CHAPTER 2

On the Understanding of Histories

Historical investigation [says Santayana] has for its aim to fix the order and character of events throughout past time in all places. The task is frankly superhuman, because no block of real existence, with its infinitesimal detail, can be recorded, nor if somehow recorded could it be dominated by the mind; and to carry on a survey of this social continuum ad infinitum would multiply the difficulty. The task might also be called infrahuman, because the sort of omnisience which such complete historical science would achieve would merely furnish materials for intelligence: it would be inferior to intelligence itself. . . . An attempt to rehearse the inner life of everybody that has ever lived would be no rational endeavor. Instead of lifting the historian above the world and making him the most consummate of creatures, it would flatten his mind out into a passive after-image of diffuse existence, with all its horrible blindness, strain, and monotony. Reason is not come to repeat the universe, but to fulfil it. Besides, a complete survey of events would perforce register all changes that have taken place in matter since time began, the fields of geology, astronomy, paleontology, and archeology being all, in a sense, included in history. Such learning would dissolve thought in a vertigo, if it had not already perished of boredom. . . . The profit of studying history lies in something else than in a dead knowledge of what happens to have happened.¹

¹ A considerable part of Section I has appeared in Part I of "Controlling Assumptions in the Practice of American Historians" in Theory and Practice in Historical Study, Bulletin 54 of the Social Science Research Council (New York, 1946). Much of the material in the rest of this chapter was used in a talk in a symposium on "Historiography of Philosophy" held at the meeting of the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association at Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut, on December 29, 1938, and printed in the Journal of Philosophy, XXXVI (1939), 469-74.

IN VIEW of the situation Santayana thus graphically depicts, it is clear that every written history must be a selection of so-called facts made with some particular emphasis. This means that the historian must employ some principle of selection; he must choose what he will include as “significant” for his history. In writing the “history” of the United States, he must decide what is “basic” for that history. Even though he permit himself four lengthy volumes to set forth “The Rise of American Civilization,” and can hence afford a broader base, he cannot escape the need for a principle of selection. There is no such thing as a “complete” history, not even the interminable productions of the Chinese scholars.

Moreover, if seventeen years elapse between the two written histories, the principle of selection employed in the later one will probably differ appreciably from the principle that served for the earlier. This will be not only because in the interval the historian has found out more “facts,” and now has a greater store from which to choose those that are really “basic” for a much shorter work. It will be due fully as much to the circumstance that he has grown in the stature of his wisdom. He has come to understand the world and its ways and the pattern of human experience with more of maturity and insight, we hope; at least he now understands it differently. And he understands it differently in large part because there is now something different to understand. The history-what-happened during those seventeen years—the history as “actuality”—has not stood still. That history, like all the histories-what-happen, has been progressive and cumulative. In 1944 the United States was not what it was in 1927. And the American nation possessed in consequence in 1944, quite apart from all “interpretation,” a different history from the America of 1927. Hence the historian, facing the problem of selecting those facts in the American past that seem basic for 1944, will not be able to make just the same selection that he made in 1927.

It is thus not only the historian who must be selective in understanding and writing his histories, in his historiography. The histories that things possess—what has occurred, history as “actuality”—are themselves plural and selective, in two major senses. In the first place, every


history is the history of something, and these “somethings” are plural: each has a history that is the particular history of the particular past of that particular something, different from the history of any other something. There can be no “history of everything,” no “history of the world as a whole.” For the world is not a whole—for human experience and knowledge at least. Histories are thus plural and many, to the degree in which our world is plural and many. This pluralism of histories is thus grounded in a general ontological pluralism. Or rather, the best evidence for an ultimate metaphysical pluralism is the encountered plurality of histories. 4 This encountered plurality of many things with many different histories can be called the plurality of histories in the present. In the second place, histories are temporally plural: they are progressive and cumulative, as we have seen in the case of Beard’s two Americas.

Thus the history the historian will write, and the principle of selection he will employ, will be undergoing continual change, because the histories things possess are continually changing, always being cumulatively added to. With the occurrence of fresh events, the meaning and significance of the past is constantly changing. Of course, what did happen, taken as a sheer brute event, does not change, no matter what further events take place. Caesar still crossed the Rubicon the exact day he did, William invaded England in 1666, Lincoln was still shot in April, 1865, the American heroes still dropped their bomb on Hiroshima in August, 1945, no matter what consequences subsequently flowed from those momentous happenings. The events as accurately chronicked never change; no one, not even the idealistic interpreters of historical knowledge, has ever maintained such a patent absurdity. But as we have seen the historian is not and cannot be concerned with all that did happen. He is and must be concerned with those events that did happen which turn out later to be “basic” for his history. He cannot be concerned with the entire past, with all its infinitesimal detail; he is concerned only with the “basic” or significant past, with that selection from all that did happen which has happened—with the history of what has happened as significant and meaningful events. And it is precisely this “basic” past, this meaning and significance of the past, that is continually changing, that is cumulative and progressive. Writ-

4 See Chapter 7, “Empirical Pluralism and Unifications of Nature.”
ing the history of the United States, the historian uses what is basic and
significant in that history-that-happened for 1927, or for 1944, as the
principle that will control his selection of material. What is significant
in American history he will understand in one way in 1927, and in a
somewhat different way in 1944. For the historian’s understanding of
the significant past, like that past itself, is progressive and cumulative.

