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CLEOPATRA'S NOSE

BY PROFESSOR J. B. BURY, LITT.D., LL.D.

One theory of history is that the course of events depends on accidents like the shape of Cleopatra's nose. Another is the theory of Providence. The Regius Professor of History at Oxford develops a view of chance compatible with both these theories, and also with the law of causation, as commonly understood. He shows that the early triumph of Christianity was due to "chance," and he suggests that the appearance of botanical and animal species, including man, depended chiefly on contingencies.

THE course of history appears in very different lights to those who view human movements and events as a logical development, and to those who view them as due to the play of chance except so far as they are the result of the conscious will and purpose of men. The first view has been generally held in the form of the theory of Providence, an external power guiding human societies and ordering human events according to a deliberate plan. It has also been held in subtler forms, of which we may take as representative Hegel's conception of history as spirit realizing itself in time by a process which corresponds to the logical process of thought. The second view has been expressed in the famous dictum that the course of the world's history depends on accidents like the shape of Cleopatra's nose.

The principle known as the law of causation does not affect the problem. It is probably true that every phenomenon is the consequent of antecedent causes, and that no phenomenon contains any element which is not determined by a sequence of causes and effects. In any case it is a hypothesis which we are obliged to assume if the world is not to become a chaos and science to commit suicide. For as the function of science is to explain phenomena, and explanation means the assignment of causes, it is clear that, if a phenomenon containing lawless elements may occur, scientific research is hopeless.

This principle is compatible with either of these two views of history. According to the first view, cause and effect can

be regarded as the machinery by which Providence executes its plan, or through which thought manifests itself in time. And it is consistent with the second view, provided we give a proper meaning to chance. It would be inconsistent if we conceive chance as the intrusion of a lawless element; but our use of the word does not really imply this, as a little reflection will show.

I visit Paris. I meet an American friend, whom I had not seen for years, in the Rue de la Paix. We were mutually ignorant of each other's presence in Paris, and we describe our meeting as a happy chance. My visit to Paris and my walking in the Rue de la Paix at a particular hour were the result of a sequence of causes and effects. His visit to Paris and his presence in the same street at the same hour followed upon another sequence of causes and effects. The collision, as we may say, of these two independent chains made what we call the chance of our meeting.

Now, it may be said that in the case of every stranger whom I passed in the street there was a similar collision. Yes, but all these were collisions of no value, because they had no consequences. The meeting with my friend had consequences—emotions of surprise and pleasure for both, conversation, the arrangement perhaps of a future meeting, etc. A chance may therefore be defined as *the valuable collision of two or more independent chains of causes*—"valuable" meaning that it is attended with more or less important consequences. It is obvious that daily life, and therefore history, is full of such chances. Few things can happen, even carefully prepared plans can seldom be carried out, without the intrusion of this element, to however small an extent. But there are endless cases where chance appears to occur on a large scale in history, and to modify or determine its course. A few examples may be chosen to illustrate various types of historical contingency.

In the early years of the war between the Athenians and Peloponnesians, in the fifth century B.C., a plague broke out in Athens which devastated the population and affected the course of the war, causing among other effects the death of the Athenian statesman Pericles. The appearance of the microbes which caused the plague had its own definite chain of causes, but this sequence had nothing to do with the sequence of events which led to the war. The microbe had

no interest in the war. The political effects of the plague were a contingency.

The shape of Cleopatra's nose was rigidly conditioned by the causal sequence of her heredity. This sequence had nothing to do with the causes which produced the situation of the Roman world and the political position of Antony when he fell a victim to her charms. The collision of the two sequences modified the course of history.

In the fourth century A.D. a man of exceptional discernment, who regarded on the one hand the internal condition of the Roman Empire, and on the other Central Europe seething with populous and rapacious German tribes, driven by the urgency of the food question to seek new abodes and attracted by the rich provinces of Rome, might easily have foretold that the Germans were destined to enter and occupy large portions of Roman territory. The German dismemberment of the Empire may be said to have lain in the logic of the situation. The prediction would have been true. But before the last quarter of the century the prophet could not have foretold how the process of the dismemberment would be determined by an event which had nothing to do in its origin with the European situation. This contingent event, which we may describe as a historical surprise, was the invasion of the Huns. The irruption of the Huns into Europe was the result of a series of political events in Central Asia which was strictly independent of events in Europe. The disarrangement of the Germanic world by the descent of the nomads altered at many points the natural development of events in Europe, with which it had no causal connection.

