Philosophical Premises

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Taken from *Il ritorno alla ragione* (1946), this late essay marks a further decisive break between de Ruggiero and Croce. Drawing on Nietzsche, de Ruggiero argues that nineteenth-century German historicism resulted in disengagement from and indeed ambivalence with respect to the present. He goes on to argue that while Croce's more sophisticated version of historicism provided a valuable bulwark against the encroachments of 'irrationalism' in the Fascist period, it also encouraged the rejection of the idea of any permanent, universal values whatsoever. Against Croce's objections, de Ruggiero argues that the best insights of historicism should be incorporated into a return to Enlightenment reason and a 'moving synthesis' of immanence and transcendence.

HISTORICISM

1. Precursors of the Problem

The term 'historicism' generally signifies an orientation of thought whereby reality is conceived as a spiritual, dynamic process through which universal values are realized in individualized forms that are never repeated. Historicism thereby raises historiography to the highest form of knowledge, above the natural sciences, which schematize and deform reality for practical ends, and above even philosophy, which is concerned with the universal moments and forms of the process, dealing in abstractions that reacquire their full spiritual and human value only so far as they are granted it in concrete historiography.

From these theoretical premises are derived the various ethical and cultural orientations of the historicist mentality, which differ from those of other doctrines in particular ways in which they define the fundamental principles of history, and which

[1] [Translated from G. de Ruggiero, 'Premesse filosofiche', *Il ritorno alla ragione* (Bari, Laterza, 1946), pp. 5–41. Square brackets around footnote text indicate editorial interventions.]

together give historicism a peculiar tonality and distinguish it from the other ideologies dominant in our time or in the past. Nietzsche took up arms against the Hegelian philosophy, claiming that

> a philosophy which chastely concealed behind arabesque flourishes the philistine confession of its author invented a formula for the apotheosis of the commonplace: it spoke of the rationality of the real, and thus ingratiated itself with the cultural philistine, who also loves arabesque flourishes but above all conceives himself alone to be real and treats his reality as the standard of reason in the world.[2]

Later in the same work, Nietzsche raised the level of his critique and considered history under a more general aspect, outside the schemata of the Hegelian dialectic. He described the historical sense of his age as 'a hypertrophied virtue' and warned that it could ruin a people no less effectively than 'a hypertrophied vice':[3]

> A man who wanted to feel historically through and through would be like one forcibly deprived of sleep, or an animal that had to live only by rumination and ever repeated rumination. Thus: it is possible to live almost without memory, and to live happily moreover, as the animal demonstrates; but it is altogether impossible to live at all without forgetting… [T]here is a degree of sleeplessness, of rumination, of the historical sense, which is harmful and ultimately fatal to the living thing whether this living thing be a man or a people or a culture.[4]

And he adds:

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[2] [Translator's note: de Ruggiero does not provide references for his quotations, so it is unclear whether he is quoting from a published Italian translation of Nietzsche's German, or else translating directly. I am quoting from F. Nietzsche, 'David Strauss, the Confessor and the Writer', *Untimely Meditations*, ed. D. Breazeale, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 11.]

[3] [Translator's note: most of this sentence, including the phrases 'hypertrophied virtue' and 'hypertrophied vice', consists of a close but unacknowledged paraphrase of a passage in Nietzsche's 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life', *Untimely Meditations*, p. 60. I have followed de Ruggiero in offering 'a people' (*un popolo*) where Hollingdale offers 'nation' as a translation of Nietzsche's *Volkes*.]

[4] [Translator's note: 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life', p. 62. The ellipsis is mine; I have compressed a phrase in Hollingdale's translation to match de Ruggiero's more concise way of putting the point in Italian.]

> He who cannot sink down on the threshold of the moment and forget all the past, who cannot stand balanced like a goddess of victory without growing dizzy and afraid, will never know what happiness is.[5]

Yet Nietzsche did not claim to have banished history from the world of reality and culture, only that the anti-historical and the historical are necessary for the sanity of individuals and peoples alike. It is solely by virtue of his ability to bring the past to life, to determine which of the things that happen become history, that man truly makes himself man. He disappears into history, whereas he would never even have begun if he had not got tangled up in the non-historical. Historical culture is something that is salutary and promising for the future only when it is ruled and guided by a higher power, not when it wants to rule and guide itself. History in the service of life, that is, of an unhistorical force: this is Nietzsche's ideal.