There is really nothing mysterious about this obvious fact that men’s
understanding of what is significant in their past changes with the lapse
time. For all understanding is in terms of causes and consequences.
Now, our understanding of causes naturally changes and deepens, as
we find out more about the operation of causes—with our changing and
developing schemes of explanation of the causes of what has happened.
And equally naturally, our understanding of consequences changes
with the working out of further consequences in the history-that-
happens itself.

In the first place, our understanding of the causes of what-has-
happened changes as we manage to extend and build up our sciences
of man’s social behavior. Thus the rise of the Greeks was explained
by Herodotus in terms of one scheme of understanding, or “science”; 
by Thucydides, in terms of another; by George Grote, in terms of a
third; by Marx, in terms of a fourth; and by contemporaries like Zimm-
ern, Rostovtzeff, and Westermann, in terms of a fifth and still more
adequate science. Each of these schemes of understanding and inter-
pretation selects somewhat different facts: hence each comes out with
a different “history.”

Again, when we are content to explain what groups of men do by
attributing their actions to the “guiding hand of Providence,” we will,
like the early New England historians, write histories of the operation
of God’s will and providence, and we will select facts that illustrate
it. Or, like Bancroft, we will record “the movement of the divine power
which gives unity to the universe, and order and connection to events.”
When we have come to understand the mysterious ways in which God
works, his wonders to perform, as the working out of the God-given
genius for politics of the Teutonic “race,” we will, like H. B. Adams,
trace the “origin” of the New England town-meeting to the primitive
German mark. When we have read John Stuart Mill’s Logie, and ab-
sorbed his Baconian conception of the nature of science, we will eschew
all guiding hypotheses and indefatigably collect “facts,” hopefully trust-
ing that somehow good, in the guise of some “synthesis” that will make
it all clear, will be the final goal of all this ill. We will then be strictly
“scientific” and “critical” historians, like those great pioneers who won
respect for “history” as an academic discipline in the historical seminars
set up during the 1880’s at Johns Hopkins, Columbia, and elsewhere.
When we have seen a great light, and been converted to the gospel of
St. Marx, we will write histories like those of Simons, Gustavus Myers,
Lewis Corey, or Curtis Nettles. When we have learned from James
Harvey Robinson that the historian must master all the social sciences,
and have read—or at least abstracted—all the books in that wide field,
we will understand the past in terms of all the different hypotheses of
all the social sciences, and will, like Harry Elmer Barnes, adopt a
“multiple causation” theory as our principle of selection. Our under-
standing of the causes of what has happened will change in these ways
with our changing—and we hope, increasingly adequate—schemes of
scientific explanation.

Secondly, our understanding of the consequences, and hence of the
“significance” of past events, changes with the further history-that-has-
happened—with what comes to pass in the world of events, as a result
of the possibilities inherent in what has already happened. Thus, World
War I was understood in one way as leading to the adoption of the
Covenant of the League of Nations. It was understood in another way
as the Russian revolution worked itself out, and began to appear as a
much more significant consequence of that war than the abortive effort
at establishing an international organization. That war took on a
further significance with the rise of the Fascist and Nazi regimes, and
with the resumption of German economic expansion in Central and
Eastern Europe. Still later it began to appear as the first stage of the
Russian domination of the European continent. And now—fresh under-
standing awaits each new date and further eventuation.

Or take the significance of American participation in that struggle.
Twenty years ago, the entry of America into World War I was under-
stood as the result of British propaganda and the machinations of the
munition-makers. Events after 1939 changed all that. After Pearl Harbor,
America’s part in World War I was seen as its first and unsuccessful
attempt to curb German aggression and establish a military guarantee
of the status quo. With the resumption of post-war power politics, it became the initial emergence of the United States as a superpower, whose irresponsibility might well prove a major menace to peace, and should we drop a few H-bombs, make us the most ruthless combatant in history. With the Pentagon curbed by the White House, 1917 began to appear as America’s first assumption of responsibilities commensurate with its resources, as a tryout for its developing role as the well-meaning if rather clumsy defender of the free world and the architect of peace. And next year—!

New consequences flowing from past events change the “significance” of the past, of what has happened. Events which had been overlooked before because they did not seem “basic” for anything that followed, now come to be selected as highly significant. Other events that used to seem “basic” recede into the limbo of mere details. In this sense, a history-that-has-happened is not, and in the nature of the case cannot be, fully understood by the actors in it. They cannot realize the “significance” or consequences of what they are doing, since they cannot foresee the future. We understand that history only when it has become a part of our own past; and if it continues to have consequences, our children will understand it still differently. In this sense, the historian, as Hegel proclaimed, is like the owl of Minerva, which takes its flight only when the shades of night are gathering, and the returns are all in. The ultimate significance of any history-that-happens will not be completely grasped until all its consequences have worked themselves out and can be discerned. The “meaning” of any historical fact is what it does, how it continues to behave and operate, what consequences follow from it.

For example, at an historic moment during World War II Winston Churchill said: “With the fall of Singapore we are beginning to realize the meaning of Pearl Harbor.” Note the word “beginning.” For the “meaning,” that is, the cumulative consequences of that specific event, were obviously not completed when Churchill was speaking. They have not been completed yet. For they depend on how things will still turn out, on the future.

