

Reflections on the History of Ideas

Author(s): Arthur O. Lovejoy

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REFLECTIONS ON THE HISTORY OF IDEAS¹

BY ARTHUR O. LOVEJOY

I

Whatever other definitions of man be true or false, it is generally admitted that he is distinguished among the creatures by the habit of entertaining general ideas. Like Br'er Rabbit he has always kept up a heap o' thinking; and it has usually been assumed—though the assumption has been nominally disputed by some schools of philosophers—that his thoughts have at all times had a good deal to do with his behavior, his institutions, his material achievements in technology and the arts, and his fortunes. Every branch of historical inquiry, consequently, may be said to include within its scope some portion of the history of ideas. But as a result of the subdivision and specialization increasingly characteristic of historical as of other studies during the last two centuries, the portions of that history which are pertinent to separate historical disciplines came to be treated usually in relative, though seldom in complete, isolation. The history of political events and social movements, of economic changes, of religion, of philosophy, of science, of literature and the other arts, of education, have been investigated by distinct groups of specialists, many of them little acquainted with the subjects and the researches of the others. The specialization which—the limitations of the individual mind being what they are—had this as its natural consequence was indispensable for the progress of historical knowledge; yet the consequence proved also, in the end,

¹ It has been thought desirable by the Board of Editors that the first number of this journal should contain some prefatory observations on the nature and aims of the studies which the journal is designed to promote, and for some of the fruits of which it may provide a suitable vehicle of publication. The Editor to whom the task has been assigned has, however, already written somewhat lengthily elsewhere on the general subject (in *The Great Chain of Being*, 1936, Lecture I and in *Proc. of the Amer. Philos. Soc.*, vol. 78, pp. 529–543), and some repetition, in substance if not in phraseology, of these previous disquisitions on the same topic has been unavoidable. Some aspects of it, on the other hand, which have been there dealt with, have been here passed over, in order to have space for comments on certain relevant but currently controverted questions. For the opinions expressed on these questions the writer alone is responsible.

an impediment to such progress. For the departmentalization—whether by subjects, periods, nationalities, or languages—of the study of the history of thought corresponds, for the most part, to no real cleavages among the phenomena studied. The processes of the human mind, in the individual or the group, which manifest themselves in history, do not run in enclosed channels corresponding to the officially established divisions of university faculties; even where these processes, or their modes of expression, or the objects to which they are applied, are logically discriminable into fairly distinct types, they are in perpetual interplay. And ideas are the most migratory things in the world. A preconception, category, postulate, dialectical motive, pregnant metaphor or analogy, “sacred word,” mood of thought, or explicit doctrine, which makes its first appearance upon the scene in one of the conventionally distinguished provinces of history (most often, perhaps, in philosophy) may, and frequently does, cross over into a dozen others. To be acquainted only with its manifestation in one of these is, in many cases, to understand its nature and affinities, its inner logic and psychological operation, so inadequately that even *that* manifestation remains opaque and unintelligible. All historians—even, in their actual practice, those who in theory disclaim any such pretension—seek in some sense and to some degree to discern causal relations between events; but there is, unhappily, no law of nature which specifies that all, or even the most important, antecedents of a given historic effect, or all or the most important consequents of a given cause, will lie within any one of the accepted subdivisions of history. In so far as the endeavor to trace such relations stops at the boundaries of one or another of these divisions, there is always a high probability that some of the most significant—that is, the most illuminating and explanatory—relations will be missed. It has even sometimes happened that a conception of major historic influence and importance has long gone unrecognized, because its various manifestations, the parts which make up the whole story, are so widely dispersed among different fields of historical study, that no specialist in any one of these fields became distinctly aware of it at all. Historiography, in short, for excellent practical reasons, is divided, but the historic process is not; and this discrepancy between the procedure and the subject-matter has tended, at best, to produce serious lacunae in the study of the history of man, and at worst, sheer errors and distortions.

Of such considerations as these, scholars in many branches of historical inquiry have in recent years become increasingly sensible. None, certainly, questions the indispensability of specialization; but more and more have come to see that specialization is not enough. In practice this sometimes manifests itself in a crossing-over of individual specialists into other fields than those to which they had originally devoted themselves and for which they have been trained. Administrative officers of educational institutions have sometimes been known to complain, with a certain puzzlement, of teachers and investigators who will not "stick to their subjects." But in most cases this propensity to disregard academic fences is not to be attributed to a wandering disposition or a coveting of neighbors' vineyards; it is, on the contrary, usually the inevitable consequence of tenacity and thoroughness in the cultivation of one's own. For—to repeat an observation which the present writer has already made elsewhere, with primary reference to literary history—"the quest of a historical understanding even of single passages in literature often drives the student into fields which at first seem remote enough from his original topic of investigation. The more you press in towards the heart of a narrowly bounded historical problem, the more likely you are to encounter in the problem itself a pressure which drives you outward beyond those bounds." To give specific illustrations of this fact would unduly lengthen these prelude remarks;² examples will doubtless appear in abundance in subsequent pages of this journal. It is sufficient here to note, as a highly characteristic feature of contemporary work in many of the branches of historiography that are in any way concerned with the thoughts of men (and their related emotions, modes of expression, and actions), that the fences are—not, indeed, generally breaking down—but, at a hundred specific points, being broken through; and that the reason for this is that, at least at those points, the fences have been found to be obstacles to the proper comprehension of what lies on either side of them.

