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## The Ethic of Historicism

*Guido de Ruggiero*<sup>1</sup>

In this essay, one of four in *Problemi della vita morale* (1914), de Ruggiero develops a thought he first expressed in *La filosofia contemporanea* (1912), describing his conception of the historicity of spiritual value, which unifies ‘historical fatalism’ and presentism. Appreciating the courses our cultures, institutions, values and ideas have followed to arrive at their present forms, argues de Ruggiero, grants us a better understanding of ourselves and our relation to the future. We are at once the creators and the products of history. In light of the historicity of the real, we see ourselves and our world in a new way. It falls to us to actualize the reality in which we live.

In one of my previous works I sketched the main outlines of an ethic of historicism. Starting with the modern concept of history, which arises from the critique of a naturalism that is already on the wane, I expressed some reflections, which I shall now relate in their entirety in order to lay the ground for the further development of the concept.

The recognition of history, I wrote,

is doubly conducive to effort; in the first place, because we can only become acquainted with the history of the past through laborious study and not through spontaneous revelations, and secondly, because history teaches us that the conception of the human reality of the world removes all justification for laziness and fatalism and comfortable reliance upon a kindly providence, and that we must depend upon ourselves for strength, because we are what we make ourselves, and our reality is our own work. But at the same time, although it deprives us of all hope in the aid of a providence consisting of external forces, the recognition of history is a source of comfort and fresh inspiration. It tells us that we are not alone and lost in the world, but that the whole of our past is focussed and individualized in us, and that what we seem to be doing as individuals, we are really doing as servants of the whole; the contingency of our action is not outside the eternal, it is the act of the eternal itself.

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<sup>1</sup> [Translated from G. de Ruggiero, ‘L’etica dello storicismo’, *Problemi della vita morale* (Catania, Francesco Battiato, 1914), pp. 43–60. Square brackets around footnote text indicate editorial interventions.]

This reflection brings with it a sense both of our moral dignity and of our freedom. This past which is focussed and individualized in us does not react on us by a kind of irresistible impetus or mechanical impact making us the unconscious instrument of a power outside ourselves; it is not, in short, simply a fatherhood for which we are not responsible, it is at the same time a sonhood voluntarily accepted, inasmuch as it lives in us to the extent that we make it live, and thus, so far from infringing our freedom, it consolidates it, since the freedom with which we will our spiritual development is the same freedom which makes our past live in us and determines the spiritual continuity of our history.<sup>2</sup>

In order to develop the concepts sketched out above, we must first resolve a tension in this brief exposition. Though hidden, it soon reveals itself under close examination. This conflict comes from the dualism I inadvertently introduced between the history which is our fatherhood and the history which is our sonhood. In saying that the history which is our past ‘is not... simply a fatherhood for which we are not responsible, [but] is at the same time a sonhood’, I somehow presupposed that there were two processes at work and not one, although the expression ‘at the same time’ gave a glimpse of the need for unity. The uncertainty of my thinking becomes more obvious to me on reading other phrases that I wrote in the preceding pages of the same work, where, for example, I described history as ‘the creation of ourselves by ourselves, as the creation of a present humanity out of a past humanity, and the re-creation of past humanity out of present humanity’.<sup>3</sup>

Now, so long as the dualism remains between that history of which we are the product and that of which we are the producers, we cannot entirely eliminate historical fatalism, which is fundamentally at odds with the mentality of historicism.

We might believe ourselves to have eliminated every trace of fatalism from history which we have made, that is, from history as ‘the re-creation of past humanity out of present humanity’; but fatalism remains forever embedded in that other process, which leads to us,

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<sup>2</sup> G. de Ruggiero, *La filosofia contemporanea* (Bari, Laterza, 1912), p. 456. [Translator’s note: the material that de Ruggiero quotes from *La filosofia contemporanea* has been quoted from *Modern Philosophy*, trans. A. Howard Hannay and R. G. Collingwood (London, Allen & Unwin, 1921), pp. 377–378.]

<sup>3</sup> [G. de Ruggiero, *Modern Philosophy*, p. 376]

and of which we are the result. And so long as this is the case, we must always harbour certain doubts about the value of what we have achieved in history as we account for the fatalism inherent in the history which created us. If we start out as the slaves of others, how can we go on to free ourselves solely by our own efforts? And how can we take credit for what others have done to grant us our freedom?

If in the natural sciences one grants that there is an objective nature which exists in itself, over and beyond scientific experience, the entire autonomous and creative value of research is lost. Doubts then arise over whether the business of thought counts for anything more than a mere superficial increment, extrinsic to the object (an *epiphenomenon*, as the positivists say). Likewise, if in the historical domain one grants that there is a readymade, objective history, which exists prior to its construction in thought, all the work of the historian ends up being merely epiphenomenal. As a result, the freedom from mechanistic causal fatalism that history seemed to have granted us turns out to be illusory.