In this sense, we understand any history-that-has-happened, any strand of our past leading up to the present, in terms of necessary reference to the future: our principle for selecting what is “basic” in that history involves a reference to its predicted outcome. Our emphasis will be determined by what we find going on in the present. But what we find there is not as yet fully worked out or realized. Rather, the present suggests what will eventuate in times to come, some realization in the envisaged future. Thus, we understand what is “basic” in the history of present things in terms of what we call some “dynamic element” in the present, some “present tendency,” as we say, directed toward a future end. The present is full of such “tendencies”; it suggests many different possible futures, according to which of the different conflicting tendencies displayed in the present proves controlling. The historian of present things selects one of these possible futures as “just around the corner,” as we say, and uses that future as a principle by which to select what is “basic” among the multitude of past facts at his disposal. In this sense, an understanding of our past depends on and involves the future—a projected and predicted future based on an analysis of the present. We discover a “future” in our present, and we then understand our past—the past of our present—as aiming at that predicted future.

For example, our papers are full of attempts to understand what has been happening in our recent history—at the moment, what has been happening in the Middle East. Most of this discussion inevitably turns out to be a prediction of what is going to happen: we cannot understand what has already happened without reference to a projected future. Thus we cannot understand the Administration’s foreign policy, toward England and France, toward Egypt, toward the Arab world, toward Israel, toward the United Nations, toward Russia—we cannot understand what is “basic” in the history of what that foreign policy has been, without trying to predict how it is going to turn out. We are all confident what the future is going to bring—though our predicted futures differ radically. As we say, we are now beginning to see the significance of what that foreign policy has been, as we find out what it has already led to.

The historian of present things must thus choose among the various possibilities in the present that tendency, that predicted future, which he judges to be dynamic or controlling. He chooses as his principle of selection the “real pattern of events,” what is “being realized,” what is “working itself out,” as we all say. Now, since the future is not fore-
seecable in detail—though many elements in it can be predicted, and all human action is based on such predictions of what will happen if other things occur—the historian's choice of a principle of selection necessarily involves a certain choice of “allegiance,” an act of “faith” in one kind of future rather than another. This future need not at all be one we would approve: our own sympathies may well be on “the other side.” Thus Greek thought about history, with its cycle of degradation from an initial Golden Age, was in fact controlled by the fascination of inevitable doom: Thucydidies ended with a tragedy. Henry Adams, who could not reconcile Grant's administration with belief in progress, had a perfectly good “future” in the degradation of energy. Spengler reads the past in terms of the predicted decay and death of an entire civilization, conceived in terms of a biological metaphor. And many a contemporary political historian finds all events crystal-clear in the light of a foreseen and imminent disaster. Thus the Alsops are excellent historians, though one can be quite sure their predictions of doom will never be realized: something worse will come to pass in the meantime.

Thus, to take the growth of science as the “dynamic factor” in the intellectual history of modern times, means that we judge it of most significance today. “The future is with it,” we say, meaning we are for it. No Catholic would choose just such a principle of selection; for him the future would be different, and consequently his understanding of the developments since Copernicus and Galileo. In the same way, to take the growth of the group control of technology as the principle for selecting what is basic in our economic past, is to

express a similar “allegiance.” It is to make the problem of establishing such control central in the present. In terms of that principle of selection, the dominance of *laisser faire* during the nineteenth century will be understood as a “stage” in the reconstruction of the earlier medieval group controls. No “rugged individualist” would choose that focus; in his history he would select a different past.

But to say that a principle of selection is “chosen” does not mean that such choices are arbitrary. Men do not arbitrarily “choose” their allegiances and faiths, even when they are converts; their faiths rather grasp them. Grace, we are told, is prevenient, and it is God who sends faith. The history-that-happens itself generates the faiths and allegiances that furnish the principles for selecting what is important in understanding it. Men do not “choose” arbitrarily to be Catholics—or rugged individualists—any more than they “choose” not to be. Some men indeed have their faiths and allegiances forced upon them by “facts,” by knowledge; though presumably for no man is this wholly the case. For these, facts discovered do impose the selection of the controlling tendencies and implicit ends in the present, in terms of which they can understand the past. For such men, knowledge does declare what has to be done: the furtherance of scientific discovery, the achievement of a group control of industry, the working out of a viable international organization.

This is especially true when men are in responsible positions, and have to act to get something done. Thus Herbert Hoover, though a “rugged individualist,” was compelled by facts to go further than any of his predecessors in setting up group controls. This practical and functional knowledge of what has to be done, like the technical knowledge of how to do it, the “know-how,” is relatively free from the “arbitrariness” and the irresponsible “relativism”—the “subjective relativism”—of so-called “theoretical knowledge,” which is usually not “knowledge” at all, but a mere “having of ideas,” mere “ideology.” In terms of these ends, that have to be achieved, these goals forced on us by facts, men understand the past and the present, using these ends as principles for selecting what is “basic” in the histories they write.

