

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

“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.

Scientific History

To begin with, I would like to remind that scientific history is to in the light of the view discussed earlier that the society has a reality, and personality independent of the individual. If society does— not have a reality independent of its members, there may not be any laws except those governing individuals,' and, consequently, scientific history, which is the science of the laws and principles that govern societies, would be pointless.

That history is governed by laws is a necessary corollary of the proposition that history has its own nature, which again follows from the proposition that society has its own nature and reality. In the context of scientific history, the following problems should be studied.

1. As has been pointed out earlier, scientific history is based on traditional history. Traditional history provides the material for the laboratory of scientific history. Hence, firstly, it should be thoroughly investigated whether the contents of traditional history are authentic and reliable. If the material is not reliable, all research and scientific inference regarding the laws governing the societies of the past would be futile and pointless.
2. If we proceed with the supposition that traditional history is reliable, and that society has an essence and personality independent of individuals, then deduction of general laws from historical events and episodes would depend upon the hypothesis that the law of causation, or causal determinism, governs the sphere of human activities—that is the sphere of problems associated with human freedom and will, which are expressed in historical events.

Without accepting it; the laws of history can neither be generalized nor universalized, nor can there be any orderly system of such laws. The question is whether the law of causation governs the course of history, and if it does, what are we to think of human freedom and responsibility?

3. Is history materialistic in nature and governed by materialistic forces? Is the principal force dominating human history a material force? Are intellectual and spiritual forces secondary, subordinate, and dependent upon the material forces that shape history? Contrarily, is it true that history is essentially spiritual, and the dominating force of history a spiritual force, the material forces being secondary, subsidiary, and subservient to it?

In other words, is history in itself 'idealistic'? Or do we have a third alternative, i.e. history possesses essentially a composite character, governed by two or more forces? Is it true that a number of material and spiritual forces—more or less harmonious and occasionally conflicting, depending on a system—govern history?

1. Authenticity and Inauthenticity of Traditional History

There are some who severely criticize traditional history, considering it as a series of fabrications of the narrators based on the historian's personal interests and objectives, his social affiliations, or on national, communal or religious prejudices—all of which have more or less led to fabrications or distortions.

The historians have compiled history according to their own wishes, and even those who, from a moral point of view, refrained from deliberate fabrication and distortion of facts, were selective in their choice while recording incidents.

That is, they have invariably related only those incidents which did not go against their objectives and beliefs. They avoided giving accounts of such events which happened to be against their beliefs and feelings.

In this way, though they might not have added anything of their own, or recorded any fabricated material, yet through their choice they gave history their desired form. A significant event or an important personality can be studied and analysed only when all the relevant material is accessible to the researcher.

If only a fraction of the required material essential for the study is available and the rest is not, the true face of reality is hidden and, replaced by a radically different face.

The pessimism of these critics of traditional history is similar to the attitude of some skeptics among Islamic jurists (fuqaha' or mujtahidun) about Islamic tradition (hadith) and narrations (riwayat) an attitude which has been termed "insidad bab al-`ilm" ("closure of the door of knowledge").

Some have made such ironic statements about history as, "History means, a series of events that never occurred, recorded by a person who was not at all present at the time." A journalist is quoted to have said that "realities are sacred, but one has freedom of faith [to believe or disbelieve them]." Some are not so pessimistic, but they, too, prefer to be skeptical regarding history.

In the book *What is History?*, the following statement has been quoted from Sir George Clark:

... Knowledge of the past that has come down through one or more human minds, and has been processed by them, and therefore cannot consist of elemental and impersonal atoms which nothing can alter The exploration seems to be endless, and some impatient scholars take refuge in skepticism, or at least in the doctrine that, since all historical judgments involve persons and points of view, one is as

good as another and there is no 'objective' historical truth. [2](#)

The fact is that though we may not entirely trust even the records of the most reliable historians, but there are, firstly, a series of definite indubitable in history, similar to the self-evident postulates accepted in other disciplines. These can form the subject of the historian's study, analysis, and research.

Secondly, the researcher can exercise his discretion in reaching a conclusion regarding the truth or falsehood of some narrations by subjecting them to critical scrutiny. Today we see that researchers have conclusively proved the unreliability of certain matters which were exaggerated out of proportion and were held in reverence for several centuries. The story of burning of the library at Alexandria, which began to be circulated since the seventh century of Hijrah, gradually found its way into several books of history.

