THE IDEA OF HISTORY

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(iv) *Bury*

One historian of that period stands out from the rest in having an altogether unusual equipment of philosophical training. J. B. Bury was not a powerful philosophical intellect, but he read a certain amount of philosophy, and realized that there were philosophical problems connected with historical research. His work therefore took on a certain air of self-consciousness. In the preface to his *History of Greece* he makes the unusual admission that the book is written from his own point of view; in the introduction to his edition of Gibbon he explains the principles on which he has edited him, and in a number of scattered essays he discusses points of historical theory. He also undertook such semi-philosophical works as an historical book on *The Idea of Progress* and a shorter one called *A History of Freedom of Thought.*

These writings reveal Bury as a positivist in historical theory, but a perplexed and inconsistent one. History for him, in the true positivistic manner, consists of an assemblage of isolated facts, each capable of being ascertained or investigated without reference to the others. Thus he was able to accomplish the very strange feat of bringing Gibbon up to date by means of footnotes, adding to the aggregate of knowledge already contained in his pages the numerous facts that had been ascertained in the meantime, without suspecting that the very discovery of these facts resulted from an historical mentality so different from Gibbon's own that the result was not unlike adding a saxophone obbligato to an Elizabethan madrigal. He never saw that one new fact added to a mass of old ones involved the complete transformation of the old. This view of history as consisting of detached parts achieved its classical expression, for the English public, in the Cambridge histories, modern, medieval, and ancient, vast compilations where the chapters, sometimes even the subdivisions of a chapter, are written by different hands, the editor being given the task of assembling the fruit of this mass-production into a single whole. Bury was one of the editors, though the original scheme was due to Lord Acton, a generation earlier.

If we follow the development of Bury's thought[1] on the principles and methods of history, we find him in 1900 still content to deal with the survival of the Eastern Empire according to the strict formulae of positivism: the treatment of an event not as unique but as an instance of a certain type, and the explanation of it by discovering a cause applicable not to it alone but to every event of the same general kind. Here the method is exactly that of the empirical sciences of nature as analysed by positivistic logic. By 1903, when he delivered his Cambridge inaugural lecture, Bury had begun to revolt against this method. In that lecture he proclaimed that historical thought as we now understand it is a new thing in the world, barely a century old: not at all the same thing as natural science, but having a special character of its own, offering to mankind a new view of the world and a new armoury of intellectual weapons. What, he asks, might we not make of the human world in which we live, when we realize the possibilities of this new intellectual attitude towards it? Here the uniqueness of historical thought is clearly seen and impressively stated; but when Bury goes on to ask what this new thing is, he replies: 'History is simply a science, no less and no more'. The lecture exhibits a mind torn between two conceptions: one, obscure but powerful, of the difference between history and science, the other, clear and paralysing, of their indistinguishable identity. Bury has made a violent effort to free himself from this latter conception, and failed.

Next year, conscious of his failure, he returned to the attack in a lecture on *The Place of Modern History in the Perspective of Knowledge*. Is history, he asks, a mere reservoir of facts accumulated for the use of sociologists and anthropologists, or is it an independent discipline to be studied for its own sake? He cannot answer this question, for he sees that it is a philosophical one and realizes that it lies, therefore, outside his competence. But he will go so far as to answer it hypothetically. If we adopt a naturalistic philosophy,

'then I think we must conclude that the place of history, within the frame of such a system, is subordinate to sociology or anthropology.

[1] I am here drawing on my review of his posthumous *Selected Essays*, edited by H. W V Temperley (Cambridge, 1930) in the *English Historical Review*, 1931, p. 461.

. . . But on an idealistic interpretation of knowledge it is otherwise. . . . If thought is not the result, but the presupposition, of the processes of nature, it follows that history, of which thought is the characteristic and guiding force, belongs to a different order of ideas from the kingdom of nature, and demands a different interpretation.'

There he leaves it. The moment was a dramatic one in the development of his mind. His conviction of the dignity and worth of historical thought had come into open conflict with his own positivistic training and principles. Committed as he was to the service of history, he accepted the consequences.