Yet such principles remain for action a choice, and for knowledge and understanding an assumption and hypothesis: they call us to act on predictions imposed by knowledge when we know we cannot ac-
tually foresee what the future will become. For the intelligent, such ends are given and determined by events understood. Within limits, there is a choice of means as to how these ends may be realized. Perhaps this is but another way of saying, that where choice is possible, we are dealing with a plurality of means. The choice of those means is itself forced by facts, and dictated by knowledge. Yet it remains a choice, a "faith"—at best, an intelligent and critical faith in certain means: in the rejection of war as an instrument of policy, for example, or in the determination to employ democratic methods.

II

It is well to be clear from the outset, that "a history"—the history some determinate thing possesses—is an aspect or trait of what that thing now is. A history is hence not itself a subject-matter, but is rather an aspect, an "essential property," of some subject-matter. Nor is a history an efficient cause. The history of a thing is not the cause of its being what it is, but is rather the resultant or precipitate of those complex processes that have generated that thing: a history is an outcome, not a cause. A history is not a process: it is not a verb. A history does nothing. Processes do things, and the result is a history or histories. The history of a thing can be said to be part of its formal cause, to belong to its essence, to what it is. But what a thing is has never made it what it is: a history does not cause or make itself, nor does it cause or make anything else. The things that have histories do; and they act in the way they do because of their histories.

A history is hence not a "process." A process is a subject-matter to be inquired into, it is an encountered substance: and it is an efficient cause, a verb. Processes are the subject-matter of science, which distinguishes them and analyses their structure as they operate in the present. Histories are full of processes at work; but "history" in the singular is not itself a "process," any more than the world as a whole is a single process. Nor is the history of any particular thing a process; though it will exhibit a complex of processes interacting with each other. "Process," that is, has meaning only if it manifests an invariant structure, only if that same structure is repeated in various instances. A "process" is always an instance of a kind, of a way of operating: its structure is a "way" or "law," a universal, or adverb. In contrast, a history is always a particular: it is always unique and unrepeatable, and never an instance of any universal structure. Whenever we can truly say, "History is repeating itself," we mean we have found a process at work, whose structure has been exemplified before. Hence the historical record of events and changes does not explain anything: it is itself something to be explained and understood, and that not by "history," but by science—by the structure of processes at work to generate histories.

Events happen; and because they have happened, other events are. A history is what has happened, not what did happen: a history is not the brute events chronicled in the record, but the events selected from the record as significant and intelligible for that history. It is what has come to happen because something else did happen. The totality of what did happen we can never know, in Santayana's superhuman and infrahuman sense, but only what has happened. It is a statement of the historical character of existence to say that what does happen will have become different when it has happened. What it is depends upon what it will be when it has become a past. This is what it means to find "novelty," "creativity," "originality" in the world. But it is not the past, it is not history, that is "creative." It is the present, and the future operating in the present, that creates the past, and makes history. It recreates the past, which is the material for the present to work upon.

The past is thus not a cause of the present, but a resultant, a precipitate, a cumulative achievement. The past is always "our past," the past of our present. It is the material with which we work, and upon which our "tendencies" operate. "The past" is our past, and as essentially related to our present, is never "over." This past of our present we may call "the Envisaged Past."

But the future likewise is not what will be, what will eventuate. What will be, will be different from our future, when it has become a present. Our future is rather the determinate possibilities of the present, what is predictable on the basis of our analysis of it. But the present contains also a host of indeterminate possibilities, unpredictable factors and tendencies. Our future is what we can predict; but what will be in its actuality cannot be foreseen—at least by men. Just as the past when it was a present was not what it has become in our
present, so the future is not what it will become, when it has become a present. What will be, will be: but this is not equivalent to saying, "What will be already is," or, "The future is now what it will become." To say that the future will be determinate when it has become a present is not to say that it is determinate now. This future that can be predicted from our present may be called the "Envisaged Future."

In contrast to the envisaged past and the envisaged future, our present is the subject-matter that can be directly experienced and dealt with, examined, analysed, and used to test and verify hypotheses: it is the entire context within which inquiry can be significantly carried on, as contrasted with speculation. As such, the present includes the record of the past: astronomical tables, geological strata, fossil remains, archeological deposits, written documents, and monuments.

![Diagram: Final Causation](image)

Both the "envisaged past" and the "envisaged future" are thus perspectives from our present, arrived at by analysis of that present, and then used in turn to illuminate it. This double movement in both cases is characteristic of historical inquiry. The reconstruction of the past and the prediction of the future—the outward movement from the present—is effected by bringing our scientific knowledge to bear upon the specific materials disclosed in our present. The understanding of the present in terms of the past and of the future—the inward movement toward the present—is a bringing to bear of this envisaged past and envisaged future upon a further analysis of the present. The understanding of present and past in terms of the future is teleological, a matter of predicted outcomes of present tendencies; the understand-
he cannot wholly escape the vantage-point of a focus in his own
“present,” with its own scheme of understanding, and its own conse-
quen ces and outcomes. He may set out to trace the history by which
Newtonian science came into being, or the history that eventuated in
the Thomistic synthesis in the thirteenth century. He cannot remain
blind to the revolution that has overtaken Newtonian science in the
twentieth century, to our present-day way of understanding that
classical mechanics, and to its significance in the world of Einstein. He
cannot disregard, in dealing with what Thomas took from Aristotle,
the revolution in the interpretation of the Aristotelian documents
introduced by Werner Jaeger. For instance, Gibbon's Decline and
Fall is inescapably an “eighteenth-century history of Rome,” in its
pattern of understanding, which unmistakably belongs to the Enlight-
enment; and in its way of taking Christianity, in terms of what
Christianity had become in the eighteenth century.

