

PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

Dr Gowri Naidu H
Associate Professor of History
GFGC KOLAR

Philosophy is a system of thought denoting critical study of the basic principles and concepts of a particular branch of knowledge. Philosophy means love of wisdom. It is a systematic thought to explain such phenomena as are not subject to direct observation and scientific study. Philosophy is an attempt to know the unknown through extra-scientific methods. In the 18th century, Voltaire, a great French philosopher used the term *philosophy of history*. He was the father of *philosophy of history* and he has expressed this view in his *Idea of History*. To Voltaire '*philosophy of history*' is a critical or scientific history in which the historian thought for himself, instead of repeating the stories contained in earlier works. Hegel meant by *philosophy of history* as universal history. Positivists like August Comte used the term *philosophy of history* to indicate the discovery of general laws governing the course of events. R.G.Collingwood thought that *philosophy of history* is concerned neither with the past by itself nor with the historian's thought by itself, but with the two things in their mutual relations. C.M.Trevelyan said, *there is no philosophy of history, philosophy must be brought to history, it cannot be extracted from it*. Herbert Butterfield imagined history as a force moving forward on its own account. Philosophy of history is basically concerned with two different but related branches of philosophical inquiry. Critical philosophy of history and speculative philosophy of history. Critical philosophy of history is analytical and synoptic. Speculative philosophy is formal and material. Critical philosophy deals with the philosophical analysis of historiography and inquiries into logical, conceptual and epistemological characterization of what historians do. Speculative philosophy attempts to discover some meaning or significance in concepts which transcend the intelligibility achieved by ordinary historical works.

CRITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

Critical Philosophy of history has developed only from the 19th century. Earlier, history was regarded either as a branch of philosophy or of literature. It was Vico, who gave for the first time a philosophical depth to history. Ranke, Rousseau, Carlyle, Hegel were contributed to the growth of critical philosophy of history. Croce called historical reconstruction as the recreation of past experience in the mind of the historian, making all history as history of thought. Collinwood pursued this idea and said that actions have a 'thought-side which can be attempted by the historian'. Certain very serious problems confronted the critical philosophy of history. These are the problem of *historical explanation*, *historical individual*, and *historical objectivity*.

Historical explanation is an issue pertaining to the kind of understanding to be sought in historical studies. Some thinkers argued that all explanations of aim to show that what happened was to be expected in view of the conditions which precede it. This is a rational explanation of cause and effect. For example, the

breakdown of a revolution in France was inevitable in view of the abuses prevalent in France during the ancient regime or one could rightly say that the disunity among Indian rulers either at the time of the Turkish invasions or British occupation would inevitably lead to foreign domination. But this kind of rational expectation is possible only through the assumption of an appropriate general laws, which require empirical verification or historical events can be reduced to a predictable general pattern as much as in history as in other sciences.

The basic issue involved in historical explanations is the causality question. Why events occurred? One cannot expect to give satisfactory answers to such questions. But the very fact that very difficult questions are attempted to be answered in the light of logic and reason makes critical philosophy a very useful aid to history. History could not be modelled on the pattern of natural sciences because no predictive powers were available to history, historical explanations require a reconstruction in historian's mind and those who believe that rational explanation is possible only through the appropriation of general laws requiring empirical verification. For this we have a theory called 'Covering Law Theory' or 'Covering Law Model'. which was proposed by Carl.G.Hempel in 1942.

COVERING LAW THEORY

In 1942 Carl.G. Hempel wrote a paper on "The Function of General Laws in History" in which he asserted that the events of human history can be explained exactly in the same way as the events of the physical world are explained by a natural scientist. He has given logical structure of the explanation which is based on deductive methods and it is called the 'Covering Law Theory'. It lays down two important conditions. A set of well-confirmed conditions and a set of well confirmed universal hypothesis. The first, relates to the presence of a set of circumstances which are unique and specifically relate to the proposition which we wish to explain. The second, is a universal or general law, well confirmed and universally true, which will have a direct connection with the particular proposition. For example, if we want to explain the origin of a custom having a few particular and well-defined traits, we can do so only with reference to a principle where all customs having those particular traits have

originated, according to a particular pattern which is accepted to be universally true. But this theory was not very popular and criticized by many. Because even without the knowledge of general laws, it is possible to explain human action by knowing the reasons. In case of revolution one cannot explain the causes on the basis of general laws. Each revolution is different. But defenders of the theory argue that the failure of the historians to use a particular law does not prove that they do not need such a law. They argue that, one may accept it or not, there is general statement implicit in a historical explanation. For example, if a man falls off a ladder it may be due to the fact that unsupported bodies do fall or it may be that the man might have fainted. So the purpose of law is to invite the attention of the historian to probe into causes. The critical philosophers

of history accept that historical thinking is similar to the scientific thinking because the historian like a scientist observes his facts to draw general laws and in the process finds linkages between one category of facts and another category of facts. Like scientists, the historians are involved with two basic questions, namely, what happened and why that happened in history, that is., to make an attempt at explaining the phenomena under study. The Critical Theory of history also argues that history should deal analytically with its genuine problems.