Nietzsche characterized the psychological and moral consequences of historicism in a series of incisive aphorisms. It turns the greatest evangelical on his head, having him say, 'Let the dead bury the living'![6] It leads to 'a dangerous mood of irony in regard to itself and subsequently into the even more dangerous mood of cynicism: in this mood, however, it develops more and more a prudent practical egoism through which the forces of life are paralyzed and at last destroyed'.[7] 'The historical sense makes its servants passive and retrospective; and almost the only time the sufferer from the fever of history becomes active is when this sense is in abeyance through momentary forgetfulness'.[8] What is worse, the idolatory of history tends to transform every moment into 'naked admiration for success and

[5] [Translator's note: ibid., p. 62. Throughout this paragraph de Ruggiero quotes directly from Nietzsche without signalling that he is doing so.]
[6] ['On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life', p. 72.]
[7] ['On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life', p. 83.]
[8] ['On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life', p. 102.]

leads to an idolatry of the factual'.[9] Yet 'greatness ought not to depend on success. Demosthenes possessed greatness, but he had no success'.[10]

In conclusion [says Nietzsche] the antidote to historicism is to be found in the 'unhistorical' and in the 'suprahistorical'. By 'unhistorical', Nietzsche means 'the power of forgetting and of enclosing oneself within a bounded horizon', the power to engage in the immediate current of life, to get carried away by creative irrationality. The suprahistorical, by contrast, is what he calls 'the powers which lead the eye away from becoming towards that which bestows upon existence the character of the eternal and stable, towards art and religion'.[11]

Nietzsche's critique is greatly instructive. He picks out two fundamental deficiencies of historicism, even if he does not manage to resolve them in a satisfactory way. The first is that historicism encourages us to act hesitantly and makes us overly preoccupied with the past, depriving decisions of urgency, hearing both sides of every argument and offering absolution when the moral conscience calls for condemnation. Nietzsche, by contrast, wants to stress the importance of activity; but he feels the need to descend to the level of history, into the zone of brute, unreflective life, as though action necessarily signified the irrational and the arbitrary, and did not have to be transplanted onto a determined historical situation, even with the intention to go beyond it.

The other deficiency of historicism is that of being overly immersed or submerged in the current of becoming, and of devaluing and nullifying all those things that emerge from it as transcendent needs, such as values, norms and ideals. Nietzsche feels this need profoundly and, just as he had found refuge for action in the sub-historical, he now finds refuge for it in the suprahistorical, that is, in the sphere of art and religion. And just as he did not see that action must be transplanted onto history if it is to have any effect, he does not see that

[9] ['On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life', p. 105.]
[10] ['On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life', pp. 113–114.]
[11] ['On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life', p. 120.]

suprahistorical existence cannot be satisfied with the refuge of a quietism that removes man from the world, but must in its turn be transplanted onto history in order to drive it from within. Values, norms and ideals are really separate from becoming but, so far as they reside in the hearts of men, their separation from empirical reality creates the vital imbalance between the real and the ideal that drives history forward on the path of progress. Otherwise it would be at every instant concluded and spent, as it was at risk of being in Hegelian historicism.

Unfortunately, German historicism did not have the resources to mount an effective reply to Nietzsche's criticisms. Of the two groups of doctrines in which it is outlined, one, headed by Windelband's and Rickert's philosophy of values, has extended the transcendent norms too far into the heavens, at risk of losing contact with the flux of becoming, and unconscious of what may be called true history.

The division between becoming and norms, between the individual and the universal, between life and form, is visible in Rickert's doctrine, even more than in Windelband's, which is limited to a very generic characterization of the problems of historiography. Rickert wanted to get down to particulars. He continually oscillated between a commitment to abstraction and a static individuality without ever managing to bring the two together in a fruitful way.

We also have the psychological approach developed by Dilthey,[12] who immersed himself in the current of life in its immediacy and risked losing sight of the universal forms and values. In his long wake came, in the best cases, as in the school of Dilthey and Spranger, a conception of history as a review of the types or forms of life and cultural complexes; or

[12] For further discussion, see my *Filosofi del Novecento* (Bari, Laterza, 1933).

else the idea of static and rigid structures, which do not pass into one other, but develop by themselves.

