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The Nature of Philosophy of History

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Abstract

This study is set to examine the nature of the philosophy of history. A well-articulated argument ensures concerning what philosophy of history is, and its ability to direct the course of history in the areas of historical evidence and the extent to which objectivity is possible. The paper argues that philosophy of history is a genuine and legitimate study of the relationship between philosophy and history which engenders elements of criticality in the study of history as an account of human activities. This is against the view of scholars especially, Frederick Copleston who doubts the legitimacy of philosophy of history. In order to appreciate Copleston's perspective, the paper investigates what he considers the nature and role of philosophy of history. Consequent on this therefore, this paper brings to the fore, the nature of philosophy of history, what it does, and how its relationship with history is consolidated. The study also provides a concluding segment, which contains an invitation to scholars, especially the Africans to learn from the lessons of the philosophy of history in order to shape their world view.

Key words: Philosophy, History, Historiography, Historicism, Critical, Speculative, Methodology, Human events, Historical research, Historical facts,

Scientific history, Civilization, Development, Intellectual form,
Meaningful achievement, Explanation, Metaphysics.

Introduction

Scholars have rejected the idea of philosophy of history, arguing as Frederick Copleston did that, it is not distinct from theology of history. Many others including W. H. Walsh (1967), express the view that should the central focus of the philosophy of history becomes epistemological, i.e., a matter of critical inquiry, which is the usual outlook of philosophy, a series of legitimately philosophical questions concerning history begins to emerge. Some of these include questions about the nature of historical knowledge itself, the concept of truth, facts and relativism. Though these issues are not of equal concern to everybody, they do altogether point to the direction contemporary reflections on history are going without implying that they were not present in earlier periods. As a matter of fact, the concern about the nature of historical knowledge has always been taken seriously by historians, right from Herodotus to the present. The question may be posed differently but it has to be posed and had always been posed. The main point is that the central focus of critical philosophy of history is the turning away from speculative and metaphysical to epistemological issues in history.

The impression is sometimes created that once philosophy of history turns critical, and becomes scientific then all is well between philosophy and history (Halkin, 1976). A question one would like to ask, is whether the standard approach to philosophy of history that divides it into two aspects, the speculative and the critical, is adequate; whether this exhausts all our intellectual need to reflect philosophically on the nature and the uses of history? It is the view of this study that there is need today for a return to pragmatic history that would recommend other possible areas of relating history to philosophy. And if we as in Halkin: 67, describe pragmatic history as 'writing history with the intention of providing recommendations for, and evaluation of, public and private activities', then we can say it is the oldest form of theory of history. In this return to pragmatic history however, two approaches are suggested; one negative and the other positive. The negative approach tries to avoid two extremes. The first extreme is the tendency to mystify history by personifying it as a temporal manifestation of Divine Reason as Hegel does. For Hegel (1953:11), 'the sole thought which philosophy brings to the treatment of history is the simple concept of Reason: the Reason is the law of the world and that, therefore, in world history, things have come about rationally.' Here Hegel limits the relation between philosophy and history to a conceptual analysis of Reason. Besides, this does not necessarily mean that historical events are the results of decisions men arrived at 'rationally' and to that extent dependent on human will. Reason with its 'rational' relationship to events has a different meaning for Hegel. Through its speculative reflection philosophy has demonstrated that Reason - and this term may be accepted here without closer

examination of its relation to God - is both *substance and infinite power*... as well as the *infinite form*, the actualization of itself as content. The spirit of Hegel's Reason in History never touched Africa. The Hegelian analysis also ignores the fact that man is the subject of history. This would impede our demand for a return to pragmatic history.

The second extreme is the non-sequitur argument of certain theorists. The claim is often made in some quarters that only certain areas of the globe have had history in the sense of significant achievements. It is either assumed or implied thereby that other people never had, and more damagingly, never will have any history. The suggestion is that these other people are going nowhere because they have come from nowhere. In a strange twist of logic, the past in the sense of the unrecorded past, is interpreted as an indication of the absence of all sorts of endowments and capabilities. This is sometimes interpreted by those negatively affected as an unjustifiable attempt to intimidate as well as psychologically discourage them from trying to take their destiny into their own hands in order to re-direct where necessary, the course of their history.

