

What is History?

History may be defined in three ways. In fact, there are three closely connected disciplines related to history.

1. Knowledge of the incidents, events, circumstances, and conditions of people living in the past in relation to the present conditions and circumstances. All situations, conditions, events, and episodes which take place belong to the present, that is, the time during which they take shape, are judged, reported, and recorded as matters of the day by daily newspapers. However, as soon as their time elapses, they are merged with the past and become a part of history.

Hence, history, in this sense, is the knowledge of the bygone incidents, events, conditions and circumstances of the people in the past. Biographies, records of battles and conquests, and all such chronicles compiled in the past, or at the present, by all nations, come under this category.

History in this sense is, firstly, the knowledge of the particular; that is, it is the knowledge of a sequence of personal and individual episodes, not the knowledge of a series of general laws and relationships. Secondly, it is a study of narratives and traditions, not a rational discipline. Thirdly, it is the knowledge of 'being,' not that of 'becoming.' Fourthly, it is related to the past, not to the present. This type of history we shall term as 'traditional history' (*tarikḥ naqli*).

2. History is the knowledge of laws that appear to govern the life of the past, obtained through investigation and analysis of the past events.

The stuff with which the traditional history is concerned, i.e. the events and incidents of the past, provides the rudimentary and basic material for this study. For the study of history in this sense, such events and incidents are similar to the material gathered by a natural scientist for his laboratory analysis and investigation to discover certain general laws, through induction, regarding the nature and properties of his material and the causal relations governing its changes.

The historian, in this analytical endeavor, wishes to uncover the true nature of historical events and their causal relationship, and to discover the general and universal laws applicable to all similar events of the

past and the present. We shall call history in this sense 'scientific history'.

Although the object of research and the subject matter of scientific history are the events and episodes of the past, the laws which it deduces are not specifically confined to the past. They have the ability of being generalized in order to be applied to the present and the future also. This aspect of history makes it very useful, making it one of the sources of man's knowledge regarding himself, and enables him to exercise control over his own future.

The difference between the task of a researcher in the field of scientific history and a researcher in the natural sciences is notable. The material of research for the natural scientist is a chain of real and verifiable occurrences that are present.

Hence, necessarily, all his investigations, analyses, and results are empirical and verifiable. But the material on which a historian works belongs to the past and does not exist in the present. What is accessible to a historian now is only a bundle of chronicles about the past.

A historian is like a judge in a court of law who decides on the basis of circumstantial evidence and indications on record in his files, not on the basis of the testimony of any eye-witness. In this way, the analysis of a historian is logical, rational, and mental, not one based upon verifiable external evidence. A historian makes his analysis in the laboratory of his mind and intellect, with the instruments of logic and inference, not in the external physical laboratory with instruments of observation and measurement.

Hence, the job of a historian is more akin to that of a philosopher than of a scientist. Scientific history, like traditional history, is concerned with the past, not with the present. It is the knowledge of 'being' not of 'becoming.' But unlike traditional history it is general, not particular; it is rational, not based upon tradition.

Scientific history is actually a branch of sociology; i.e. it is a sociological study of the societies of the past. The subject of sociology includes the study of the past and the present societies. However, if we restrict sociology to the study of contemporary societies, then scientific history and sociology should be considered as two disciplines, separate but closely related, complementary, and dependent upon each other.

3. Philosophy of history is based upon the knowledge of gradual changes and transformations which lead societies from one stage to another. It deals with the laws governing these transformations and changes. In other words, it is the science of 'becoming' of societies, not of their 'being' only.

Perhaps this question might have arisen in the mind of the honoured reader, whether it is possible for societies to have simultaneously 'being' as well as 'becoming,' and that being should be the subject of one discipline, viz. scientific history, and 'becoming' of societies the subject of another discipline, viz. philosophy of history. Isn't any synthesis between the two impossible, as 'being' implies rest and 'becoming' movement? Only one of the two should be chosen. Our picture of the societies of the past

should be either a picture of 'being' or a picture of 'becoming'.

Probably the honourable reader may pose this problem in more general and comprehensive terms: Our picture of the universe as a whole—and of society as a part of it—is either a static or a dynamic one. If the universe or society is static then it has 'being,' not becoming; and if it is changing and dynamic, it has 'becoming' and not 'being.'

From this point of view, the most significant division of the schools of philosophy is made. It has been said that philosophical systems are divided into two main groups: the philosophies of 'being' and the philosophies of 'becoming.' The philosophies of 'being' are those which hold that being and non-being are incompatible with each other, and they regard contradictions as impossible. It is supposed that if there is 'being' there cannot be 'non-being' and if there is 'non-being' there is no 'being.'

Hence one has to choose one of these two alternatives. As being is necessary and there is nothing except being in the world and society, the world is governed by rest and stillness. But the philosophies of becoming, on the other hand, hold that being and non-being co-exist in each and every single moment, and this is what we call motion. Motion is nothing except that a thing 'is' and at the same time it 'is not.'

Hence, the philosophy of being and the philosophy of becoming are two opposite views regarding existence, and one has to choose any one of the two. If we associate ourselves with the first view, we should hold that societies have 'being' not 'becoming,' and, contrarily, if we associate ourselves with the second view, it should be assumed that societies have 'becoming' and not 'being.' Either we can have scientific history, in the light of the above discussion, without having any philosophy of history, or we can have philosophy of history without a scientific history.

The answer to these questions lies in the fact that such thinking about being and nothingness, about motion and rest, and about incompatibility of opposites, is a characteristic feature of the Western thought and originates in the West's ignorance of the philosophical problems of: being (problems concerning existence) and specially the profound problem of principality of existence (asalat al-wujud) and a number of: other problems related to it.