In the worst cases, by contrast, it comes, with Spengler and the Nazi historians, to a kind of second-rate historicism, connected to a non-spiritualistic historiography, which makes history coincide with natural becoming, that is, with an indiscriminate and fatal flux, in which consciousness cannot exercise its dominion, because it is nothing but an ephemeral moment in the course of history. This historicism lacks any idea of universal values or categories, so it affirms that truth, beauty and goodness are contingent and fleeting formations, and that all that man can do with the purity of his heart, with personal sacrifice and profundity of mind, is ultimately equivalent to anything else, because nothing can come into the world from the relativism of earthly values. And it lacks any criterion for distinguishing dialectically between reflection and action; hence it follows that, because every action is worth the same as any other, and all are equally predetermined by the necessity of natural progression, acting blindly, or not acting at all, are also worth the same. A brutal activism, which wants to change everything for the sake of doing so, or a sceptical conservatism, which wants to conserve out of the conviction that change is pointless, are two opposing but at bottom identical consequences of extreme historical relativism.

In this way, German historicism, which first set out to turn back the current of irrationalism, ended up flowing into it, prompting lively protests from Troeltsch in his book *Der Historismus und seine Überwindung* (The Overcoming of Historicism). We need to turn back to Italy to find the true spirit of historicism in Croce's doctrine and to judge whether our need for spiritual orientation can be satisfied within its limits.

2. The Crocean Phase

It may be said, without risk of undue nationalistic boasting, that the most efficacious defence of civilization and culture to have been mounted in the name of historicism, against the blows of irrationalism, has taken place in Italy, in the works of Benedetto Croce. It is largely thanks to him that only a fraction of our educated class has capitulated to the enemy, while in contrast to what we have seen in Germany, the greater part has kept the values of the Western tradition intact. Croce knew how to keep the flame of that tradition alive with his tireless works of philosophy, literature and historiography, as well as with his vigilant criticisms of the distortions and misunderstandings his adversaries made in their attacks on culture.

An important moment in this struggle, the extent of which we are now able to measure, came from Croce's clash with Gentile, who had come out of that same tradition and, after first professing a similar kind of historicism, gave in to the enticements of irrationalism that characterized the new era, even becoming a champion of an indiscriminate activism with the capacity to justify even the most repugnant views in the name of reason. Given the prior personal relationship between the philosophers, Croce's criticisms of Gentile might have seemed too harsh at the time, but now this harshness seems justified, given that Croce had identified the danger not just of one person, but of a whole generation of scholars who were running uncontrollably toward a precipitous drop.

But the episode just described, while important, is but one of many in the long battle Croce has fought. From his histories of Naples, Italy and Europe, which, drawn in ever larger concentric circles, bring into focus a philosophical vision of the events of modern life, to his countless essays of literary criticism, which restore the rights of good taste in the face of the old oratory amplifications and the recent recondite sophistications, and further to his comments on moral matters, which imbue the abstract concepts of ethics with a flavour of living humanity, he has given us a whole series of writings, both polemical and constructive,

driven by a singular sense of purpose. The comfort that these writings have given us through the years of dreary servitude, the value of the example they have set for us all, the ways they have strengthened our faith in our mission as men of culture, have been part of so many different people's recent experience that I would be doing wrong by the reader if I were to dwell on them.

Amid the general consensus over Croce's work there has arisen a note of dissatisfaction, almost in spite of us. To a greater extent than the older generation, who had already chosen their path and were happy to accept Croce's invitation to keep going along it, the young, feeling more urgently the need to be guided by standards, advised him to resist the enticements of the other side. To be sure, the fulfilment of this need did not come about without a certain amount of naiveté; irrationalism had at its disposal refined myths and formulae, as well as ways to break with them by means of suggestion and violence. With reason, on the other hand, especially in its historicized form, nothing comparable can be achieved, only methodical, critical work, without demonstrable success, and with results emerging only in the long term.

In that dissatisfaction there was, however, a well-founded inkling of the intrinsic limitations of Croce's historicism. This was presented as an overly backward-looking vision of reality: it brought one phase of world history to a close without opening up a new one; and into that phase, with its realistic immanentism, those eternal values of the spirit were absorbed and dissolved without residue. The relative transcendence of those eternal values with respect to empirical reality could have created a fruitful equilibrium with the capacity to open the door to the future. Closed within the limits of the Hegelian equation of the rational and the real, it did nothing to satisfy the ideals which reside in the hearts of men, and are powerful drivers of progress. On the contrary, it deemed such ideals vain and chimerical abstractions, which set aside 'ought', derided the programmes and expectations for the future,

and taught us to be wary of the utopias and general concepts of the Enlightenment, like equality, justice and humanity.