There is, unquestionably, some danger to historical scholarship in this newer tendency. It is the danger already intimated, that scholars soundly trained in the methods and widely acquainted with the literature of one limited—even though it be an arbitrarily limited—field may prove inadequately equipped for exploring other

² Some have been adduced by the writer in a paper above mentioned, *Proc. of the Amer. Philos. Soc.*, Vol. 78, pp. 532-535.

provinces into which they have, nevertheless, been naturally and legitimately led by the intrinsic connections of the subjects that they are investigating. Most contemporary historians of any national literature, for example, or of science or a particular science, recognize in principle—though many still recognize too little—that ideas derived from philosophical systems have had a wide, and sometimes a profound and decisive, influence upon the minds and the writings of the authors whose works they study; and they are constrained, therefore, to deal with these systems and to expound these ideas for their readers. But they do not—it is perhaps not too unmannerly to say—always do it very well. When this is the case, the fault, no doubt, often lies partly with the existing histories of philosophy, which frequently fail to give the non-philosopher what he most needs for his special historical inquiry; but they are, in any case, unsatisfying to the scholar who has learned from experience in his own specialty the risks of too implicit reliance upon secondary or tertiary sources. Even more, however, than an extensive reading of philosophical texts is needed for the accurate and sufficient understanding of the working of philosophical ideas in literature or in science—a certain aptitude for the discrimination and analysis of concepts, and an eye for not immediately obvious logical relations or quasi-logical affinities between ideas. These powers are, by a happy gift of nature, sometimes found in historical writers who would deprecate the title of “philosophers”; but in most cases, when they are attained at all, they owe much, also, to a persistent cultivation and training, of which the student of philosophy naturally gets more than specialists in the history of literature or science—and for lack of which the latter sometimes seem to the philosopher to go more or less widely astray in their necessary divagations into philosophy. They, in turn—especially the historian of science—could doubtless not infrequently respond with a *tu quoque* to the historian of philosophy; if so, the present point is the better illustrated; and many other illustrations of it might all too easily be found.

The remedy for the effects defective of specialization in historical inquiry, then, does not lie in a general practice, on the part of specialists, of simply invading one another's territories or taking over one another's jobs. It lies in closer coöperation among them at all those points where their provinces overlap, the establishment of more and better facilities for communication, mutual criticism

and mutual aid—the focussing upon what are, in their nature, common problems, of all the special knowledges that are pertinent to them. It is one of the purposes of this journal to contribute, so far as its resources permit, towards such a more effective *liaison* among those whose studies have to do with the diverse but interrelated parts of history, in so far as history is concerned with the activities of 'man's mind and the effects of these upon what he has been and has done—or (to change the metaphor) to assist towards more cross-fertilization among the several fields of intellectual historiography. It is hoped that the journal will serve—among other things—as a useful medium for the publication of researches which traverse the customary boundary-lines, or are likely to be of interest and value to students in other fields than those in which they primarily lie. Its prospectus has already indicated, by way of illustration, some topics concerning which its editors believe further investigation to be potentially profitable, and on which contributions will be especially welcome :

1. The influence of classical on modern thought, and of European traditions and writings on American literature, arts, philosophy, and social movements.

2. The influence of philosophical ideas in literature, the arts, religion, and social thought, including the impact of pervasive general conceptions upon standards of taste and morality and educational theories and methods.

3. The influence of scientific discoveries and theories in the same provinces of thought, and in philosophy; the cultural effects of the applications of science.

4. The history of the development and the effects of individual pervasive and widely ramifying ideas or doctrines, such as evolution, progress, primitivism, diverse theories of human motivation and appraisals of human nature, mechanistic and organismic conceptions of nature and society, metaphysical and historical determinism and indeterminism, individualism and collectivism, nationalism and racialism.