Thus any focus may be selected by the historian from which to
trace and understand a history. The history of Egypt as contributing
to the Periclean age will find its “focus” in the Periclean age; the
history of Egypt as contributing to the empire of the Ptolemies will
find its “focus” in that empire. If one be content with such an arbitrary
choice of focus in some past or proximate “present”—that is, “prox-
imate” for that history—then reference to our present will not be called
for, though it will be implicit in the scheme of understanding we
shall employ. For example, Rostovtzeff can write a history of the
Hellenistic empires as leading up to the Roman conquest—which is
his focus—without bringing in the significance of that history for
1943—very much! But he does emphasize economic history, because
that is our twentieth-century way of understanding the past. In other
words, Rostovtzeff was writing a “modern,” “up-to-date” history of
the Hellenistic empires. No eighteenth-century scholar could possibly
have written his book.

But if the question be raised as to the justification for taking that
particular past eventuation as the focus for historical investigation,
then there must and will be a reference to a still more “ultimate”
focus, in our present. The “focus” of a history must always be relative
to something. The “proximate focus” will be relative to the historian’s
particular enterprise of understanding. The “ultimate focus” will al-
ways be found in the historian’s own “present.” So long as historians
live in time, such “presentism” is inevitable.  

III

In an interesting section of the last chapter of his History of Historical
Writing, 8 “A Prospectus of the New History,” Harry Elmer Barnes,
analyzing the methods of contemporary American historians, finds
them facing two different and perhaps incompatible tasks. The first
is “to trace the genesis of contemporary culture and institutions”—as
F. J. Tegart put it, to discover “how man everywhere has come to be
as he is.” 9 In this enterprise, “the criterion of the significance of the
various aspects of culture must be their cogency and relevance with
regard to the present age.” The other task is “to reconstruct as a totality
the civilizations of the leading eras in the past.” Here “in attempt-
ing to reconstruct the civilization of the age of Pericles the criterion
of the importance of events and interests should be the estimates
placed upon them by the Periclean age, not by those of the period of
the historian.” 10 Like many other historians Barnes sharply sunders
these two inquiries, and questions whether both can be undertaken in
a single work.

Let us examine this taking of a vantage-point in some past “present,”
this search for the “estimates of the Periclean age” and the significance

8 Chester M. Destler, in a rather confused article in the American Historical
Theory,” identifies what he calls “presentism” with “subjectivism” and “relativ-
ism,” and attributes all three to “an epistemological revolt from modern
science.” Many diverse views are lumped together in this article. Mr. Destler
seems not to realize that all the philosophers he mentions are concerned to
defend a realistic view of historical knowledge against the European idealists;
at least he recognizes that like Dewey I am neither a “subjectivist” nor a “sub-
jective relativist.” The passage quoted from Dewey’s Logic: “The conceptual
material employed in writing history is that of the period in which a history
is written” (p. 233), means that the historian uses the best science available
in his day to understand the facts of the record, which are certainly “inde-
pendent” and “objective.” I gather that Mr. Destler agrees with this “presentism”
of Dewey’s. What the “exclusive presentism” criticized may be, I cannot imagine.
I should think that any historian, though he must live in his present, would be
by definition concerned with his past.

10 Barnes, History of Historical Writing, p. 380.
events, ideas, and institutions possessed "then." In our histories we all try to do something of the sort; and in so doing we certainly manage to understand something. But what is it we are doing when we try to understand "from the inside" the "Periclean age," or the "Middle Ages," or the "Reformation," or the "Enlightenment," when we try to get the "feel" of such unities in terms of foci immanent to them? As many Germans in particular have pointed out, following Nietzsche's search for "unities of aesthetic style in the manifestations of the life of a people," there are certainly such genuine objective structures there to be discovered. It is indeed possible to divide the past neatly into such "periods of synthesis," with intervening "ages of transition"; 11 though it may be significant that whenever we do this, we generally find ourselves in an "age of transition," never in a "period of synthesis." It may also be significant that the attempt, with a Pater, a Henry Adams, or a Henry Osborn Taylor, to get the feel of an age from inside, seems always to approach a work of art, the historical novel, or even that triumph of Hollywood, a Cecil de Mille spectacle.

Such structures are certainly there, such relations exist to be singled out: that is why we find so many "insights,"" so many perceptions of connection and relatedness in works so perverse as Spengler or Toynbee. And vantage-points or foci are there—many of them! What seems arbitrary and "subjective" is why we should emphasize one structure rather than another, this focus rather than that; for there is specified no basis of selection in terms of which the structure chosen could be criticised or verified. Should we, for example, understand the "Periclean age" in terms of what we call the "Greek view of life," or in terms of the progress of Greek geometry, or of Greek economic organization, with its triumphs in banking, or of Athenian imperialism, or of the rise of the Greek middle class? All the structures and foci these terms suggest are objectively there. Which is the unity, the focus, we are to choose? What will dictate our choice?