Absent from Croce's historicism was the idea of a distinction between the real and ideal spiritual planes, which alone could animate a fruitful dialecticism and create a passage between history-as-fact and history-still-being-made. On the contrary, he wanted to identify the one with the other and thus to forge a weapon for fighting teleological doctrines, though it ended up being identified with them, at least so far as they are regarded as the custodians and interpreters of values that go beyond empirical reality. In this way an overly restricted view of philosophy as a methodological precondition of history was replaced by a two-thousand-year-old philosophical tradition. Yet historicism started out as something greater and better than just the vain prejudices or the presumptuous arrogance of a series of individuals detached from reality. It was a search for the single, undivided source of that which is distributed and multiplied in time and space; it was driven by the aspiration to attain the final end of the spirit, which can be deceptive only if the end is detached from the force that tends toward it, but which, if the two are combined, gives the spirit movement, a direction, its very life. There is, in short, a need for something beyond history, and to which even history is subordinate, because without that vital imbalance between what is and what ought to be, without looking to the future, without ideals that emerge out of everyday anxiety, the process of becoming loses impetus, and history stops or ends in the sterile re-enactment of the past.

We feel this sense of arrest, almost in spite of ourselves, in Crocean historiography. Consider, for example, the *Storia d'Italia* (History of Italy). This book, which is in many respects admirable, shows us the drama of the formation of the new Italian state. However, at a certain point, the different threads intertwine and the drama reaches its last act, by virtue of its creator, Giolitti, who used a formal and extrinsic art to bring together all the divergent parties. Croce gives the impression that the history of Italy came to a close at that point, or at

least that it must keep going down that path in perpetuity. His *Storia* provides no explanation for the profound subversion that followed this, and no way of preparing for it; the reader closes the book with a feeling of perplexity and doubt, asking himself whether everything that was bubbling away in the minds of the Italian people has been brought to light, and whether the historiographical catharsis of the author corresponds to the catharsis of the historical period he describes.

Similar examples, though much circumscribed, can be obtained from all the dialectical solutions to particular historical conflicts that Croce has given us. At one point he asked himself: was the Inquisition right, or were its adversaries? And he replied that the question does not make sense, historically speaking, because history both includes and surpasses them both.[13] But amid this neutrality of historical judgement, this view that the actions of each side are as justified as the other's, we felt that a blow had been struck against the good cause, not because we wanted to cast judgement on the conflict after the fact, but because it seemed to us that the victims, who presented themselves as defenders of principles that transcended the period in which they lived, had established a basis for future recognition by the world's conscience, and thus the need for a new history.

Even today, making the same point in a somewhat less forceful way, Croce affirms that men of the past

> cannot be held responsible before any tribunal whatsoever, just because they are men of the past who belong to the peace of the past and as such can only be the objects of history, and can suffer no other judgment than that which penetrates and understands the spirit of their work. They are understood, yet not automatically, as the motto has it (*tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner*),

[13] [Translator's note: De Ruggiero is alluding to B. Croce, *Filosofia della pratica. Economica e etica*, third edition (Bari, Laterza, 1923 [1908]), pp. 43–44; and *The Philosophy of the Practical: Economic and Ethic*, trans. Douglas Ainslie (London, Macmillan, 1913), pp. 69–71.]

> pardoned, because they now stand beyond severity or indulgence, beyond censure or praise.[14]

If we say, then, that Caesar is guilty because he deprived Rome of liberty, the conviction thus pronounced has neither any effect on Caesar, nor any meaning for us, because from the historiographical point of view Caesar has already played his part to the extent dictated by the unfolding of events and the mission he set himself.

This conclusion is unsatisfactory because it ignores Brutus, and with him all the anti-Caesarian instances which have appeared in history, and which will keep on appearing right up to the point at which we make our judgement.