But the function of this journal is not solely to help to bring about a fruitful correlation between older and more specialized disciplines. For the study of the history of ideas does not need to justify itself by its potential services—however great—to historical

studies bearing other names. It has its own reason for being. It is not merely ancillary to the others; it is rather they that are, in great part, ancillary to it. To know, so far as may be known, the thoughts that have been widely held among men on matters of common human concernment, to determine how these thoughts have arisen, combined, interacted with, or counteracted, one another, and how they have severally been related to the imagination and emotions and behavior of those who have held them—this, though not, indeed, the whole of that branch of knowledge which we call history, is a distinct and essential part of it, and its central and most vital part. For, while the fixed or changing environmental conditions of human life, individual and collective, and conjunctions of circumstance which arise from no man's thinking or premeditation, are factors in the historic process never to be disregarded, the actor in the piece, its hero—some would in these days say, its villain—is still *homo sapiens*; and the general task of intellectual historiography is to exhibit, so far as may be, the thinking animal engaged—sometimes fortunately, sometimes disastrously—in his most characteristic occupation. If—as some would be content to say—the justification of *any* study of history is simply the human interestingness both of its episodes and of the moving drama of the life of our race as a whole, then this study has that justification in the highest degree. Or if historical inquiry in general is defended on the ground—which some contemporary historians appear to reject—that the knowledge which it yields is “instructive,” that it provides material towards possible general conclusions—conclusions which do not relate merely to the occurrence and successions of past and particular events—then no part of historiography seems to offer a better promise of this sort of serviceableness than a duly analytical and critical inquiry into the nature, genesis, development, diffusion, interplay and effects of the ideas which the generations of men have cherished, quarreled over, and apparently been moved by. That the knowledge which man needs most is knowledge of himself is a sufficiently old and respectable opinion; and intellectual history manifestly constitutes an indispensable, and the most considerable, part of such knowledge, in so far as any study of the past may contribute to it. At no moment, indeed, in the life of the race has the pertinency of the Delphian imperative been more tragically apparent; for it must now be plain to everyone that the problem of human nature is the gravest and most fundamental of our problems, that

the question which more than any others demands answer is the question, "What's the matter with man?"

II

The general observation that knowledge concerning the history of ideas has an independent value, and is not merely instrumental to other studies, might well seem too obvious to require emphasis, were it not that it has consequences, not always clearly realized, with respect to the methods and aims of literary history. The thoughts of men of past generations have had their most extensive, and often their most adequate and psychologically illuminating, expression in those writings which are commonly differentiated from other writings—though by criteria not usually very clear—as "literature." Wherever the line of division be drawn, it would generally be agreed that literature is, at least among other things, an art. Since there is no universal consensus as to the meaning of "art," this classification does not, of itself, greatly clarify the subject; but one may perhaps say, without too much risk of dissent, that a work of "art" is such by virtue of its relation either to an artist who produces it or to a potential reader, hearer or beholder of it (or to both). And, considered solely in the second relation, the work of art may be said to be differentiated from other visible or audible artificial objects by its capacity to produce in the perceiver a distinctive something called an "aesthetic enjoyment," or at least an "aesthetic experience," which (though definition of it is here judiciously avoided) is at all events not simply identical either with cognitive experience or with a recognition of a possible ulterior utility which the object may serve. Works of art, further, are usually held to differ widely in respect of their aesthetic values—however these are to be measured. Now it has, especially by some recent writers, been maintained that a work of art, so conceived, must contain its aesthetic value, that is, the sources of the aesthetic experience it evokes, in itself, and not in anything extraneous to itself. It makes no difference, so far as the aesthetic quality and efficacy of a poem are concerned, who wrote it, or when, or what sort of person he was, or from what motive he wrote it, or even what he meant to convey by it; and if the reader permits his mind to be occupied with such questions as these, he weakens or wholly loses the experience which it is the function of the poem, as a work of art, to

afford. And it is consequently argued, by some who are preoccupied with this aspect of literature, that the study of literary history results chiefly in the accumulation of collateral information *about*, *e.g.*, poems, which adds nothing to the aesthetic experience as such, but, on the contrary, impedes or annuls it, by interposing what is aesthetically irrelevant between the poem and the reader. Thus Mr. C. S. Lewis observes that "any and every result which may follow from my reading of a poem cannot be included in my poetical apprehension of it, and cannot, therefore, belong to the poem as a poem," and, starting from this (in itself undisputable) premise, he attacks, with an argumentative verve and skill which has itself a good deal of art in it, the notion that "poetry is to be regarded as an 'expression of personality,' " and laments "the steadily increasing role of biography in our literary studies." "When we read poetry as it ought to be read, we have before us no representation which claims to be the poet, and frequently no representation of a *man*, a *character*, or a *personality* at all." There can, in fact, be "poems without a poet"—*i.e.*, writings which (like passages in the English Bible) have in the course of time acquired a poetic value which is not due to anything that anyone ever *put* into them.³ (Any essential distinction between the experience of beauty in natural objects and in works of art is here apparently obliterated.) If knowledge about the poet's "personality" is thus foreign to the "poetical apprehension" of the poem, still more foreign must be the other sorts of knowledge which the literary historians so busily pursue, about his experiences, education, associations, "background," sources, philosophical opinions, contemporary reputation, later influence, and the like.