And such a view, furthermore, suggests a pattern of successive syntheses, a pattern of which Hegel and Marx have made much. But unfortunately the syntheses display very ragged edges. Does the thir-

11 I was guilty of a book like that myself once; unfortunately, in 1926 I had not found out about the "age of the Baroque," and considered it a "period of transition." That is what the poor historian is up against.
could only mean, how it looked to that element that looks important to us. To take some focus other than our own, which we must do, is thus ultimately to take our own at one remove. Greek culture is not part of the past, except as a body of records and documents, to which archeology is daily making startling additions, but of our past. There can be no other significant past. And our past is not buried in the past: it is living in the present, in our present.

IV

It has been illustrated where we get if we start out by taking "history," or the task of the historian," as all-inclusive, instead of recognizing that histories are plural, adjetival, and determinate—that they are always histories of something, of the relevant past of that thing; that they involve a selection, from the infinite relatednesses of past events, of those events and relatednesses that have been important and significant for making that thing what it has come to be. If we frankly start by selecting something definite and determinate to investigate the history of—something with a locus at any point in time, anywhere in our past—then that history will not be "arbitrary." It will be capable of perfectly "objective" investigation, just because it will be relative to that definite thing.

This is merely an illustration of the general principle, that nothing can be "objective" in the way we all want our knowledge to be "objective," historical knowledge as well as all the rest, unless it is "relative"—"relative to" something else. Things are "objective" only in terms of their relations. If anything is taken "by itself," out of all relation to anything else, ἀπλά, "absolutely"—then the taking will inevitably be an arbitrary choice. If there be no relations to other points of reference, there can be no "reason" for that choice: it will be a "subjective," not an "objective," choice. In other words, "relativism," being relative to something determinate, is a necessary condition of any "objectivity." Every "absolute"—everything that is unrelated—is an arbitrary, groundless, "subjective" choice. To fail to take things as related is to destroy all possibility of objectivity.

This "objective relativism" of historical knowledge, as so far developed, has not yet managed to answer all the questions. The selection of the relevant history of anything demands a further "focus" in that thing—either in our present, or in its past "present," as the basis of selection. The relevant past of anything, its history, is selected by some focus in the eventuation of that history. Thus, it is not enough to investigate the history of "our science," or the history of "our economic system." We must first determine what focus in our science, what focus in our economic system, will select those relevant pasts. This notion of the "focus" of a history is hence fundamental, and the determination of that focus remains a basic problem. To that problem we shall now address ourselves.

At the end of Section I of this chapter, we found that the focus of any history of present things is the eventuation in the envisaged future suggested by present tendencies. That future focus we then stated in very general terms—as the establishment of group control of industry, the working out of international organization, the fostering of further scientific discovery. This was not only because, since the future is not foreseeable, such generality is safer. More particularly, it was to emphasize the fact that what is predicted from an analysis of the present and imposed as an end is not a fixed career. What men envisage is an end, together with a problem of means. The future focus is thus more precisely the problem of how something that must be done is to be brought about. "What has to be done" is something given. The envisaged future poses insistent problems and issues. The past has left us a deposit of materials and resources, setting the limits and conditions within which a choice of means is possible. That means, once chosen, further determines what the future will be when it has become a present. God—or the future—proposes, but man disposes: he forces God to propose something else. And what God—or the future—proposes, is always problems and issues. Man responds and answers. To be sure, man never "solves" the problems with which the future confronts him. He may come near a solution, especially in matters intellectual: but he then finds that what he has done has generated fresh problems, and he is forced to turn to them. They may well be so insistent that he forgets the old problems. Thus, we had to get rid of Hitler and the Japanese militarists. But in doing that necessary job, in the way we chose to do it, we got the Russians and the atom bomb on our necks. Thus do men progress in history. But what men have accomplished in trying to deal with the problems
forced on them remains, as the past that is left to work with, as the materials with which to meet new issues. The “past” that is thus left in the moving present is a kind of storehouse of incomplete solutions. And the course of history becomes a game of questions and answers between the future and the present, a conversation between the envisaged future and men—in the current jargon, a “dialectic.”

History as confronted and lived through by men is thus fundamentally problematic or functional: it is a finding of the ways or methods to bring about the ends which history itself imposes upon men. The envisaged future is always presenting men with issues that must be met. Men are always doing something: they are so acting or so inventing new ideas as to create difficulties and tensions for themselves, oppositions that have somehow to be resolved. And their attempts at resolution generate further problems in turn. The past furnishes us with the long record of how past problems were worked upon. Facing our own issues, we turn to our resources, our materials—the means and methods at our disposal. And we understand those materials and resources in the light of their respective histories, of the past problems and action upon them that forced men to create those materials and leave them to us. Our problems—the foci forced upon us by our envisaged future—lead us to select certain materials from our past, and to understand those materials, that selected past, in terms of the problems that generated them, and to which they were a working solution.