The positive approach to pragmatic history should try to evolve a theory of history that takes history as it is, an approach that sees history as primarily human, essentially temporal and radically contingent. Basing itself on the above characteristics of history, it should try to theorize about the uses of the past for future ages. To be historical is to be human, and to be human is to have a history, not only in the sense of Heidegger's historical destiny, but also in the sense of being the object of history. According to Raymond Aron (1959), 'man, then, is at the same time both the subject and object of historical knowledge. It is only by starting with man that we shall understand the real nature of the science and philosophy of history.... History is subject to the human condition. It is 'an affair of men made by men, and therefore exposed to the risks, hazards, and uncertainties of every human enterprise (Barrett & Aikens, 1971). Some contemporary philosophers including W. H. Walsh have gone as far as to maintain that only human beings have history and that non-human events are not materials for history except in so far as they are related to man. History is not something that simply 'happens to man'. On the contrary, man makes history. Man is historical.

History is essentially temporal in the sense that historical events can take place only in time. Furthermore, the study of history entails the consciousness of the past. According to Aron, '... consciousness of the past is a constituent part of the historic process. Temporality is therefore of the essence of history and this is independent of whether one sees time as either subjective or objective. Time by its very nature is meant to be superseded both in itself and in relation to historical events. The past is meant to be superseded by the future at least in sequence. In relationship to events, the time it takes to do something can always in principle be superseded. And history is made, depending on the circumstances, each time this happens. This is in keeping with the

philosophy of sports and the spirit of the Olympic Games. One can always think of the possibility of doing something faster and better, i.e., endeavour to break a previous record. Here lies the challenge, the drive to do better; and the consciousness of the passage of time.

Theoretical Framework

Frederick Copleston (1984) is quite an articulate critic of the possibility as well as the legitimacy of philosophy of history. He is convinced that a theology of history is possible, and by a theology of history he means a belief in divine providence as an operative principle in human history, whose plan will be realized regardless of what human beings might think or do. He contends that since a theology of history would be based not on empirical data but on revelation, it is difficult to see in what practical way it could be useful to the study of history. As far as philosophy of history is concerned, he does not completely reject the notion, but expresses some serious doubt about its validity. Philosophy of history as he sees it, is an attempt on the part of the philosophers of the eighteenth century to substitute philosophy for theology, while at the same time creating the false impression that their theories of history are thereby given “the character of scientific knowledge”. It is true, Copleston says, that philosophers make certain statements about history that are true. The real issue however is not about the truth of their statements but whether what they say cannot equally be said by historians without the assistance of philosophers. “In other words, the question is whether the philosophers as such can achieve anything more in developing a synthetic interpretation of history than can be achieved by the historian. If not, there is no place for philosophy of history in the sense in which the term is being used”, (Pinker, 2012). In order to appreciate fully Copleston’s position, it would be good to investigate further what he considers the nature and main function of the philosophy of history.

To begin with, he makes a distinction between historiography and philosophy of history. The former is “a critique of historical method” that investigates among other things the notion of historical fact, the nature of interpretation, the role of imagination in history and the criteria of selection historians observe. These are strictly speaking “meta-historical inquiries” of methodology. “If by philosophy of history one means a critique of historical method, then philosophy of history is obviously a possible and legitimate undertaking”, (Ingold, 2006). Just as it is legitimate to inquire into the method of the sciences, it is legitimate to investigate the method employed by historians. Unfortunately, Copleston does not think this is what is meant by philosophy of history. “And when we speak of the philosophy of history we think of interpretations of the actual course of historical events rather than of an analysis of the historian’s method, norms of selection, presuppositions, and so on. We think of the search for patterns or for a pattern in the course of history and of theories of universal laws which are supposed to be operative in history” (Al-Rodhan, 2009). Furthermore, the mere

presence of a pattern in history does not by itself constitute a philosophy of history. The pattern must be shown to be “a necessary pattern”, necessary in either of two ways. It might show that history is moving towards a definite and predetermined goal that must be realized irrespective of whatever human beings might think or do; or it might show that historical events follow “certain universal laws” which control and determine the actual development of these events. In either case, we have a legitimate philosophy of history.