These views are not cited here principally for the purpose of discussing the issues of aesthetic theory which they raise; yet one of these issues has some pertinency to the present subject, and is worth brief consideration before passing to the main point. It is the general question whether information about, say, a poem, not contained in it, is necessarily incapable of enhancing the aesthetic experience, or "poetical apprehension," of the reader; and I suggest that the answer must be in the negative. One may, of course, so *define* the terms "aesthetic" or "poetical apprehension" that an affirmative answer to the question necessarily follows; but the con-

³ *The Personal Heresy: A Controversy*. By E. M. W. Tillyard and C. S. Lewis, 1939, pp. 1, 4, 5, 16.

sequence is then a purely verbal one, having nothing to do with any matter of psychological fact. But it is hard to see how anyone can, except through such verbal inference, find plausibility in the thesis that the sources of what would commonly be recognized as the aesthetic enjoyment of a poem, or of any work of art, must consist wholly in its own literal and explicit content.⁴ For—upon the very view which has been illustrated by some sentences of Mr. Lewis's—the aesthetic value of the poem depends upon its effect on the reader; and this in turn, surely, depends much upon the reader—upon what the psychologists once liked to call “the mass of apperception” which he brings to the reading. The external stimulus giving rise to the experience consists, it is true, in the actual words of the poem; but the capacity, even of the separate words, to suggest imagery or to arouse emotion, not to say to convey ideas, is due to the associations which they already possess in the reader's mind, and these may be, and often are, the products of other reading. Any allusive word or passage illustrates this.

Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn.

The poem does not tell you who Ruth was, nor where she is elsewhere mentioned in literature; *that* is a piece of extraneous historical information—though one, fortunately, familiar to all Occidental readers. Will anyone venture to assert that, for most of them, the aesthetic enjoyment of the lines is diminished, and not, rather, heightened, by their possession of this knowledge? And is there any reason to suppose that knowledge of a similar kind, even though less generally possessed, may not similarly enrich—for those who have it—the aesthetic value of many other passages? Instances in which it quite certainly does so might be adduced by the hundred, if there were space for them. The historical perspectives which a word or a poem may bring, clearly or dimly, to mind are often (given the necessary acquaintance with history) a great part of the aesthetic experience which it evokes—an augmentation of its imaginative voluminosity. Nor are the possible contributions of the his-

⁴ The subject has been dealt with illuminatingly, and more adequately than is possible here, by Louis Teeter in an essay (“Scholarship and the Art of Criticism,” *ELH* September, 1938) which should be required reading for any who concern themselves with this question.

torian to the "poetical apprehension" of the reader limited to obviously allusive or evocative single passages. It is he, often, who enables the reader to recapture, in writings of earlier times, aesthetic values which had been lost because the frame of reference, the preconceptions, the mood, which once gave them such value for their contemporaries were no longer current. How meager would be the aesthetic content of the *Divine Comedy* as a whole, or of most of its parts, to a modern reader—especially a non-Catholic reader—wholly ignorant of medieval ideas and feelings and pieties, or incapable, while reading it, of making these in some degree his own, by an effort of the imagination! Indeed, the exercise of the historical imagination, even apart from its function in the revitalizing of this or other masterpieces, has itself been, since Western men became historically-minded, one of the chief sources of aesthetic experience—though that is another story. Obviously, not all historical or other knowledge pertinent to, but derived from sources extrinsic to, a given work of art thus adds to its potency. Some does and some does not; no general rule can be laid down on the subject in advance. But it is by no means evident that even knowledge from external sources about the *artist*, his "personality" or his life, is one of the sorts of collateral information which necessarily do *not* have this effect, and that biographical studies consequently cannot contribute to the enjoyment of literature. The aesthetic irrelevance of a considerable part of the chronicles, scandalous or edifying, of the lives of authors, can hardly be denied. Whether any of the discoveries about Shakespeare heighten the effect of the plays is at least debatable; and it is more than dubious whether an acquaintance with the private life of the Reverend C. L. Dodgson makes *Alice in Wonderland* more enjoyable. But there are many instances on the other side of the account. Doubtless there would be a touching pathos in "All, all are gone, the old familiar faces," if the poem were anonymous, but there is much more when I know that it was written by Charles Lamb—a fact which is no part of the poem—and know something of the tragic circumstances in his life. Or consider Coleridge's "Dejection, an Ode": our present knowledge (which we owe to his biographers and the collectors of his letters) of the experiences out of which it arose, and of the fact that it marked the end of his great creative period as a poet, makes the poem far more moving than it can have been to the generality of the readers of the *Morning Post* in 1802. Such

knowledge adds what may be called a new dimension to a work of art, the dramatic dimension—as, in a play, a single poetic passage, though it may have beauty in isolation, owes its full effect to the reader's knowledge of the fictitious personality of the speaker and of the situation which evokes it and makes it dramatically apposite.

For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground
And tell sad stories of the death of kings. . . .