It is such problems that form the ultimate foci for selecting the facts and events that are relevant to and significant for any history. We have just been speaking of present problems as forming the focus for the history of the present, or of anything in our present. The “present”—or the “present state” of anything: of an institution like marriage, or a body of ideas like physics, or a human activity like painting—is the “locus,” the vantage-point, from which we must look backward in trying to understand the history of that institution, science, or activity. But though the vantage-point has its locus in the present, that present state is not yet a sufficiently precise or definite focus from which to trace its history. We must find a more specific focus than the mere “present,” a definite focus in that present locus, for selecting and organizing the relevant facts, events, and conditions that will enter into that history. And that specific focus in the present situation of whatever it is we are examining the history of, is precisely the problems presented in that thing. Thus the history of the institution of marriage will find its focus in the problems forced upon men in connection with that institution, the conditions that have generated those problems, the changes they have forced, etc. The history of physics will find its focus in the problems forced on physicists by the present state of physical knowledge and theory, what discoveries and theoretical achievements generated those problems, and how. The history of painting will likewise set out from the focus of what painters are today trying to do and why, what their problems are, and how they came to face those particular problems.

But this holds true not merely of the history of the present, or of present things alone. It is not merely when the locus of which we are trying to trace the history is in our present, that the specific focus is formed by the problems analysis will reveal in that locus. It is true also when we are considering the history of some past eventuation, some past “present,” in which the proximate focus is to be sought in that locus in the past. The focus for selecting the materials of that history leading up to a past outcome will be equally the problems confronted. It is in terms of the problems forced on thinkers by the coming of Aristotelian thought, that we select, organize, and understand the history of thirteenth-century thought. It is in terms of the problems forced on a mind brought up to take the Aristotelian world of individual processes very seriously, by the mechanics and the mathematics of the second half of the seventeenth century, that we understand the thought of Leibniz— in terms of what Cassirer would call Leibniz’s Aufgabe, his task. It is equally in terms of the focus of its generating problems that we understand, say, the English agricultural revolution of the eighteenth century. Woodbridge tells of his teacher Ebbinghaus, who would really explain the thought of a philosopher when he abandoned his notes and asked, “Was will der Mensch?”—What is his problem?

Any past, any history of anything, is to be understood in the light of the succession of problems faced by the men who created that history: what they were trying to do, how they were trying to do it, what
resources they had at their disposal, what limits those materials imposed, what possibilities they left open, how they were chosen and closed.

Consider, for example, the history of architecture. If that be taken as something more than the customary chronicle, if it be a genuine "history," it will be understood in terms, e.g., of what the medieval cathedral-builders had to build: what the function of a cathedral was; of the problems of vaulting, arching, buttressing, etc.; of the problems of glazing; of the problems of raising money: enlisting the guilds, or rich donors, or city fathers, as patrons; of the problems of symbolism, of setting forth a bible in stone; of the problems of civic pride that had to be expressed and gratified; of the resources available: the accessible stone or brick; the skills, techniques, and artistic traditions to be worked with, the styles, designs, forms inherited; the expectations of the people, their taste and demands. Like any materials and resources, all these things are to be understood in the light of their respective histories. All set the conditions to which doing the building well, perfecting the implicit possibilities, had to conform—all determined the "artistic" problems. For a New England Georgian meetinghouse, for a Hopi pueblo, for a California Franciscan mission, for a modern skyscraper, all these factors would be different: in each case a wholly new set of problems would be imposed, and a new achievement attained. But the history of any type of architecture would involve a host of analogous factors, all unified in the particular problems confronting the builders and challenging them to do their best. And though the history of architecture is not in itself an "evaluation," it is obviously not only relevant but essential to any evaluation of the success of the architects in accomplishing what they were trying to do.

In contrast, consider our collections of so-called "timeless art," or art "without epoch." Here the basis of selection is purely an aesthetic criterion—that of a sensitive artist today. But the point is, such a collection is definitely not history. Likewise, for the great majority of us, however much we may be attracted by its achievement, African art has "no history"—we simply are ignorant of the problems involved.

And I suspect that any "science of social and cultural change"—which we have defined as the inquiry into the "laws" and "patterns" of the processes at work in histories—would be concerned primarily with the processes involved in problem-solving. It would deal with how historical problems are generated, through "diffusion," the getting of new materials, techniques, and ideas from outside that culture, or through "invention," the working out in the culture of new solutions to old problems, with the tensions and maladjustments resulting, both in intellectual and material techniques. And it would deal with how problems are dealt with: with the patterns of adjustment, assimilation, compromise, and reconstruction; of reeducation, of modifying old habits, rebuilding institutions, and changing beliefs. It would examine the part played by conscious thought: by reflective criticism, by philosophic reconstruction, by "scientific methods." It would set forth the part played by social choices, by legislation, and their basis in group conflicts; and the part played by dramatic upheavals, by "revolutions" in control. It would show how all these methods work through modifications in the institutionalized habits of belief and behavior—through "psychological" processes. The "science of social and cultural change" would thus deal with the patterns of processes involving means and ends in problem-solving, with functional patterns. And it would treat the efficient cause of such change—the "dynamic," the "driving force"—as frankly a concern of the technique of the "art of social change," which tries to understand the past in terms of the present means to social action: how the means and methods one hopes to employ today have operated in the past.