Now it is easy to say, given what we have seen, that *ignava ratio* has given us a cynical excuse for our own laziness and a convenient refuge from the burden of having to make decisions; and that historicism resolves the back-and-forth of dialectical antitheses in a passive recognition of reality and in a consecration of what has happened.

While these are the consequences that many have drawn from historicism in our time, we should add that Croce himself rejected them. And he did so not because they were not implicit in the doctrine, but because the force of his moral personality burst the banks of the doctrine and compelled him to find an outlet for action. This is the purpose of Croce's last book, entitled *La storia come pensiero e come azione* (History as Thought and Action), which represents not just the most mature phase of his doctrine, but also the one through which the most profoundly and generously human notes of his philosophy resound.

[14] [Translator's note: De Ruggiero does not include a reference for this quotation, but the passage corresponds to *History as the Story of Liberty*, third edition, trans. Sylvia Sprigge (London, George Allen and Unwin, 1949), p. 47. This is the name given to the English translation of Croce's *La storia come pensiero e come azione* (literally 'History as Thought and as Action'). Two alterations have been made: Sprigge refers to 'men of the past' as 'subjects of history', whereas the Italian is '*oggetto… di storia*', i.e. 'object[s] of history'; and I have added commas after 'understood' and 'automatically' for the sake of clarity.]

Here Croce directly addresses the accusations made against historicism: those of 'promoting fatalism', 'dissolving absolute values', 'sanctifying the past', 'accepting the brutality of facts as facts', 'applauding violence', 'recommending quietness', 'removing the impetus and confidence from creative forces', 'blunting the sense of duty' and 'disposing men to inactivity and lazy compromise'.[15] And he clears himself of the accusation, expounding the spiritual process that leads unswervingly from history as thought to history as action. He goes on:

> We are products of the past and we live immersed in the past, which encompasses us. How can we move towards the new life, how create new activities without getting out of the past and without placing ourselves above it? And how can we place ourselves above the past if we are in it and it is in us? There is no other way out except through thought, which does not break off relations with the past but rises ideally above it and converts it into knowledge. The past must be faced or, not to speak in metaphors, it must be reduced to a mental problem which can find its solution in a proposition of truth, the ideal premise for our new activity and our new life…
>
> Only a strange obscurity of ideas could impede us from recognizing the purifying function which both the writing of history and likewise poetry fulfil: the latter liberates us from servitude to the passions, the former from slavery to events and to the past. Only by an even greater intellectual blunder can that man be called a gaoler who unlocks the door of the cell to which he would otherwise be condemned.[16]

This is the real crux of the issue. Croce understands the historiographical catharsis to be so complete, so conclusive, that it leaves nothing still to be done. The need for action that he wants to include in it is added on from the outside: his humanity demands it, but his philosophy cannot justify it. Giving the name 'historiography' to the spiritual process by which we come to know the past and thereby free ourselves from it, and 'history' to the new

[15] [B. Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty*, p. 43.]
[16] [Translator's note: B. Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty*, pp. 43–44.]

process to which the first process gives rise, it may be said that for Croce, historiography paralyzes history, and if he thinks this also lives and moves, it does so because his personality transcends the purely historiographical interests in which he has sought to enclose himself.

Since the new process is connected to the preceding one, there must be, as in every connection, a break between them. It is necessary for the concrete man, who stands between the two, to mediate the passage from one to the other, to take up a position high above history, at that ideal standpoint which Nietzsche talked about, where the supreme values of his humanity come together. From those heights he must judge the past, measure how far the world as it is falls short of the world as it ought to be, view the essential imbalance between the real and the ideal as a reason to set himself new tasks and prepare for new activities. The continuity between what has been done and the doing of it is not restored, or better, is not reclaimed, except at risk of this fracture, through which the dialectic of spiritual life is enacted. Croce wanted to reject it, to deny this meta-historical standpoint on which the gaze of philosophers has remained endlessly fixed. In doing so he revealed his preference not for a streetlamp, which illuminates the whole road from above, but a portable lamp with which to light the path of historical research as he moves along it.

Thanks to the more modest light Croce has given us, we are able to avoid many pitfalls hidden by the light from above, which often proves too dazzling. Yet we do not know how to do without the streetlamp. Setting aside the metaphor, we notice that Croce's historicism, for all that it is brimming with good advice, leaves unfulfilled the deeply held, universal human need for enlightenment of the kind for which it is offered as a substitute. A synthesis of the two, which introduces into history the leaven of those values which surpass history, seems to us one of the living aspirations of our time, which has faced the disappointment of an overly realized idealism, but holds out hope for an idealism that has yet to be realized.