In A.D. 1740 a memorable step was taken in the expansion of Prussia by the conquest of Silesia. It may be said that the expansion of Prussia lay in the logic of events. This may be true, and in any case we will suppose it to be true. But the moment and method of this decisive step in aggrandizement were determined by three facts, which were independent of the needs of Prussia and her relation to Austria. Frederick William I died early in the year. This was the first fact. The second was the character of his successor, Frederick the Great. The third was the death of the Emperor Charles VI in October, which opened the question of the "Austrian succession," and gave Frederick the political opportunity for using the mailed fist. These facts were conditions of the

Prussian attack on Silesia, and each of them was determined by a rigorous sequence of cause and effect. But each of these sequences was entirely independent of the others. The chain of causes which led to the death of the Prussian King had nothing to do with that which led to the death of the Emperor, and neither had any connection with the causes which conditioned the character of Frederick the Great. The Silesian war was thus due to the coincidence of three contingencies.

The American War of Independence may furnish another illustration. It may be said that the separation of the colonies from Great Britain must inevitably have occurred. This is a proposition on which it would be rash to dogmatize. But granting it for the sake of argument, there can yet be no doubt that if George II had been still reigning when the difficulties arose, or if George III had been a man of different character, the differences between the colonies and the mother country would have been amicably composed. If the independence of the colonies was inevitable, it would have come about at a later time and in another way. The American War, one of the most far-reaching events of modern history, was determined by the contingency of the personal character and political ideas of George III, which were the result of a chain of causes, unconnected with the relation between the interests of the colonies and those of England.

Exceptional military genius is a contingency (such as that of Alexander the Great or Napoleon) which may divert the paths of history on a colossal scale. Napoleon's supremacy in France was linked by a logical chain with the French Revolution, but conditioned by his genius for war. The possibility of his hegemony in Europe was entirely determined by his military talent.

The triumph of Christianity early in the fourth century was also due to chance as above defined. However satisfied you may be that its ultimate triumph was assured in view of the progress which it had already made, and the origin of its propagation, the circumstances of its position in A.D. 300 pointed to the probability that for a couple of centuries to come it must abide, at best, in the position of the tolerated cult of a minority. The audacity of Constantine the Great in exalting Christianity to the dominant place cannot be sufficiently emphasized. A revolution defiant of the wishes of the vast majority has never in the world's history been

accomplished on so large a scale. The estimates which have been attempted of the number of Christians in the Empire in the time of Constantine vary from one-twentieth to one-sixth of the whole population. If we estimate the population at one hundred millions, it seems certain that there were at least ten million, but not more than seventeen or eighteen million, Christians. Of course, these figures were the merest approximations, but they are amply sufficient for the present purpose. It is obviously due to the contingency of Constantine's personal characteristics, not to any manifest strength or equity in Christian claims, that the cult of a small minority was raised to the supreme place. If in the struggle for power a monarch of another mould than Constantine had emerged the final victor, Christianity would, doubtless, have obtained toleration, but not privilege. And it is hardly likely that, unassisted by the stimulus which privileged position and power of persecuting gave to proselytizing, the Church would in less than 150 or 200 years have embraced such a majority of the population that it could have imposed upon the State its recognition as the exclusive religion. It is needless to point out what great differences this would have made in the course of universal history.

The element of contingency seems to enter into the history of the development of thought as well as into the course of external events. The logical relationship of Platonism to the philosophy of Socrates is clear, but it depended on the character of Plato's brain, which was a contingency. If Plato had died in infancy, there is no reason to suppose that the Platonic ideas would have been conceived in the form in which he conceived them. Other different systems, such as those of Aristippus and Eucleides, each depending on the contingency of the individual author's brain, were also logical developments of the Socratic teaching. In the same way Cartesianism, it is easy to see, may lead logically to the system of Spinoza. But the advance on this particular line might not have been made if Spinoza had not lived.