If we want to conserve all that is valuable in history, then, we need to unify the two processes. And unification is possible only if that history which I have called ‘a fatherhood for which we are not responsible’ is entirely resolved into history understood as our sonhood, which is to say that history exists as a product in so far as we produce it for ourselves. We are not driven to our present position in history by some mechanical process; on the contrary, the historicity of our present is contingent on our understanding of the entire course of history which culminates in us.

It is sometimes said, for example, that our mentality was born out of the French Revolution and the Bourbon Restoration that came after it. This lineage only really exists so far as we are conscious of the Revolution and the Restoration. In fact, many of our contemporaries still live in a historical phase that has stagnated for centuries, whereas others came to a halt at the ideas of the French Revolution, without managing to integrate them with

those that came after it, and so forth. And if humanity, however stratified it may be at a given moment, seems to be moving in one direction, this is because those best able to walk pull others along with them, just as among the stars, a satellite runs its course around a planet, while at the same it follows a greater trajectory that is not the planet's, but its own. The same is true of the planets with respect to the sun. Likewise, in humanity, the games that play out in the little circle of particular interests and lower mentalities are contained in the larger circle of higher ends, to which it is indirectly connected. This connection has nothing to do with the abortive metaphysics of the 'unconscious'. Everyone is conscious of what he does. Unconsciousness is not a form of consciousness for just anyone who acts in a certain way; it is rather something that someone who follows higher ends attributes to those who, in their particular situations, have a more limited view. Thus the farmer is aware of the sacrifice he is making by volunteering for military service; but someone who has knowledge of the national ends to which this service is subject can judge him to be unaware of this higher consciousness.

As we have seen, what is regarded as an action of the past on the present is conditioned by our consciousness of that past; so, according to what we already know about the resolutive and innovative functions of consciousness, the action of the past results from the spontaneity and liberty of our labours. With this the value of the history of which we are the product is by no means annulled; quite the opposite, it is here that it finds its full recognition. We do not, in effect, reduce objective history to a merely arbitrary creation (*al mero arbitrio*) of our subjectivity; rather, we affirm that the full and real objectivity of that history of which we are the product finds its proper recognition only as we become conscious of it. The distinction between our merely subjective, arbitrary creations and the necessary results of past history is a real distinction only in our present consciousness: the object is truly an object only in the subjectivity that resolves it. In other words, we are truly determined by

history only insofar as we feel ourselves to be determined by it. If, on the other hand, the determination had come about through the inevitable flow of events, any discrimination between what is merely arbitrary and subjective and what is a consequence of objective causes would be completely annulled. Each thing being equally necessary, each would be equally arbitrary: a world of mere necessity is no different from a world of just whatever happens to be the case. Moreover, the height of the historical position, if it were just something consciousness had captured, would be but a level mechanically created in the course of events, and on which exigencies with deep and firm historical roots would stand alongside those resulting from the contingencies of the moment.

Our conception, therefore, which resolves history as our fatherhood into history as our sonhood, far from annulling the one thing with the other, makes it real. To correct the concept of history we have already formulated, we may say that, inasmuch as history is ‘the re-creation of past humanity out of present humanity’, so too is it ‘the re-creation of past humanity out of present humanity’. Here the duality of the process is overcome, so far as the distinction originates from the unity of spiritual life, which is posited as a logically ulterior and discriminatory moment of that same consciousness.

With this unification, historical fatalism is overcome. Every determination of our present, as a result of past history, is included in the consciousness that we acquire of it, and so returns to the more expansive concept of self-determination. The historicity of our thinking and acting is not something that is imposed on us, but something that we absolutely posit, with the spontaneity of our labours. Determinism, by contrast, included in the laws of consciousness, can, by fatal impulse, transform into an ethical maxim. If our reality is history, and it becomes ever more coherent with the deepening of our consciousness of the relationships that tie us to the past, our liberty cannot consist in anything but determining our action more

historically. Arbitrary licence, or empty, formal liberty, is what we can fool ourselves into possessing as single individuals, isolated in the world, immune from the necessities that life implies and at the mercy of sudden decisions concerning an indifferent content of facts. But such liberty represents nothing more than the limits of the impoverishment of that which constitutes our spiritual life, and has that bogus character which is proper to the limit. In reality, the determination is ineradicable, just as consciousness is ineradicable as a living and active dimension of history, a perennial memory that the spirit has of itself. And this law of consciousness presenting the self to itself is not a natural, extrinsic law, but expresses only the character of its activity which can become a maxim or rule for consciousness itself. In other words, the consciousness that I have of myself as historical reality is at the same time the activity of presenting myself to myself in the historicity of my spiritual content. It is the norm of this activity, as a *duty* to act, to affirm the historicity of my life.