It would seem therefore that the only form of philosophy of history acceptable to Copleston is a theory of historical determinism that is either theological in origin or “natural” but universal in character. In actual fact however, none of these, Copleston maintains, can qualify as philosophy of history. Any such theory is either a priori or a posteriori. In the first case one approaches the study of history persuaded in advance that human history is predetermined. “On the other hand a man might come to the study of history with an already formed belief, derived from theology or from metaphysics that human history moves inevitably towards the attainment of a certain end or goal”, (Rubinoff, 2008). One then attempts to illustrate how this belief is confirmed by “the actual course of historical events”. Copleston mentions Hegel specifically as an example and expresses the feeling that it is quite difficult, given an a priori belief in divine providence, to develop a consistent philosophy of history that is different from a theology of history. It is true for example, continues Copleston, that there is divine providence in history; it is equally true that events in history “have their phenomenal causes”. However, we would not be able to explain, without revelation, in what way the actual course of historical events is related to divine providence. It is possible to speculate and conjecture on the basis of faith, but this would not “permit prediction”, nor would it advance “scientific knowledge”. In the second case, the a posteriori situation, a historian in the process of studying history might feel he has discovered “certain recurrent patterns” in the course of history, and tries to explain this phenomenon in terms of “universal laws”. According to Copleston, any approach to the study of history that claims to discover universal laws is open to challenge. It is questionable whether, on the strength of available evidence, such a theory can be proved. Second, such a theory will have taken human freedom and initiative into account. Although it is not impossible, it is by no means easy, to develop a theory of “universal laws” in history that is compatible with human freedom and initiative. Besides, it is fair to ask if the so-called laws of history are “anything better than truisms”. More importantly, one is justified in asking whether the historian is not capable of discovering them without the help of the philosopher. It is on the strength of these arguments that Copleston feels that what we call a philosophy of history is either a theology of history or a historiography. Either way, a valid case is yet to be made for philosophy of history as a legitimate subject.

Copleston's argument that philosophy of history is not a legitimate endeavour might appear convincing, especially if one accepts his notion and scope of the subject. It would seem however that there is more to philosophy of history than "a synthetic interpretation of history", the primary objective of which is to show that divine providence directs the course of history. It would seem also that philosophy of history is much more than "a critique of historical method". It is interesting to note that as early as 1951, over a decade before Copleston expressed his "doubt concerning the validity of the idea" of philosophy of history, Walsh has, in *An Introduction to Philosophy of History* analyzed in detail "a number of problems" he felt "should undoubtedly be recognized as genuine" issues in philosophy of history. These were topics he felt at that time would in the future constitute "the main repertoire of critical" philosophy of history. They comprise "the nature of historical explanation", the question of objectivity in history, historical knowledge, truth and fact in history, and finally historical causation which was added later. About a quarter of a century later, Walsh returned in Berkhofer (1995), to these issues to see how far his "prophecy has been borne out by events". All of them, to his pleasant surprise, have turned out to be areas of lively discussions in philosophy of history. Copleston must have been aware of Walsh's work. In any case, since Walsh's "repertoire of critical" philosophy of history can be subsumed under Copleston's historiography, it would seem that the latter's objection is directed mainly against speculative philosophy of history. If that is the case, the main problem boils down to a possible justification of speculative philosophy of history that, according to Copleston, must be an interpretation of "the actual course of historical events"; must reveal "patterns or . . . a pattern in the course of history", a pattern that must also be "a necessary pattern"; an interpretation that would "permit prediction", while advancing "scientific knowledge".

