special about history as a discipline.
But such a conclusion would be mistaken. The trouble with philosophy's preoccupation with the why of history is that it is precluded from seeing what that discipline is all about and how it carries out its business. The focus of attention is on the finished product of the historian's work, the report, as it were, of the outcome of his research. For the most part, but not entirely, that report takes the form of a narrative, an account which purports to tell us what took place in some swath of the human historical past. But how does one come to know what happened in the historical past? In my judgment, the most interesting and exciting questions which confront a philosophy of history in the critical sense of the term have to do with how historians can claim—can claim responsibly—to know a past they can never experience. What is the nature of the discipline that makes such knowledge possible, and what can factuality, reference, truth and objectivity be in a discipline having such a nature? That I have come to believe that these are the important questions is clearly reflected in the fact that the section devoted to the what of history, the focus on history as the discipline which tells us what the past was like, is so much larger than the section devoted to the why.

Collingwood's *The Idea of History* appeared posthumously in 1946, four years after Hempel's paper made historical explanation virtually the only issue for philosophy of history of the critical sort. And so it was simply taken for granted that that was what Collingwood was dealing with as well, particularly in his well-known doctrine that historians re-think or re-enact past thought. Collingwood was simply absorbed into the dominant problematic notwithstanding the fact that his account of re-enactment actually begins with the words: "How, or on what conditions, can the historian know the past?"4 Knowing is not explaining, and it is clear that Collingwood was working on the what not the why of history.

I no longer remember when I first read *The Idea of History*, but my recollection is that my first understanding of what he was doing was along the lines of everybody else. At the beginning of "Evidence and Events in History," which was published in 1962, I talk about giving some view of Collingwood a methodological interpretation, which suggests a suspicion that there was more to what he had been doing than the explanation-reading of him, but I had not yet abandoned

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the view that re-enactment was intended to be a species of explanation. Some years later, while writing my *Historical Knowing*, a book that is entirely concerned with the what of history and seeks to understand factuality, truth, objectivity and reference in history by taking history seriously as a way of *knowing*, I remember stopping suddenly and saying to myself: maybe this is what Collingwood was trying to do all the time. I re-read the *Idea of History*, and discovered that that was, indeed, the case. I then proceeded to read Collingwood’s *Speculum Mentis*, the penultimate chapter of which deals with history, and then proceeded to read Collingwood’s occasional pieces on history which had been brought together conveniently in a volume edited by William Debbins.5 With all that read, I proceeded to write the first of my Collingwood papers, “Collingwood’s Theory of Historical Knowing,” which was published in 1970. “Collingwood on the Constitution of the Historical Past,” continues further my interest in what Collingwood says about and actually does in trying to know the historical past, and “The Idea of History as a Scale for Forms,” deals with Collingwood’s sense of the discipline of history as itself having a history.

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