A Pragmatist Critique of Dogmatic Philosophy of History

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The first part of this paper aims to situate Paul Roth's approach to philosophy of history vis-à-vis some more traditional theoretical alternatives, while the second explicates how his well-known critique of historical realism illustrates his broader meta-philosophical commitments. It makes sense to begin by introducing a pair of provisional heuristic distinctions, so as to use them later on to peg some of the important characteristics of Roth's philosophical outlook. The first distinction, between the dogmatist and the pragmatist approaches to philosophy of history, is a particularly important one for our purposes. Thus, dogmatist approaches concern themselves primarily with vindicating some fundamental elements of a pre-established a-priori philosophical vision: defending realism, rescuing rational agency, preserving free will, restoring the disciplinary autonomy of humanities, etc. History, here, is meant to illustrate, support, or reinforce some theoretical insights secured in advance by philosophical thought. Meanwhile, a pragmatist approach recommends seeing history primarily as a special and advanced mode of inquiry, which readily invites comparisons with other disciplined modes of pursuing understanding and knowledge, and generates important philosophical conundrums and puzzles of its own.

To illustrate, Michel Foucault once explained his disagreements with Habermas by referencing an important difference between the philosophical traditions to which they respectively belong. Habermas, according to Foucault, comes from a tradition built around a continuous history of reason—a tradition which suffers in modernity from a painful split between the instrumental/scientific and moral reason, while Foucault himself comes from a tradition of reflecting upon the developments in the history of science—a tradition where

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1 The term ‘pragmatism’ does not have one settled meaning. It usually designates a loose constellation of somewhat divergent views, centered around some shared themes. Here, it is merely used to signal a continuity between the lines of thought discussed in connection with Roth’s work and some of the key guiding insights of classical pragmatism (Peirce and Dewey, especially) with respect to scientific investigation and intellectual inquiry in general.
the aforementioned split does not arise (Foucault 1994, p. 118). On terms proposed, Foucault emerges as a **pragmatist** in this comparison, to the degree that his attention is focused on historically circumscribed and locally contextualized attempts to cope and understand, without trying to anticipate the way in which the results of his investigations can fit in with a pre-established philosophical framework. The contrast can further be elaborated by recalling Dewey’s description of modernity as a conflict between “the picture of the world painted by modern science” and “the earlier picture which gave classic metaphysics its intellectual foundation and confirmation” (Dewey 1920, p. 54).

Philosophy can either submit itself to an apprenticeship in the new modes and methods of inquiry or can, alternatively, insist on the perennial relevance of its own traditional preoccupations. Intellectual inertia strongly favors the latter course because, in contrast to the “dry, thin and meager scientific standpoint” (Dewey 1920, p. 211), the old philosophical conceptions have already been thoroughly incorporated into the “emotionalized imagination” of individuals as well as the enabling ideology of social institutions (Dewey 2012, p. 170). Nonetheless, as a pragmatist, Dewey strongly recommends resisting this latter course. Instead, he emphatically endorses the first option, wherein philosophical reflection commits to the task of adjusting itself to the realities of the first-order inquiry.

Our second distinction, between the **speculative** and the **critical** philosophy of history, is mainly worth mentioning here because it can work, inadvertently, at cross-purposes with our first distinction, resulting in a temptation to assign all speculative philosophy of history to the dogmatic side, and to equate the pragmatist philosophy of history with critical philosophy of history tout court.² While **critical** philosophy of history programmatically abstains from speculative pronouncements about the meaning or trajectory of actual historical events and focuses exclusively on questions that pertain to the scholarly investigation and writing of history, it can, nonetheless, be still **dogmatic**, as illustrated by the protracted debates between the covering-law theorists and the defenders of rational agency explanations. The covering-law theorists charged

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² W.H. Walsh, originally responsible for introducing the distinction between the speculative and the critical philosophy of history, primarily had Hegel in his sights, whom he read more or less as a dogmatist philosopher in our sense (Walsh 1955, p. 120). Whether or not he was right about Hegel is open to question. The idea that history is governed by reason is said by Hegel to be **first** demonstrated in philosophy (Hegel 1902, p. 53), making him a dogmatist. Yet, Hegel also objects against philosophers introducing “**apriori** inventions of their own” into history, claiming that his own conclusions are only an ‘inference’ from history as it happened (Hegel 1902, p. 54).