But the findings of the last century researchers have proved it absolutely baseless, only a fabrication of some prejudiced Christians. In the same fashion, sometimes certain truths are obscured and hidden, but after sometime they are somehow uncovered. Therefore, it is not justifiable to be totally skeptical of the historical records.

2. Causation in History

Does absolute causation govern history? If the law of causality dominates history, it would be essential to accept that occurrence of every incident in itself should be certain and inevitable, and that some type of determinism prevails over history. If determinism governs history, then, where is the place for the individual's freedom and choice?

If in reality occurrence of events is deterministic, then no one has any responsibility, and no one may deserve any praise or reproach for his deeds. If the law of causation does not govern history, there can be no universality, and if there is no possibility of generalization or universalization, history cannot have any law because law is dependent upon universality, and universality is a corollary of the principle of causality.

This is the main difficulty with regard to scientific history and philosophy of history. There are some who, on the basis of the principle of causation and the principle of universality, negate freedom and choice. They maintain that whatever is accepted in the name of freedom is not actually freedom. Contrarily, there are others who approve the principle of freedom and negate the view that history follows certain laws. Many sociologists accept the incompatibility of causality and freedom, and, therefore, they accept causality and negate freedom.

Hegel, and Marx following him, accept historical determinism. According to Hegel and Marx, freedom is nothing but consciousness of historical necessity. In the book Marx and Marxism, the following passage of Engels is quoted from his work Anti-Duhring:

Hegel was the first to state correctly the relation between freedom and necessity. To him freedom is the appreciation of necessity. Necessity is blind only in so far as it is not understood. Freedom does not consist in the dream of independence from natural laws, but in the knowledge of these laws and in the possibility this gives of systematically making them work towards definite ends. This holds good in relation both to the laws of external nature and those which govern the bodily and mental existence of men themselves.³

And also in the same book, after a brief discussion of the view that man can and should act according to his particular historical conditions and in the direction determined by those conditions, Engels says:

Identifying and understanding these given conditions render human action more effective. Every act in the opposite direction amounts to resisting and obstructing the historic course. To act in the direction determined by the historic course means moving within the course of history and participating in the process.

But the question, as to what is meant by freedom, still remains to be answered. The Marxist school answers that freedom of the individual lies in his appreciation of the historical necessity, and the social movement towards which the whole course of history is directed.⁴

It is evident that these remarks do not solve the difficulty. The real problem regarding man's relationship with historical conditions is as follows: Does man control historical conditions? Can he give history his preferred direction? Is he able to change the course of history?

If man is unable to direct the course of history, or change it, he is forced to follow the course of history. This is the only way through which he can not only survive but also continue to evolve. If he goes in a direction opposite to that of the historic course, he will definitely perish.

Now the question arises whether man is free or determined to participate in the course of history. If we accept the principle of priority of society over the individual and that the consciousness and awareness of the individual and his feelings are moulded by historical and social conditions—especially economic conditions—does there remain any room for individual freedom?

Moreover, what is meant by the statement that 'freedom is the consciousness of necessity'? Does it mean that an individual whose life is threatened by a storm and who has the full consciousness of the fact that after some time the tide would take him down into the depths of the sea, or an individual falling from a high cliff who is conscious that according to the law of gravity his bones would be crushed into pieces within a short time, is 'free' to drown into the sea or fall into the valley?

According to the materialistic theory of historical determinism, social conditions act as restraining factors for man, which determine his direction and mould his personality, his consciousness, his determination and choice. Man is nothing but an empty pot, merely a raw material in the hands of social conditions. Man is the product of the conditions, which are not created by him. Preceding conditions determine the

future course for man. It is not man who determines the future course of historical conditions. On the basis of these notions, freedom has no sense and meaning.

In reality, human freedom cannot be conceived apart from the theory of (specific human) nature. According to this theory, in the general course of the essential movement of the universe, man enters into the world with a certain dimension that is over and above the physical universe, and this extra dimension is the essence and core of human existence.

Afterwards, under the influence of the environmental factors, man's personality develops and matures. It is this existential dimension that gives man a unique human personality, so that he may rule over the tide of history and determine its course. I have already discussed this problem under the heading "Determinism or Freedom," and I shall discuss this issue further under the title, "The Role of Personality in History," when discussing the historical role of heroic figures of history.