There is a point to Copleston's argument that the eighteenth century philosophy of history was simply substituting philosophy for theology. He is probably justified in maintaining that Hegel's speculation about history is both a priori and based on metaphysics. He is probably not as equally right or justified in doubting "the validity of the idea" of philosophy of history in general; or in doubting whether a philosopher of history has a legitimate function different from that of the historian. There is nothing invalid or problematic about the idea of philosophy of history. It is part of the function of the philosophy of any field to inquire into the nature, the assumptions and the presuppositions of that particular field. It is therefore a legitimate endeavour to talk in this sense of the philosophy of history. It is not the job of the historian as historian to question the nature and the basic assumptions of history. When that happens then that historian is no longer doing history but a philosophy of history. Contrary to Copleston, it is possible to have a valid philosophy of history that is quite different from a theology of history and from Hegelian theodicy.

It is a little unfortunate that Copleston who is a leading historian of philosophy whose volumes have remained, and will continue to remain, in the opinion of both scholars and critics, a “standard history of philosophy for many years to come” would fail to see the validity of philosophy of history. He definitely has a highly evolved consciousness of historical development. It is therefore difficult to imagine how he could fail to notice the historical development of the philosophical understanding of history from the ancient Greeks (Plato and Aristotle) who “thought of history in terms of cycles”, through the Medieval Christian conception of history as teleological (St. Augustine), to the nineteenth-century (Hegel and Marx who saw history as dialectical), when philosophy of history “as a distinct field within philosophy” reached a mature stage. If Hegel’s interpretation of history can be dismissed as a priori, metaphysical, and “a highly elaborate secular version of Christian theodicy”, that of Marx deserves a slightly different treatment.

Methodology

Conceptual exposition, clarification, and critical analytical explanation of philosophy are the methodology templates on which this study is predicated. This choice is made in order to bring the work in conformity with the acceptable methodological ranges open to any philosophical determination. In this specific regard, the underlying methodological framework is ideational. And this entails expository, critical, analytical, and even historical deliberations. It is an investigative approach, which derives from the idealist consideration of the character of phenomena generally.

Since the adaptation of any framework presupposes the justification for the rejection of others, our chosen methodological framework freely gives a guided exposition of the entailments of our operative concepts by posing them as critique of the perspective of Professor Frederick Copleston and other Scholars of same view. Within the ambit of these methods, the study is able to illuminate the peculiarities of philosophy of history above primordial considerations. It is also able to make suggestions on how Africa would overcome a prejudiced interpretation of phenomena in manners that deny them of their contributions to civilization. This would be in the form of taking advantage of the effort of this study as it is for philosophy, to systematize knowledge and behaviour into a coherent and logical whole.

The Content

The nature of philosophy of history has to do with the historical explanation and interpretation, which forms the basis of concern between philosophy and history. What should interest a philosopher of history here is the ‘objective presentation of historical facts and some of the social theories built around it in the cause of interpretation or explanation’ (Sweet, 2011). Since the philosophy of anything suggests the axioms of that particular field of study, it follows, therefore, that philosophy of

history is the study of a cross idea of philosophy and history that inquires into the nature, assumptions and presuppositions, and the objects and goals of history of as already indicated earlier. Philosophy of history is also an attempt to a point to know what history is. And as an essential ingredient of this, it would be revealing to show the very nature of history itself.

There exist two ways in which one can look at history. These include; the nature of history, and about the lessons of history. A study of the nature of history ought to examine the subject matter and the methodology of history. About the lessons of history, one should keep in mind the limits of the uses of the past by the nature of history, its methodology, and its uses, this would yield more fruitful result than either alone. This point goes on to explain an area of the nature of history as a record of past events and the events themselves. And as fallout of this, it will be absurd to impose a restrictive definition on history. Both E. Bernheim and W. Bauer are guilty of this offence according to Huizinga (1936), when they started with the notion of history as a modern science, thereby limiting the scope of history to the dictates of modern science' (Rose, 2011). Huizinga himself shares from this fault of imposing restrictive definition on history when he saw history as the 'intellectual form in which a civilization renders account to itself of its past' (Danto, 2001). The emphasis here is on the form of the account as opposed to the account of the past, which is the subject matter of history, and also constitutes a historical fact. From the above, it will be seen that the very nature of history, which is the objective explanation and interpretation of historical fact has been subverted for a subjective rendering of the account of the past to suit a particular intention or motive.