In 1909 he published an essay on *Darwinism and History*, deliberately attacking the idea that historical events can be explained by reference to general laws. Uniformities, yes; laws, no. What really determines them is 'chance coincidence'. Examples are 'the sudden death of a leader, a marriage without issue', and in general the decisive function of individuality, which sociology falsely eliminates in order to facilitate its task of assimilating history to the uniformity of science. The 'chapter of accidents' everywhere enters as a disturbing element into historical processes. In an essay called *Cleopatra's Nose* (1916) he repeats the same idea. History is determined not by causal sequences such as form the subject-matter of science, but by the fortuitous 'collision of two or more independent chains of causes'. Here the very words of Bury's argument seem to echo those of Cournot in his *Considérations sur la marche des idées et des événements dans les temps modernes* (Paris, 1872), where he expounded a conception of chance, based on the distinction between 'general causes' and 'special causes': chance being defined as 'l'*indépendance* mutuelle de plusieurs séries de causes et d'effets qui concourent *accidentellement*' (his italics; op. cit. i. 1). A note in Bury's *Idea of Progress*,[1] read together with a footnote to *Darwinism and History*,[2] suggests that he may have derived his own doctrine from Cournot, who, however, develops it by pointing out that in so far as anything is merely fortuitous there can be no history of it. The true function of history, he holds, is to distinguish the necessary from the merely accidental. Bury is developing, or rather disintegrating, this theory by adding to it the doctrine that, in so far as history is individual, everything in it is accidental and nothing necessary, but after

[1] London, 1920, p. 368.

[2] *Selected Essays*, p. 37.

illustrating what he means he concludes his essay by suggesting 'that as time goes on contingencies will become less important in human evolution and chance have less power over the course of events'.

The impression made on a reader by the last paragraph of this essay is a painful one. With great toil, Bury had in the preceding dozen years reached a conception of history as knowledge of the individual. He realized, early in that process, that this conception was essential to the dignity and worth of historical thought. But by 1916 he is so dissatisfied with what he has discovered that he is prepared to give it up; to see in this very individuality an irrational, because accidental, element in the world and to hope that, with the march of science, it may one day be eliminated. If he had grasped his own idea firmly, he would have realized both that this hope was vain (for he had really proved, in the preceding pages, that accidents in his sense of the word must necessarily happen) and also that by entertaining it he was turning traitor to his own historical vocation.

This disastrous conclusion, from which he never afterwards deviated, was due to the fact that instead of conceiving individuality as the very substance of the historical process, he had never thought of it as more than a partial and occasional interference with sequences which in their general structure are causal sequences. Individuality for him only meant the unusual, the exceptional, an interruption in the ordinary course of events: where the ordinary course of events means a course of events causally determined and scientifically comprehensible. But Bury himself knew, or had known in 1904, that history does not consist of events causally determined and scientifically comprehensible; these are ideas appropriate to the interpretation of nature, and history, as he then rightly said, 'demands a different interpretation'. If he had logically developed the ideas of his earlier essay he would have concluded that individuality, instead of appearing in history only now and then in the shape of the accidental or contingent, is just that out of which history is made; what prevented him from advancing to this conclusion was his positivistic prejudice that individuality as such is unintelligible, and that in consequence the generalizations of science are the only possible form of knowledge.

Thus, after realizing that an 'idealistic' philosophy was the

only one which could account for the possibility of historical knowledge, Bury fell back into the 'naturalistic' one which he had tried to repudiate. The phrase 'contingency of history' expresses this final collapse of his thought. Contingency means unintelligibility; and the contingency of history is simply a name for 'the role of the individual' seen through the spectacles of a positivism for which nothing is intelligible except what is general. Professor Norman H. Baynes, Bury's successor as our leading master of late Roman and Byzantine history, has spoken bitterly of 'the devastating doctrine of contingency in history' which dimmed Bury's historical insight towards the end of his life. The criticism is just. Bury had done his best work under the inspiration of a belief in the autonomy and dignity of historical thought; but the atmosphere of positivism in which his mind had formed itself undermined this belief, and reduced the proper object of historical knowledge to the level of something which, precisely because it was not an object of scientific thought, was unintelligible.

(v) *Oakeshott*

Bury, however, did set historians an example of attempting to think out the philosophical implications of their own work, and this example was not thrown away. In Cambridge, it was followed by at least one historian of the next generation, by an historian armed with a preparation vastly superior to Bury's in philosophical studies. I refer to Mr. Michael B. Oakeshott of Caius College who published a book called *Experience and its Modes* (Cambridge, 1933), in which he dealt at length and in a masterly way with the philosophical problem of history.