Apply this to the origin of Christianity. In this case we have the collision, in the brain of Paul of Tarsus, of conceptions and methods of reasoning derived from Greek sources with the traditions of the life, death, and teaching of Jesus, which he learnt in Judæa. The Pauline doctrines, from which fully-fledged Christianity was developed, were thus the fortuitous

union of two different sequences, and it might easily be shown that further elaborations of Christian dogma, in many cases, depended on contingencies. A universal religion, based on the union of Oriental mysticism with Greek dialectic, was doubtless inevitable. It may also be maintained that the life and teaching of Jesus were a germ so strong in vitality that it must have developed into a universal religion. It is, nevertheless, clear that if the Galilean traditions had been manipulated by a man whose brain was differently constituted from that of Paul, and whose training had been on other lines, Christianity and history would have been incalculably different.

The course of history seems, then, to be marked at every stage by contingencies, some of greater, some of smaller import. In some cases they produce a situation to which the antecedent situation does not logically lead. In others they determine the form and means of the realization of a logical tendency. This conclusion is theoretically compatible with either of the two hypotheses which I mentioned at the beginning of this paper. On the theory of Providence, history becomes an epic like the *Æneid*, in which all the contingencies are pre-arranged to work together towards a foregone conclusion, with this difference—that the conclusion is not known. The storm which drives *Æneas* and his companions to the Libyan shores is not an accident; it is devised by Juno. All the incidents which appear to the actors effects of entirely disconnected causes are, through the operation of divine agency, displayed as parts of one woven chain.

On the theory that history is a process by which thought realizes itself externally in time, contingencies must be explained, if it is an explanation, by the metaphysical conception that contingency is a logical category, and therefore must be an element in the process. But I need not dwell on either the theological or the metaphysical hypothesis, each of which is improbable, and both of which for other reasons many of my readers will consider impossible. What I wish to suggest here is the view that a systematic study of contingencies is a necessary preliminary to any speculations which aim at historical synthesis.

Perhaps I may further illustrate this subject by dividing contingencies into pure and mixed. This division is not strictly scientific, but is convenient. If Napoleon at an early

stage in his career had been killed by a meteorite, that would have been the purest of pure contingencies. The fall of the meteorite on a particular spot at a particular moment was the effect of a rigid causal sequence, and the presence of Napoleon at the same moment on the same spot was also rigidly determined. The meteorite was completely disinterested in his death. If his death had been caused by an earthquake or by disease, the contingency would have been of the same order, and the consequences the same. Both these hypotheses suggest that pure contingencies might be arranged in gradation according to frequency or probability. Death by a meteorite is clearly an outside chance. Death by an earthquake is a chance less remote. Death from disease is a possibility with which one has always to reckon. But suppose Napoleon had been killed by the hand of an assassin who detested his policy. This would not be a pure contingency. For the assassin was interested in Napoleon's death, and the causal sequence which led him to commit the act would have been connected with the causal sequence which rendered the great man's death historically important. It can, however, easily be shown by analysis that a mixed contingency contains some purely contingent elements which can be separated.

The problem of contingencies which meets us in the development of human societies, though it must be studied separately and is profoundly modified by human purposes, is similar to that which meets us in the evolution of nature. The appearance of the various botanical and animal species which exist and have existed seems to have depended on accidents. There was nothing in the logic of life that made the existence of an oak or of a hippopotamus inevitable. Nor can it be proved that there was anything that made the existence of *anthropos* inevitable. At the remote threshold of history we seem to find a primordial contingency—the origin of man. And we may conjecture that the origin, formation, and primitive development of human societies, which are inaccessible to our knowledge, depended chiefly on contingencies. But this soon ceased to be the case. The experience and knowledge of man became more and more important, until finally this became the predominant factor in social evolution. It is to this that the historical process owes its logic, so far as it is logical. When we speak of a logical situation at a given moment in history we mean this complex factor. The logical conse-

quences may be facilitated or upset, accelerated or retarded, by contingencies; and it is this which makes history so interesting and so baffling.

One synthesis may perhaps be risked. A survey of history seems to suggest that as time goes on contingencies will become less important in human evolution and chance have less power over the course of events. This tendency of social development to become more and more logical is due not only to the increase of experience and of men's knowledge of the conditions under which they live, and to their larger command over nature, but also in recent times to the growth of democratic societies, the consequences being that the destinies of societies are moulded less and less by single individuals. And the growth of knowledge itself is less casual and occasional; although the element of contingency is not eliminated, the march of science is continuous, systematic, and imperturbable. It appears probable that as time advances the fates of nations will become more and more independent of accidents, whether more or less serious than the pretty face of Anne Boleyn or the shape of Cleopatra's nose.