The whole passage might be taken out of its context and given a place in an anthology; but would one who had known it only as a detached fragment find his "imaginative apprehension" of it diminished upon learning that it is, in the play, spoken by a king, and that king, Richard II, and at a crisis in his fortunes calling for resolute action rather than self-pitying musings on the ironies of royal state? The increment of aesthetic content which the lines gain from such knowledge of their dramatic setting is essentially similar to that which a poem or other writing may sometimes gain from the reader's knowledge of its authorship, its place in the author's life and its relation to his character. This is not, to be sure, an element in the art, *i.e.*, the design, of the creator of the work; but it is not the less on that account an enrichment of aesthetic experience on the side of the reader—which is presumably one of the purposes of the "teaching of literature."⁵ And if the work be considered with respect to the skill, or "artistry," of its creator, the "aesthetic appreciation" of this is least of all possible without going beyond the work itself. For it is dependent upon a knowledge—or an assumption—about what he was trying to do,

⁵ In the debate of Lewis and Tillyard, to which reference has been made, two "personal heresies," not sufficiently discriminated, seem to be at issue. One is the assumption that a poem (and a single poem is usually meant) *necessarily* tells us anything about the "personality" of the poet. In maintaining the negative on this issue, Mr. Lewis seems to me to have the better of the argument. But the correct answer, I suggest, is that no generalization on the point is legitimate; some poems do, and some don't. The more serious question concerns Mr. Lewis's view that, when "we read a poem as it ought to be read," we *ought not* to know, or want to know, anything about the poet, since this interferes with the "imaginative experience." And this is a part of the larger question, above discussed, whether *any* extrinsic knowledge about a poem can contribute to the aesthetic experience generated by reading it. This more general and fundamental issue, however, is not very definitely considered by either contributor to this, in many respects, brilliant example of the gentle art of controversy.

which can by no means always be safely or fully inferred from the obvious content of the work; and it is also dependent upon an acquaintance with other extrinsic matters, such as his subject (if or in so far as his purpose is assumed to be descriptive or realistic), the limitations of his medium, other examples of the treatment of the same subject or of essays in the same *genre*, and (when they can be certainly determined) the sources of which he made use. This element in the appreciation of (for example) "Kubla Khan" has, surely, not been decreased by the publication of *The Road to Xanadu*.

The very notion, then, of a work of art as a self-contained kind of thing is a psychological absurdity. It *functions* as art through what it does for the experiencer of it; nothing in it has aesthetic efficacy except through its power to evoke certain responses in him; so that one may say that, except in a physical sense, its content is as much in him as in itself. And this general consideration alone, even apart from the citation of particular examples, seems to establish a sufficient presumption against the doctrine, now somewhat fashionable in various quarters, that, in the reading of literature, ignorance is always bliss, that the best reader is the one who has least in his mind, and that, consequently, the sort of knowledge which may result from the historical study of literature is never serviceable to the aesthetic purposes of that art. But though many and notable services of this kind can be and have been rendered by such study, it is still needful to insist—and this is the point chiefly pertinent to the present theme—that that is not its only, or even its principal, function. "Literary history," as the late Edwin Greenlaw wrote, "looks on literature as one phase of that history of the human spirit which is one of the chief learnings, is humanism itself."⁶ It is, in short, a part, and a major part, of the quest of that knowledge of the workings of man's mind in history which, having its own excuse for being, is not subservient even to ends so valuable as the aesthetic appreciation or the criticism of individual works of art. But so conceived, the province and the methods of literary history must be determined by its own historical-psychological purpose, and not by contemporary critical appraisals either of the aesthetic excellence or the philosophical validity of the writings of men of former times. Evident as this may appear, some confusion of ideas with respect to the matter still seems common, not only in

⁶ *The Province of Literary History*, 1931, p. 38.

the public mind, and among literary critics, but also among students and teachers of literature. Because, *as* an art, it exists to be “enjoyed” (in the wider sense of the term), it is sometimes, tacitly if not explicitly, assumed that the purpose of studying or teaching it is exclusively to increase or communicate that enjoyment; and, in so far as this assumption prevails, the natural result is the limitation of the study to what is now regarded as “good” literature—the writings which still have (or are, often somewhat naïvely, taken by academic teachers to have) a high aesthetic value for most readers of our own time. Thus a distinguished English scholar who has recently rediscovered an almost forgotten but admirable English prose writer of the seventeenth century (Peter Sterry), and has edited selections from his works, explains that his (the editor’s) “aim has been to exhibit not so much those aspects of Sterry’s work that probably made the greatest impression on his contemporaries as those elements which appear to me to have the universal and enduring qualities of great literature.” Here, obviously, the part of the contents of this author’s writings which is of greater historical value—the part which throws most light upon what was distinctive of the thoughts, the moods, the taste, of his age and group—is treated as more or less negligible, because it has (or, *for that very reason*, is presumed to have) less “literary” value. Now, to make available to the contemporary reader a forgotten piece of “great”—or at all events, still enjoyable—literature, is assuredly a laudable thing. But it is a strange thing to disregard, in such a writing, what is most pertinent to that “one of the chief learnings”—that essential portion of the “history of the human spirit”—to which it is the prime office of the literary historian, *quâ* historian, to contribute. It is not now in general true that those who devote themselves to this study neglect their function as historians of ideas (including artistic methods and aesthetic valuations and tastes); but, because of the confusion of the two aims, they are sometimes subject to reproach for occupying themselves so much with what is *not* “good literature,” perhaps not even “literature” at all; and they themselves often seem a little apologetic about it. Something like a declaration of independence for the genuinely historical study of literature, in itself and in its relations to other phases of the history of man thinking, feeling, imagining and evaluating, is even now not wholly superfluous. In this journal, the independence (which does not imply the indifference) of the historiography of literature with