In this way, historical determinism, as we have said already, is being transformed from a fatal impulse into an ethical maxim. Unless determinism is a moment of liberty, it makes no sense to talk about moral duty; the 'ought' implicit in the duty adds nothing useful to the reality of what 'is'. But in our view, the 'ought' presupposes no pre-existent *being*, no real and fatal action determined by the unfolding of events. Rather, it creates its own being, the reality of the determination, for itself. It is my duty to determine myself in history; this duty, insofar as it at the same time expresses my activity of determining myself, creates the being, the reality of the determination, which, as a result, is free from the old fatalism and is nothing but a moment of my liberty.

In a complete ethic of historicism this would be the place for a phenomenology of historical determination, understood to demonstrate the progressive realization of liberty through an ever more comprehensive determinism of actions. But for the present sketch we must be content to indicate quite generally where our conception of determinism leads us.

The more action depends on the contingencies of the moment, the less we feel like ourselves and the less confidence we have in our work. Thus we have much less liberty, if by liberty is meant the self-possession of the spirit in its own labours. So it may be said that the closer we get to the limit of the liberty of indifference, the more true and proper liberty is being diminished; and beyond that limit it is totally annulled, because there the spirit would cease to affirm itself, passively accepting any content *whatsoever* as its own. Spiritual subjectivity is not a mere form that is conserved unscathed, emptied of any content, but an activity that grows in scope and in strength as it is filled with ever richer content. So we are ever more 'ourselves' the more profoundly we situate ourselves in the history that has created us and accept the responsibilities that it confers on us, making our lives all the more individual as it unifies us with the whole.

This expansion of the personality, which also entails its unification, gives us the faith in our powers and commitment to our actions in which the morality of life truly reveals itself. We become conscious that humanity is at work within us and that our experience is neither arbitrary nor isolated, but rather represents the experience of all the generations that preceded us, all the spiritual capital amassed and acquired over centuries of industrious life. At the same time we become conscious that we are inert and passive instruments of that life, unwitting squanderers of riches created by other people, because those experiences do not live except so far as we make them live. Humanity is not at work within us except insofar as we ourselves are at work, and we do not squander that inherited capital, but rather conserve and further expand it through our own efforts.

In all the manifestations of life we observe this profound morality, which is enacted through historical determinism, taken as the means and instrument of liberty. A believer cannot plumb the depths of religious experience unless he is conscious that the Church is alive in him and that there is a whole patrimony of spiritual values bound up in its dogmas.



At the same time he must feel obligated to submit to the limits that the Church imposes on him, a task on which he must work in order to acquire a product that was centuries in the making. Similarly, in civil life, the past is contained in a vast patrimony of institutions and customs, which are brought to life in the consciousness of the individual who understands their necessity and subordinates himself to their laws, extending their powers by harnessing the products of an immense labour.

So a person lives his own life within the lives of others inasmuch as he comes into being by mediating his labour as one moment of a broader social context. The apparent heteronomy of historicism is resolved into a more comprehensive autonomy. And this is why historicism involves not a static, inert vision of a reality that has already passed away, but self-realization through reference to the past and the mediation of our labour.

The concept of labour in the new philosophy must be founded on the same ground as the old concept of providence. As labour, the new providence is no longer transcendent, but immanent and active. We do not exist until the moment we make ourselves, so there is no providence that predetermines our being, which is created solely through our activity. We can nurture confidence only in ourselves and in our own powers: this is neither arrogant presumption nor blind faith, for it is founded not on any arbitrary determination or contingent fact, but on the very law of our spiritual development. Pride would be in the belief in an unmerited choice; rather, the choice is something we enact. Blind faith would be that which we can have in our empty subjectivity and our free will; on the contrary, we nurture faith in ourselves to the extent that humanity lives within us.

Historicism further develops the concept of labour and grants it an even greater capacity. A recent philosophical doctrine, Marxism, has formulated a new concept of labour, limiting its investigations to economic labour alone. Marx's problem was to determine the source of economic value. He proposed that there was no value but that of 'congealed

labour', which is not the same as that of *present* labour, which is required to manufacture goods, but also of *past* labour, required for the production of machines, primary materials and so on. The concept of capital came to be absorbed into that of labour, capital being nothing but past labour, cemented, so to speak, in the goods themselves.

We need not be concerned with the other tenets of Marxist doctrine, such as the view that capital can be either constant or variable, the first being a factor of true and proper value, the second representing surplus value – the distinction on which Marx tries to found his harshest criticism of the effects of the capitalist system. More interesting to us is that the starting point for the doctrine is essentially historical, which implies a certain dematerialization of economic values and a sure affirmation of the efficiency of human labour.