SPECULATIVE PHILOSOPHY IN HISTORY (Various Theories of History)

Speculative Philosophy of history is as old as Plato and Aristotle, who advanced their own theories relating to the forms of government. Theories advanced under speculative philosophy do not conform to any set of pattern. Speculative philosophy is divided into two types.

- Teleological Speculative System
- Scientific Speculative System

Teleological Speculative System

These theories are those that attempt to prove that there is some purpose or plan in historical events. This was an old and traditional concept. Christianity presented history as a drama with divinely appointed beginning and end. From St. Augustine in the 5th century to 17th century a number of Christian writers believed in the providentially ordained design. It was thought that divine intelligence causes empires and cultures to rise and fall. The Church theory attempted to interpret history in terms of a principle by which historical facts are directed and unified towards an ultimate meaning. It makes God dwell in history. St Augustine, the greatest Church historiographers was a theologian expounded the idea of the City of God, which was divine and City of Man which was a sin. According to Church view all historical events are chaotic which can be set right only by submission of man to the divine will. So the motive force for historical events is the will and grace of the God.

But this theory has been severely censored in modern times. Proudhon was its strongest critic. Though he was a theologian he is the theologian of the theory of progress. His is of the view that society acts by spontaneous impulses. It is man's privilege to apprehend fatality as a social instinct. There is constant struggle between man and nature, in which his intelligence, skill, and initiative play a vital role in turning the wheels of history. So according to him in this struggle divine will has not part. So Proudhon is anti-God. Voltaire and Condorcet were also anti-church, but they were nor anti-God. Voltaire was on the opinion that if God does not exist it would be necessary to invent him. So a vehement attack was made on the theological interpretation of history. It was also criticised by Comte, Buckle, Darwin, Marx J.B.Bury etc.

SCIENTIFIC THEORIES OR APPROACH OR SYSTEM

Those who rejected theological interpretation of history and founded their theories on empirical facts are called scientific theorists. The earliest of them were the Greeks who attempted to explain human action on the basis of reason. They believed in the cyclical approach of historical events. Plato's *Republic* refers to a cycle of eternal recurrences when time and again society returns to monarchy after passing through other forms of government and that philosophers deserve to be kings. Polybius. Aristotle also believed in this eternal cyclical approach. Greeks believed in the study of events as facts which we linked one to the other in a rational and permanent manner. They also believed that history is a philosophy teaching by examples.

The working concepts of the ancient Indian mind also centred round the idea of an unchanging reality. In Puranas there are references to a cyclical concept of creation and destruction but it does not go to the extent of Church Teleological approach. The idea of the yuga following one after the other in the definite order was elaborated. The traditional division of the historical process according to Hindus is four fold; Krita, Treta, Dwapara, Kali. In the first, virtue or dharma reigns supreme, in the second it declines, in the third it becomes rare, in the fourth it disappears. Indian thought is wedded to the cyclical conception of history.

The Chinese conception of history also believes in cyclical theory. The Chinese conception of historical change is the alteration of order and disorder. They believed in the cycle three sequences, black, white and red. Their philosophy also rests on the idea that the present period is the period of decline. This is the main essence of Confucianism, Taoism and Chinese Buddhism. They always regarded past as superior than present.

The idea of historical change in Islam is quite different. Islam conceives of the world as a cavern in which light battles with darkness. There is a perpetual struggle between good and evil. In the entire world-cavern there is but one cause which lies immediately behind all visible workings and this is the Godhead, which acts without causes. In Islam beginning of time, the creation of the world, men and women, the age of the fall, the birth of prophets, the rise of religions, of empires and cultures all are regarded as specific events, the ultimate cause of which is the will of God.

Speculative philosophy made tremendous advance from the 17th century. Hobbs advocated possibility of investigating human affairs according to procedures adopted in sciences of physical nature. To many historians of the enlightenment era such a possibility opened an era of great hope. In the 18th century Vico, Kant, Condorcet, Herder, Fichte and Hegel contributed much in this direction. The 18th century was characterized but two conflicting conceptions of enlightenment and romanticism. Enlightenment treated history as a linear movement towards human progress. Romanticism considered history as a cyclical movement.

In the 19th century various speculative theories flourished. They are idealism, materialism, biological, romanticism theories propounded. In the 20th century Spengler, Sorokin, Toynbee added much to the

subject. The trend of thought all of these is that, if physical nature yields laws of universal validity, history which forms only a fraction of a activity in nature can also be reduced to laws.

The Italian thinker Vico considered historical movement as cyclical. Kant and Condorcet described history as the progressive manifestation of human rationality. Herder treats history as the cyclic succession of the birth, growth, decay and death of the life forms. Hegel built the boldest metaphysical account of the historical processes. He declared the theme of history to be the actualization of the absolute in time, the self-development of the spirit itself through the careers of a number of world historical peoples. In the 19th century Auguste Comte was the prophet of Positivism. He held the view that no phenomenon could be understood philosophically unless it was understood historically. Comte calls history positive philosophy or social physics. Historians have failed to predict the past because they have been so long engrossed with individuals and not on masses. Positivism led to the materialistic conception of history developed by Karl Marx.

Thus, several theories have been put forth to explain historical phenomenon and to interpret social change. There is a lot of intellectual value in the speculative theories which explain only a part of truth.