respect to all non-historical criteria of relevance and importance, and also its inseparable connection with most of the other parts of that total history, are assumed *ab initio*. As a source of delight and a means to the widening and deepening of inner experience, literature has one value; as "criticism of life" it has another (for the appraisal of which a knowledge of its history is one of the necessary means); and it has a third as an indispensable body of documents for the study of man and of what he has done with ideas and what diverse ideas have done for and to him.

III

To avert possible misunderstanding, let it be said that the terms "ideas" and "intellectual" are not here used in a sense implying any assumption of the solely or chiefly logical determination of opinions and behavior and of the historical movement of thought. There is now widely current even among the general public a doctrine that the beliefs, and professed grounds of belief, as well as the acts, of individuals and of social groups are not shaped by "intellectual" processes, but by unavowed or "subconscious" non-rational desires, passions or interests. This "discovery of the irrational," a recent writer has declared, "makes the genius of our age. . . . The intellectual revolution of the twentieth century is likely to prove the charting of the *terra incognita* of the irrational and the extraction of its implications for every area of human thought." It is "nothing short of a Copernican revolution in ideas," since it means that "the rational, right-thinking man has as surely ceased to be considered the center of our intellectual system as the earth has ceased to be the center of our planetary system." The discovery is not so new as it is commonly supposed to be, and it is questionable whether exploration of the "*terra incognita* of the irrational" was not attempted with as much diligence and subtlety in the seventeenth century as in the twentieth. But at all events it is little likely to be unduly neglected by contemporary students of the history of thought. Few of them are accustomed to look upon man as a highly rational animal, in the laudatory sense, or to deny that alogical factors play a great part in most of the phenomena which they investigate; and it would be a misconception to suppose

⁷ Max Lerner in *The Nation*, Oct. 21, 1939. The term "rational," of course, needs definition, and the assumption of the equivalence of "non-rational" and "irrational" requires examination; but into these topics it is impossible to enter here.

that the intellectual historian is concerned solely with the history of intellection.

Perhaps the greater danger at present lies upon the other side. One of the safest (and most useful) generalizations resulting from a study of the history of ideas is that every age tends to exaggerate the scope or finality of its own discoveries, or re-discoveries, to be so dazzled by them that it fails to discern clearly their limitations and forgets aspects of truth against prior exaggerations of which it has revolted. Now, that the doctrine of the non-rational determination of men's judgments and ideologies is not true without exceptions is the obvious assumption of all who enunciate opinions and publish ostensibly reasoned arguments for them—and therefore, the assumption of the authors of the doctrine, and of all who seek to justify by evidence any historical proposition whatever. It is true that some representatives of the theory known as “the sociology of knowledge” (*Wissenssoziologie*), holding that the “modes of thought” of all individuals are determined by, and therefore relative to, the nature of the social groups to which the individuals belong—not merely economic classes but also “generations, status groups, sects, occupational groups, schools, etc.”—deduce from this psychological hypothesis a sort of generalized relativistic (or, as they prefer to call it, “relational”) logic or epistemology. Upon the set of presuppositions characteristic of a given group, some conclusions are valid, some invalid—but (apparently) each group has its own “thought-model,” its distinctive standards of what is true or false, which do not hold good for others. And certain adherents of this form of the general doctrine seem willing to have this relativism applied to their own contentions; thus Mr. Karl Mannheim writes that “even one's own point of view may always be expected to be peculiar to one's [social] position.”⁸ Yet the ingenious and often suggestive interpretations of history put forth by members of this school do not, in fact, have the air of being presented as valid for the reader in one of his capacities, say that of a professor of sociology, and invalid for him in another capacity, say that of a man over forty years of age, or an income-tax payer in one of the lower brackets; nor are these reasonings presented (as might

⁸ Karl Mannheim: *Ideology and Utopia*, 1936, p. 269; cf. the whole section “The Sociology of Knowledge,” pp. 236–280. See also Robert K. Merton's excellent brief review of this movement, “The Sociology of Knowledge,” in *Isis*, XXVII, 3, November, 1937, pp. 493–503.

be expected) as valid only for readers belonging to precisely the same economic class and generation and status-group and occupational group and sect as their authors. If they were so presented, their claims to consideration would obviously be extremely restricted. The spokesmen of this sort of sociological relativism, in short, patently give *some* place to common criteria of factual truth and of legitimacy in inference, which their theory, in its extreme interpretation, would exclude. They do not, it is clear, really believe that the proposition that George Washington was a great landed proprietor is true for a Virginia Episcopalian but false for a Chicago Baptist—nor that their own thesis that opinions and “thought-models,” outside of pure science, are shown by historical evidence to be correlated with social status or position, ought to be accepted only by persons of a particular status or position. Even they, then, necessarily presuppose possible limitations or exceptions to their generalization, in the act of defending it.