Firstly, take the statements that 'being' is synonymous with rest, or, in other words, rest is being, and that motion is a synthesis between being and non-being and means unity of two opposites. These notions are some of the gross errors made by some schools of Western philosophy.

Secondly, what is maintained here has nothing to do with the above-mentioned philosophical problem? The positions taken here are based upon the hypothesis that society, like all other living beings, follows two different sets of laws: one set of laws which is confined to a particular species, and the other set of laws which deals with changes of species and their transformation into one another. We shall term the first kind of laws, 'the laws of being,' and the other, 'the laws of becoming.'

Incidentally, this point has been realized by some sociologists. Auguste Comte is one of them. Raymond

Aron says about him:

Statics and dynamics are two basic categories of Auguste Comte's sociology... Statics consists essentially in examining, in analyzing what Comte calls the social consensus (social unanimity). A society is comparable to a living organism.

It is impossible to study the functioning of an organ without placing it in the context of living creature. By the same token it is impossible to study politics of the state without placing them in the context of the society at a given momentAs for dynamics at the outset it consists merely of the description of the successive stages through which human societies pass. [1](#)

If we take into consideration any species from among the species of living beings, like mammals, reptiles, birds etc., we shall see that they have a group of particular laws specific to their kind, which govern them as long as they are related to that particular species. (For example, the laws related to. an animal's embryonic stages, its health and survival, its conditions of sickness and disease, its food habits and nourishment, reproduction and growth, or the laws related to the patterns of its habitation or migration, and its mating habits.)

But according to the theory of evolution and development of species, in addition to certain specific laws that operate within the species, there is another set of laws which are concerned with the process of evolution and transformation of .the lower species into the higher ones. These laws are formulated philosophically, and sometimes termed as the 'philosophy of evolution' as distinct from the science of biology.

As society is considered to be a living organism, it is also governed by two types of laws: biological laws and evolutionary laws. The laws which are concerned with the causes of birth and decline of civilizations, and the conditions which determine social existence, are laws which are universally applicable to all the varying forms and changes taking place in various societies.

We shall call them the 'laws of being' of societies. And those laws which are concerned with the causes of evolution of societies from one epoch to another and from one system to another system, would be termed as the 'laws of becoming' of societies. The difference between them will become clearer when we discuss each of the two types of problems.

Hence history, according to its third meaning, is the study of evolution of societies from one stage to another. It is not merely the knowledge of the existence of the society at a particular stage or at all stages. For the sake of avoiding any possibility of confusion, these problems should not be mixed with the problems of scientific history. We shall call the study of these problems the 'philosophy of history.'

Very often the problems related with scientific history, which deals with the non-evolutionary movement of society, are not clearly differentiated from the problems of philosophy of history, which deals with the evolutionary movement of society. This is what gives rise to misunderstandings and errors.

Philosophy of history, like scientific history deals with the general not with the particular. It is rational (‘aqli), not traditional (naqli). It is the knowledge of becoming of societies, not of their being. And also, contrary to the case of scientific history, the use of the word ‘history’ in the term ‘philosophy of history’ should not lead us to think that philosophy of history is related to the past; rather it means that philosophy of history is the study of a continuous stream which originated in the past and continues to flow towards the future. Time, for the sake of study of these types of problems, cannot be assumed to be merely a container [occupied by historical reality], but it is to be regarded as one of the dimensions of this reality.

The study of history is useful in all of its three senses. Even the descriptive traditional history, which deals with the lives and characters of individuals, may be useful, moving, directive, educative and constructive. But it depends upon who the individuals whose life histories are discussed are, and what conclusions we infer from their lives. Men are made, according to the law of imitation, under the influence of the behaviour, treatment, resolutions, moral habits, and companionship of their fellowmen.

As the lives of contemporaries serve as a lesson and example for man, and he learns manners and customs from his fellow beings—or, according to Luqman, learns good manners even from the ill-mannered, so that he does not commit their mistakes—the same principle is applicable to the biographies of the men belonging to the past. History, like a film, transforms the past into the present.

The Quran itself refers to the beneficial aspects of the lives of such worthy people whom it considers as fit and imitable models. About the Prophet (S), the Quran says:

﴿لَقَدْ كَانَ لَكُمْ فِي رَسُولِ اللَّهِ أُسْوَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ لِّمَن كَانَ يَرْجُوا اللَّهَ وَالْيَوْمَ الْآخِرَ وَذَكَرَ اللَّهَ كَثِيرًا﴾ (٢١)

“Verily, in the Messenger of Allah you have a good example for whosoever hopes for God and the Last Day, and remembers God much.” (33:21)

About Abraham (A), the Quran says:

...قَدْ كَانَتْ لَكُمْ أُسْوَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ فِي إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَالَّذِينَ مَعَهُ

“You have a good example in Abraham and those with him” (60:4)

Whenever the Quran refers to the characters of persons as examples for others, it does not give importance to their worldly positions, but always emphasizes the moral and humanistic aspects of their personalities.

It is from this viewpoint that the Quran remembers Luqman, a Negro slave, as a wise man, although he was neither a king, nor a wealthy man, nor a famous philosopher. He is introduced to the world as a

paragon of wisdom. The examples cited in the Quran of the true believers—one belonging to the Pharaoh's tribe and another mentioned in Surat Yasin—also belong to the same category.

In this book, where we intend to discuss sociology and history from the Islamic point of view, we will confine our attention solely to scientific history and philosophy of history because of their relevance to the world outlook of Islam. Accordingly, we will discuss these two topics somewhat elaborately, starting with the nature of scientific history.

- [1.](#) Raymond Aron, Main Currents in Sociological Thought, vol. I. pp. 85,86.

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