The search for objectivity about the past is a major indicant of the task of historiography, which is the science or craft of writing history. Historiography is aimed at uncovering the truth by the accumulation of data concerning the past and then philosophically uncovering uniformities in the past. A precipitant end of this is a comprehensive knowledge about the past which consists of facts. This quest for facts in history led to the need for "an integrated approach to the subject matter of the study, i.e., toward revealing the whole structure of that subject matter of historical research" (Gardiner, 1952). The achievement of this historical research is the dialectical method, which is scientific, and offers a rational explanation of both historical change and development. The advantage of this dialectical method is that it puts together, the achievements of earlier and contemporary epochs in historiography by making the study of the development of society the primary task of historical research. (Gardiner, 1974). It is these functions of historiography as enumerated above and added to those of "the role of imagination in history, and the criteria of selection historians observe which it shares with philosophy of history that Frederick Copleston thinks that the philosophy of history is not a relevant study. Its job he says is being done by historiography as part of the methodology of history. Copleston has failed to

understand that just as it is rational and coherent to inquire into the method of the sciences, “it is legitimate also to investigate the method employed by historians” (McLaughlin & Pellauer, 2000). To support the study of philosophy of history as a genuine enterprise, W. H. Walsh said in his book, *An Introduction to Philosophy of History* (1951), that the main repertoire of critical philosophy of history include “the nature of historical explanation”, question of objectivity in history, historical knowledge, truth and fact in history, and lastly historical causation.

The concern for internal relation between the historical narrative, the methodology of history, and the philosophy of history as argued by Topolski (1976), drags us to historicism which stands half way between ‘the methodology of history and the philosophy of history’. This deals with “the nature of truth and values, about the laws governing human history” (Canary and Kozicki, 2012), which in turn outlines the requirements for the study of history. To study the past, the historian must emphasize the past. In inquiring into the life of a people, the historian understands and feels his way into their lives, and as well accepts their point of view. He should not allow his own preconceptions and standards colour the past. As a rule, historicism ‘combines relativism with historical determinism, claiming that all socio-cultural phenomena are historically determined’, that there are no absolute values’, truth, standards or categories” (Curran, 2000).

To historicism, history in its specificity is human life which is multifaceted, unsystematic, all changing and all growing. An essential element of this type of thought pattern is the ability to capture the past as it happened with all its specifics, uniqueness and singularity. “The meaning of history does not lie hidden in some universal structure, whether deterministic or teleological but in the multiplicity of individual manifestations at different ages, and in different cultures” (Dilthey, 1989). The general concept, therefore, of historicism is that history is non-deterministic, open-ended and depended on human decisions and choices. It is this contention of historicism that reinforces Jerzy Topolski’s want for pragmatic approach to history.

Having gone thus far in exposing the content of the nature of history and its methodology, it will be of interest to now turn to the philosophy of history itself. Philosophy of history on a wide note consists of two divisions, the speculative and the critical. The first (speculative) entails the endeavour to unmask ‘a deeper meaning or purpose’ in history than the ‘mere sequence of events’. This ‘deeper’ meaning of history has been challenged by many and given different interpretations, one of which is that “the course history has so far traced shows a discernible trend that suggests a basis for possible prediction of its future direction” (Muller, 2010). But if we are to avoid obscuring certain key concepts in the analysis of the nature of history, this type historical determinism which leads to the way of the personification of history as in the Hegelian system must be abandoned. At the conceptual level of critical philosophy of

history, philosophical questioning begins to unfold. They include those that have to do with the nature of historical knowledge itself, the idea of truth, facts and explanation in history and of course, objectivity and relativism. From this general configuration of critical philosophy of history there is a move away from the speculative and the metaphysical to the matrix of epistemological examination of history.