But if there *are* limitations or exceptions to the truth of the doctrine of the non-rational determination of men’s judgments, it follows that two types of factor are at work in the history of thought; and it is the business of the historian—if he can—at once to discriminate and to correlate them, and perhaps, in the long run, to arrive at some rough quantitative estimate of the relative part played by each. But to make this discrimination in particular instances—which must be done *before* any general conclusions can be regarded as established—is unquestionably a hazardous and uncertain business; and the more weight you initially give to the rôle of the non-rational in these matters, the more hazardous and uncertain the appraisal of that rôle must itself appear. It is perilously easy to find more or less plausible explanations, in terms of non-rational motives, for other men’s reasonings, opinions or tastes—to “un-mask ideologies” which you happen to dislike—and, in the nature of the case, it is exceedingly difficult to demonstrate the correctness or adequacy of such specific explanations, unless by deduction from *a priori* general premises dogmatically assumed at the outset—a type of question-begging exemplified in our own time on a huge scale. Nevertheless, given a sufficient degree of caution as well as of acumen on the part of the historian (including the biographer), some success in this delicate task of distinguishing the two components in the formation of men’s judgments is, doubtless, not past hoping for.

Meanwhile, the usual ambition of the contemporary historiographer to find conjectural "affective" or "sociological" explanations for the explicit facts of the history of ideas obviously cannot justify—though it sometimes tends to result in—a neglect to observe with as much adequacy, accuracy and judicial-mindedness as may be, the facts to be explained—to investigate widely and to analyze searchingly, through their expression in words, the kinds of ideas that have actually appealed to men, to note upon what grounds beliefs have seemed to those who held them to have been based, how they have changed from generation to generation, and under what conditions these changes have taken place. Even if most or all expressed judgments and reasonings were but "rationalizations" of blind emotions or cravings, the nature of the cravings must be chiefly inferred from the content of the rationalizations; the need to rationalize is, upon the same hypothesis, not less imperative than the cravings; and once a rationalization has been formed, it is antecedently improbable—and could be shown by historical evidence to be untrue—that it will remain otiose and inert, having no repercussions upon the affective side of consciousness out of which it may have arisen. When a man has given a reason for his belief, his moral approbation or disapprobation, his aesthetic preference, he is—happily or otherwise—caught in a trap; for the reason is likely to entail, or to seem to entail, consequences far beyond and, it may be, contrary to, the desire which generated it, or, not less awkwardly, contrary to undeniable matters of fact; even if he seeks to evade those consequences, he will suffer the embarrassment of appearing to his fellows irrational because arbitrary and inconsistent; and an aversion from manifest and admitted irrationality is, after all, by no means the least pervasive or least powerful of emotions in the creature that has long, and with evident gratification, been accustomed to define himself as the rational animal. Man, moreover, is not only an incurably inquisitive but an incurably ratiocinative being, and the exercise of this function, as of others, carries its own pleasure with it. To recognize a nice distinction, to discover a new truth, or what appears to be such, to feel that one is reasoning well and coercively, to triumph over an at first baffling problem—these are all accompanied by a sense of power and therefore by lively satisfactions. And the satisfactions cannot be enjoyed without the presupposition of rules of procedure and of

criteria of success not peculiar to oneself, but inherent in the nature of the subject-matter.

For these reasons, if there were no others, the intellectual historiographer will still do well to entertain the hypothesis that logic is one of the important operative factors in the history of thought, even though he cannot accept this assumption in the extreme form in which it was once widely held. According to that older but now evanescent view, what we chiefly witness, in the temporal sequence of beliefs, doctrines and reasonings, is the working of an immanent dialectic whereby ideas are progressively clarified and problems consecutively get themselves solved, or at least advanced towards less erroneous or inadequate "solutions." Perhaps the strongest reason why we no longer find this picture of a majestic logical forward movement in history convincing is that we have become increasingly aware of the oscillatory character of much of the history of thought, at least of Western thought, outside the domain of strictly experimental science. On any intelligibly formulable general question, there are usually two not entirely unpalatable extreme positions, with a number of intermediate ones; and much of the historic spectacle, so far as the dominant tendencies of successive periods are concerned, seems to consist in alternate shifts from one extreme to the other, either abruptly or gradually through the intermediate stages. This phenomenon is, of course, especially conspicuous in political and social history, and in the history of taste and of the arts. A tendency to radical innovation flourishes for a time and perhaps eventuates in a revolution, which is followed by a reaction, more or less extreme, and a period of dominant conservatism. Democracy, or some measure of it, through a long struggle, replaces absolute monarchy, to be succeeded suddenly by dictatorship. This seems to be the all-but universal pattern of the sequences of politico-social history—excepting those contemporary revolutions of which the end is not yet. There is little in such history thus far to encourage the belief that it moves continuously in any particular direction; it has, in the long view, as Polybius long since observed, much more the look of a series of periodic recurrences, though the periods are of very unequal length. So in matters of taste and aesthetic fashions: the majority of connoisseurs in one period care, for example, only for Gothic architecture, then they despise it, then they admire it again, then they once more revolt against it; now fixed "form" is the criterion of excellence,