A deeper awareness of the historicity of our spiritual reality enables us to extend Marx's concept of labour beyond the restrictive sphere of political economy to the vast domain of social and moral life. The sole moral value is nothing but our labour, not only as the creation of new activity, but as the conservation of the entire inheritance of activities that make up our history. Capital does not really exist except in labour and for labour: in history there is a kind of capital, a set of inherited values, which can acquire actual and concrete importance only by mediating our works. The fruits of centuries of labour by successive generations of humanity are in turn revived through labour in the present. Aside from that, they do not exist at all. Considered in themselves, institutions – documents of human activity in history – do not have any value, as though centuries of labour were 'congealed' in them. Instead they live solely in the spirit, which, by affirming itself through them in the continuity and unity of its life, gives them life and recreates them anew in its labour.

The Marxist notion of labour congealed in goods conveys the inadequacy of Marx's speculative position and his oscillations between the idealism with which he started out and

the naturalism toward which he headed. Whence arises a spiritual and dynamic concept of labour as an activity that builds on itself; a concept that at a certain point is so far dispersed that the notion of labour, instead of referring to the spiritual activity that drives it, is attached instead to material *res* (things) without the capacity for the work of the living spirit.

On the contrary, to conserve the efficacy of the concept of labour, there is no need to attach the activity it expresses to any kind of substance, be it some material *res*, or something spiritual, like our nature. We do not exist prior to making ourselves in the course of our labour; rather, we ourselves are the labour, and the whole of reality is nothing but our labour – not congealed in it, but endlessly created in it and for it.

Having formulated the wholly spiritual and dynamic principle of the ethic of historicism – a principle suited to various applications and specifications which we have not the space to point out in such a short essay as this – we must, before concluding, answer a question implicit in the formulation of the problem we have set ourselves. That is: can we talk about an ethic of historicism, or else about historicism that it is itself an ethic? In other words, does our conduct arise on the basis of the past as something different from historical vision or knowledge of the past, as if it were a condensation of that experience in a later action?

Now, without the slightest pretence of having resolved the full extension of the *vexata quaestio* of unity and the distinction between theory and practice, we merely observe that, within the bounds of our problem, historicism is a theory only so far as it is a practice. Since history does not have a centre that is independent of us, but springs from the very spontaneity of our consciousness, it makes no sense to try to make it a presupposition of our subjectivity, like an object that we might contemplate without having first made it real. We do not come to know our past and only then situate ourselves in the world; rather, our situation in the world is nothing but our consciousness of our past. The concept of subjectivity, as we have claimed

elsewhere,<sup>4</sup> entails the profound unity of two moments: the root of our cognitive interest is always practical, derived from our present interest in actuating ourselves and realizing our activity in the world; but on the other hand, this interest is not a matter of brute nature or mere practice, but self-consciousness, in the form of knowledge as the root of action.

The greatest difficulty in conceiving of this unity, with respect to our problem of the ethic of historicism, is to imagine that our activity, or, as I have said, our labour, must consist solely in the work of mere scholars, as though it were something we indulged in from time to time, representing those parts of life we spend digging up the past, visiting archives and examining documents. But to be sure, this is not the kind of labour we are talking about! Historical labour is instead understood in the broader sense of any activity whatsoever, any effort directed at actualizing the reality in which we live, and which, living in us, lays out for our consideration the richness of its historical content. Thus the labour of the philosopher, as he acquires consciousness of the development of universal thought, actualizes the thought in him, just as the labour of the farmer, as he tills the soil, actualizes the values condensed in the entire course of his history. Consciousness of the historicity of the real, active in different ways in the various branches of human activity, demands and creates a prodigious diversity of labour that is nonetheless unified in principle, so far as capital is always created (and to be created is also to be conserved) through labour, and the values of the past live on in those of the present.

It should now be easy enough to understand how historicism is an ethic. It is an ethic so far as it reveals our intimacy with ourselves, our consciousness of the liberty and autonomy of our labour and the creation of the dignity and loftiness of our spiritual life. The concepts of human solidarity, of the spiritual unity of all, of the immanent finality of our

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<sup>4</sup> [Translator's note: a more literal translation would be 'as we said in the last chapter'. De Ruggiero refers to 'Moralità come scienza e scienza come moralità', *Problemi della vita morale* (Catania, Francesco Battiato, 1914), pp. 21–41.]

development, of the eternity of values that are seized amid the contingency and mutations of historical life, of the progress that is realized in the continuity of human labour – these are all parts of historicism, understood as theory and practice in one.

*Translated by J. R. M. Wakefield*