Following this pattern of the matter, a question readily comes to mind as to the adequacy of the above two divisions of philosophy of history to exhaust the very nature and uses of history. To this question, I share the sentiments of Nwodo, (1992) who calls for a comeback to pragmatic history. And what is this pragmatic history? It is writing history with the intention of providing recommendations for, and evaluation of, public and private activities (Halkin). This will appreciate the relating string of history to philosophy and bring this forth for a more elucidating deliberation instead of the mystification of history and the callous tying of history to 'significant achievements'. The presupposition here is that other people who lack this so-called 'significant achievements' criteria never had or never will have any history. This type of bias transmits very well in the above Huizinga's definition of history as 'the intellectual form in which a civilization renders account to itself of its past'. What matters to Huizinga is the 'forms' in which the account is given, and not the existence of the history itself no matter how it is rendered. Of course, this is a mere intimidation and a gimmick directed at preventing a people from rendering their historical account by whichever form, or at least rededicate the course of their history. The positive side embraces history primarily as a human phenomenon, temporal, and contingent. It recognizes the uses of the past in history for future ages. 'History therefore, is an 'account of man by man for man' (White, 2009). History involves a consciousness of the past which invariably is time oriented. Temporality in history is absolved of time seen subjectively or objectively, and history is made, depending on the circumstance time supersedes itself, or by events. It is this nature of temporality that offers an opportunity of possibilities to shape ones well-being rather than be a possessor of a determined fate. Contingency in history shows firstly that human actions as subject matter of history dictated by human freedom and initiative which is unpredictable, is the basis of historical events. It also shows the effects historical events can have on people and then embraces lastly an air of uneasiness about the future because of its uncertainty. History seen in the above light will reveal that though it is an account of the past, it is not an order that cannot be deviated by the future. After all, the world is characterized and dictated by change.

It is this way of using the lessons of the past positively and constructively that will challenge the present generation. Instead of this, what has happened to the African is a disparaged past by Western Scholars who erroneously hold the belief that the 'African continent has made no contribution to civilization, because her people are backward and low in intelligence and culture' (White, 2010). These Western Scholars

will never want to give the credit of Egyptian accomplishments to Africa. To accomplish their aim, histories of great historians like Herodotus are subverted and rewritten. The precipitating effect of this is that what would have been the theoretical framework for African's modern and contemporary shaping of their future is denied them.

Conclusion

From the above account therefore, it appears that African Scholars have a lot to do in order to redress the situation. They cannot sit on the fence and crying wolf. They have to study what the African pasts were and thereafter put the records straight. It is obvious that an effort directed along this line will not only meet every dissenting view and undue aggression from these same Western and even some African Scholars but it will also prove a worthwhile attempt. Armed with what the records of their past are, 'contemporary Africans, as the descendants of those who formerly organized and ruled over large empires; who came before Columbus' to America (Nwodo), will be inspired and their potentials challenged to face their future confidently. It will also disabuse their minds against these Western biases and prejudices, and then spur them to realize that even if it were possible that Africa had no history it would be unjustifiable to deny her a future.

However, most African Scholars are almost failing in this direction for fear of repression and clamp down by government and other agents of Western imperialism. Here I would wish to label this creed of African Scholars as cohorts. Cohorts in the sense that they are denying the contemporary Africans the knowledge they need so as to rededicate and direct their future. The knowledge these Scholars have acquired either through their peculiar orientation or through some personal endeavour soon pass away with them if not bequeathed to the younger generation. This trend will only lead to the 'poverty of historicism'. As historiography is no longer critical and objective from the Western perspective, it is only the inheritance of such knowledge from the older African Scholars that will inspire and exhort the present generation into believing that whatever the odds are, they can take a leaf from history and rebuild their lost civilization. An essential fallout of this type of reasoning will prove that history is not predicated upon any sort of determinism whether racial or 'significant achievement'.

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