now "irregularity" and freedom of expression; once the "picturesque" was all the go, now it is belittled. "Romanticism," in some sense of the vague term, displaces "classicism" in literature, and gives place to it again. If you wish to prophesy about the future, in any of these matters, the actuarially safest working rule would seem to be to take what are now venerated idols and predict that they will sooner or later become hobgoblins—and still later, idols once more.

And no honest observer even of the history of philosophical opinion can deny that a similar phenomenon of oscillation is to be found in it. Moods of radical intellectualism are followed by anti-intellectualisms, of one or another variety. In recent American and British philosophy, after the dominance of idealism for a generation, realism, as we all know, came flooding back—and there are now some indications that its tide is receding. (These oscillations, it should hardly need saying, have no relevance to the question of the validity of any of the views which succeed one another; there is nothing more naïve, or more indicative of a failure to learn one of the real lessons of the history of thought, than the tendency of some, even among philosophers, to take the bare fact that a way of thinking is now *démodé* as indicative either that it is false or that it will not come back.) The history of philosophy assuredly is not, in the successions of the ideas and systems which it presents, an exclusively logical process, in which objective truth progressively unfolds itself in a rational order; its course is shaped and diverted by the intrusion of many factors which belong to the domain of the psychologist or the sociologist, and have nothing to do with philosophy as a would-be science. But since this aspect of the matter is now in so little danger of being disregarded, it is more to the purpose to dwell upon the residuum of truth in the older view. It must still be admitted that philosophers (and even plain men) *do* reason, that the temporal sequence of their reasonings, as one thinker follows another, is usually in some considerable degree a logically motivated and logically instructive sequence. For a very familiar example that will hardly be disputed, both Berkeley and Hume did, plainly, bring to notice implications of Locke's premises which Locke had not seen—implications that were actually *there*, waiting, as it were, to be brought to light. In both cases, perhaps—certainly in Berkeley's—extra-logical motives help to explain why the later philosophers *noticed* these implications; the idealism

which Berkeley thought it possible to deduce, in part, by combining the simple Lockian thesis that "the mind hath no immediate objects but its own ideas" with the principle of parsimony was a consequence manifestly welcome for religious reasons: it dished the materialists completely, it provided a new argument for the existence of God, it seemed to imply a more direct and intimate relation, even in the common business of sense-perception, between the human and the divine mind. In Hume's case, at least in his non-political works, it is hard to see any extra-logical motivation, except a certain pleasure in horripilating the orthodox and an intense ambition for a reputation as an original writer; it seems questionable whether his sceptical conclusions themselves were really emotionally welcome to him. And even when alogical motives may seem to explain psychologically the readiness of one philosopher to observe a *non-sequitur*, or an unexamined presupposition, or an undeveloped implication, in a doctrine of his predecessor, it frequently, and perhaps usually, remains the case that it is such actual logical facts that he observes—as a review of the entire history of philosophy would easily show. In their criticisms of other people's ways of thinking men inevitably appeal largely to common rational principles, or what at the time are accepted as such, however partially they may follow such principles in arriving at their own beliefs or valuations. On the offensive, many a thinker little capable of self-criticism has shown himself an acute and cogent reasoner; so that, somewhat paradoxically, it is through their quarrels that philosophers have most illuminated the logic of their problems, and it is in the polemical part of the history of reflective thought that the cool white light of reason may most often be seen emerging.

The study of the history of thought, then, must still be pursued with an open and alert eye for the action of "intellectual" processes in the narrower sense, processes in which—along with all the emotive factors, the blank, quasi-aesthetic likings for one or another type of concept or imagery or "metaphysical pathos," and the biases due to personal or group interests—ideas manifest their own natural logic. By natural logic I do not mean necessarily good logic. It sometimes may and sometimes may not be that; and the question how far it can be would involve a digression into logical theory itself, which would be out of place here. But it will hardly be denied that numerous ideas have, if not necessary connections, at least elective affinities, with various other ideas, and incongruities

with yet others, and that most propositions, taken in conjunction with others which are usually assumed though they may be unexpressed, have implications not always evident or welcome to those who affirm them. An idea, in short, is after all not only a potent but a stubborn thing; it commonly has its own "particular go;" and the history of thought is a bilateral affair—the story of the traffic and interaction between human nature, amid the exigencies and vicissitudes of physical experience, on the one hand, and on the other, the specific natures and pressures of the ideas which men have, from very various promptings, admitted to their minds.

Johns Hopkins University