Human freedom, in the sense pointed out, is neither inconsistent with the law of causation, nor is it incompatible with the universality of the laws of history. That man, in spite of his freedom of choice, his will and his thought, should have to adopt a predetermined, specific, and an inviolable course in social life—a freedom loaded with necessity—does not imply anything but the rule of blind necessity over man and his will.

The problem regarding history being subject to laws and their universality poses another difficulty. It is revealed through the study of historical events and incidents that sometimes a sequence of trivial accidents changes the course of history. Of course, the accidents contrary to the belief of some people—do not occur without any cause; such events are called 'accidents' because they cannot be explained by a general and universal system of causal laws.

If accidents do not follow any universal law and have played an effective role in the movement of history, then history would be regarded as devoid of any kind of specific laws. Among the accidents which have been effective in determining the course of history, the nose of Cleopatra, the well-known queen of Egypt, has become proverbial. Many times there have been in history where, according to the well-known saying, "A waft has ruffled the pages of history."

In his book: What is History? Edward Hallett Carr writes:

The other source of the attack is the famous crux of Cleopatra's nose. This is the theory that history is, by and large, a chapter of accidents, a series of events determined by chance coincidences, and attributable only to the most casual causes.

The result of the Battle of Actum was due not to the sort of causes commonly postulated by historians, but to Antony's infatuation with Cleopatra. When Bajazet was deterred by an attack of gout from marching into central Europe, Gibbon observed that "an acrimonious honour falling on a single fibre of a man may prevent or suspend the misery of nations."

When King Alexander of Greece died in the autumn of 1920 from the bite of a pet monkey, this accident touched off a train of events which led Sir Winston Churchill to remark that “a quarter of a million persons died of this monkey's bite.” Or take again Trotsky's comment on the fever contracted while shooting ducks which put him out of action at a critical point of his quarrel with Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Stalin in the autumn of 1923: “One can foresee a revolution or a war, but it is impossible to foresee the consequences of an autumn shooting –trip for wild ducks.” [5](#)

In the Islamic world the instance of the defeat of Marwan ibn Muhammad, the last Umayyad caliph, is an evidence of the role of accident deciding the fate of history. During his last battle with the `Abbasids, Marwan, feeling the necessity to answer the call of nature, went aside to ease himself.

Accidentally, a person from the enemy's camp happened to pass by, he saw and killed him immediately. The news of his death spread among the soldiers of his army. As such an accident was never anticipated, his soldiers became panicky and fled from the battlefield. The Umayyad dynasty was thus overthrown. It was on this occasion that it was said:

ذَهَبَتِ الدَّوْلَةُ بِبَوْلَةٍ

(“a dynasty was swept away by urine.”).

Carr, after explaining that every accident, far from being without cause, is governed by a chain of causes and effects, which terminates another causal chain, says:

...How can one discover in history a coherent sequence of cause and effect, how can we find any meaning in history, when our sequence is liable to be broken or deflected at any moment by some other, and from our point of view, irrelevant sequence? [6](#)

The solution to this difficulty is dependent upon the question whether society and history have a particular direction. If history in itself has direction, the role of accidents would be insignificant, which means although certain accidents may change the position of some pawns on the chess-board of history, they do not exercise any significant influence on the course of history as a whole.

At the most, they can accelerate or arrest it for a moment. But if history is devoid of nature and personality and does not follow a path determined by its own nature, it would be without any particular direction, and also it would be impossible to formulate any universal laws and to forecast the future.

In my view, history has a specific nature and personality which is a composite product of the individual human beings who make it, and who have a natural urge for perfection. I believe that the role of accidental events does not affect historical necessity and universality of history.

Montesquieu has beautifully explained the role of accidents in history, a part of which I have quoted

earlier. He says:

...if the outcome of a single battle, i.e. a particular cause, was the ruin of a state, there was a general cause which decreed that, that state was destined to perish through a single battle. [7](#)

He further says:

It was not the affair of Poltava that ruined Charles. Had he not been destroyed at that place, he would have been in another. The casualties of the fortune are easily repaired; but who can be guarded against events that incessantly arise from the nature of things? [8](#)

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

[2.](#) E. H. Carr, What is History?, p. 8.

[3.](#) Andre Peter, Marx and Marxism, Persian translation by Shuja` al-Din Diya'iyan, p. 249, Appendix V.

[4.](#) Ibid., pp. 37,38.

[5.](#) E.H. Carr, op. cit. pp. 144, 145.

[6.](#) Ibid., p. 146.

[7.](#) Raymond Aron, op. cit., p. 27.

[8.](#) Ibid.

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