However one approach it, any analysis of the factors involved in a history takes one ultimately to a functional structure, a structure of means and ends. Indeed, there are so many facts and so many patterns of relation, so many structures and types of structure discernible in the history of anything, and it is so manifestly impossible to include them all in a history, that any selection will remain "arbitrary" and "subjective" unless it is dictated by some problem or necessary choice generated in that history itself. Only in such a problematic, functional context—only by realizing clearly, in any field whose history we are exploring, "These are the fundamental problems and choices today," or "These were the problems, this was the Aufgabe, in some past or proximate 'present'"—can we hope to understand or write the hist-
only thus can we escape the difficulties of Barnes and the "stylists," and their hopeless search for the "estimates of the Periclean age itself." Inquiry cannot hope to discover those "estimates," which vary "arbitrarily"; but it can discover the problems of the Periclean age. Cassirer's Aufgabe, the "task imposed," is a rather better term than "problems." It means something imposed, that must be faced, faciendum. "Problems." is too weak: it suggests that men "thought them up," and could escape them if they wanted to.

Only thus can we understand objectively, for example, the history of the Romantic era. It is notoriously difficult to find any common traits, common pattern, or "style" in that movement. But we can hope to find the common problems in terms of which we can understand its history. As Jacques Barzun writes, "Clearly, the one thing that unifies men in a given age is not their individual philosophies, but the dominant problem that these philosophies are designed to solve. In the romantic period this problem was to create a new world on the ruins of the old"—i.e., to criticize the inadequate synthesis of the eighteenth century, and to reconstruct a more adequate one.

The historian must make a selection. From the infinite variety of relatednesses that past events disclose, he must select what is important or "basic" for his particular history. If that selection is not to be merely what seems important for him, if it is not to be "subjective" and "arbitrary," the selection must have an "objective" focus in something to be done, something he sees forced and imposed on men, some Aufgabe or faciendum, some job to be accomplished. The history of what is important for and relevant to that problem—of the causes and conditions that generated it, the materials and resources men had to draw upon, how they dealt with it—will then be perfectly "objective," in a sense in which no mere recording of arbitrarily selected "facts" could ever be.

This is the "objective relativism" that is characteristic of historical knowledge, as it is of all types of knowledge. Knowledge is "objective" only for some determinate context: it is always a knowledge of the structure and relations essential for that context. In historical knowledge, the context is always a teleological and functional one, pointing to a structure of means and ends, of "means for" or "relative to" ends and eventuations. In that context, the relation between the means and the outcome will be "objective."

In historical knowledge, the focus in any history—the focus in a problem in the envisaged future—will be relative to that time and situation—it will be "the" problem, "the" issue, "the" Aufgabe for that history, what has to be done "in those times." It will be what Paul Tillich calls the "Kairos." This problematic focus of a history will be "historically relative," and "historically conditioned"—and for that precise reason, it will be "objective." The fact that this focus, this Aufgabe, this Kairos, is continually changing with further history-as-actuality, is the reason why history-as-written has to be continually rewritten, why it is never enough merely to add further new chapters to a history selected by a now antiquated focus. "Objectivity" means always being objective for something, just as "necessity" means always being necessary for something. There can be no "objectivity" without relations to an objective; there can be no warranted idea without an ideal.

In summary, then, on the first of the two major problems of the Theory of History, the question of how histories are to be understood, this "objective relativism" means concretely: The history of anything is what has happened and become relevant in the envisaged past of that thing. The understanding of that history consists in looking backward from a "focus," tracing the continuities or persistences of materials to be found in that history, uncovering the operations of the various factors and processes that have in the past modified and reconstructed those materials, and understanding those modifications and reconstructions in terms of the best scientific knowledge available today—of what Dewey calls "the conceptual materials available in the historian's present." The focus in the present of any history first selects its past, and designates the particular historical changes that brought about its present state. These changes are then themselves explained by drawing upon the best science of changes in that "present" in which the history is being understood—a science of cultural change in which certain patterns or constant operations of human behavior have been arrived at through the experimental analysis of observed behavior. The record of the past of course furnishes material to such a science of cultural change, in the form of instances of the kind or pattern of behavior that can be observed in the present. But it is in terms of our

---

12 Jacques Barzun, Romanticism and the Modern Ego (Boston, 1945), pp. 21-22.
present science of human behavior, of our psychology, anthropology, and social sciences in general, such as they are, that we must ultimately understand past human behavior, if we are to understand it at all.

But this science of the processes at work in human histories will not of course of itself explain the presence of the particular materials that enter into actual processes. To understand the processes by which ideas and institutions are changed and developed, will not of course explain what particular ideas and institutions are there to be changed. In contrast with a "process," which is always one instance of a universal, a "history" is always a particular, a concrete individual, with a unique material of its own. In that particular history, universal "processes" are at work, and the changes that take place in that history are to be understood in terms of the appropriate science of those universal "processes." The particular materials that are changed by these universal "processes," however, are explained not by the universal processes of change, but by tracing their histories to those points where they were formed or transformed—by universal "processes" again to be themselves explained by the science of formation and transformation. Thus a "history"—as a concrete individual, a ἤθος ὁμοίως—is to be understood both in terms of the origin of its materials, and of the operations of human thought and action upon them. The "origins" are always themselves unique histories; the "operations" are illustrations of a science of human operations. To grasp the significance of "a history," we must understand both the continuities and the changes in the histories that things have had.