3. Beyond Historicism

We do not deny our debt to historicism, especially in its Crocean formulation. We recognise that, against the irrationalist currents prevailing today, its progress has been decisive and its achievements have enduring value. We are indebted to it for showing us the real poverty of the impetus behind the life of instinct, sensibility and passion, which appears to us a force that we continually squander without any hope of getting it back; for keeping the myths that stir the primitive imagination and naïve feelings from swaying our judgements; and for making programmes of action based on a fleeting activism, without roots in reality, yield their inconsistencies to our rigorous examination. Historicism has taught us an incomparable lesson in balance and prudence, while at the same time it has given us real confidence in the sure results of the slow, gradual work of human reason, which, even when at first it seems overwhelmed by brute forces, has the capacity for revival and recovery, so it ultimately emerges victorious.

And, just as we do not give in to the enticements of anti-historicism, neither do we want to go back to Enlightenment rationalism, in its eighteenth-century form, though we recognize that it has some just claims to present. To our mind, trained to make realistic, severe historical judgements, the whole Enlightenment approach to problems of reason seems somewhat naïve and ill-focused. A conception of reason that does not belong to a historical context, but seeks to judge it as though from outside or above it, cannot fully grasp the distinction between what is feasible and what is illusory, between the concrete and the abstract. In its invincible radicalism, Enlightenment reason believes it can refashion the world from the beginning, ignoring the connections that maintain the continuity of successive phases of the world, despite all the fissures that divide them.

And Enlightenment reason further believes that the material with which it carries out this reconstruction must be, unlike that of the old form of reason it has replaced, of a wholly rational stamp, without grasping that the material cannot be anything but sensible, drawn out of the ruins of empiricism; and that the ability of the artist is manifest instead in the novelty of the design and in his capacity to fit it to the appointed time and place. With a more refined historical reason, however, there is a way, as philosophers know well, to turn the irrational forces of the senses and passions to our own ends and to convert those egoistic energies into means of cohesion and fusion. Thus historical reason makes us quick to judge men and to condemn their vices and errors, more comprehensive in evaluating the indirect and mediated effects of their actions, and more liberal in following the shifting, complex play of contrasts through which the fabric of life is woven.

On the other hand, though, the relative transcendence of Enlightenment reason has one merit that historicist immanentism is in danger of forgetting. It is raised to an ideal plane, where all that is eternal in the spirit finds its refuge and its purpose, from which perspective transient becoming can be judged and measured with a sense of proportion and control, because we are not caught up in its whirling currents. This is where we get our fundamental intolerance for an empirical reality always ill-suited to the rational essence of man; this is where noble and generous ideals are cultivated to give us an incessant spur to action. The human soul thus looks toward the future, anxious to make progress, but with a tendency toward the good, which multiplies its strengths. From this position of Enlightenment, for all that it seems detached and inert, come profitable schemes for the future and ideas for improvements. And these life-giving flames deserve not to be snuffed out.

But can the recent conquests of historicism be saved along with the heritage of the Enlightenment? Can historical reason and meta-historical reason be combined in a single

current? I daresay that it is not only possible but necessary, unless we want to sacrifice history-still-being-made to history-as-fact and thereby lose all the fruits of historicism.

The latter, adhering scrupulously to becoming, has put too much stress on our status as products of history and of the past, forgetting that while as individuals, peoples or institutions, we are children of history, as universal human essences we are the parents and creators of history, too.

The adoration of history is the highest form of fetishism, manifest in the cult of the creation rather than that of the creator. What in fact constitutes our spiritual value is a unified and focused activity, which, precisely because it posits time, stands outside it. This activity contains within it the full power of what it distributes and develops. We can picture it as a fountainhead, with water flowing from it along the twisting course of a riverbed that corresponds to the shape of the land through which it passes. No one part of the riverbed can contain the entire body of water, which for that reason flows onward in search of some more distant outlet. And this excess, this overflow, is exactly what keeps the whole body moving. If the source were to run dry, the water would be calm and stagnant.

The inexhaustible energy of the spirit is likewise expressed in history, without ever finding satisfaction in the stages it has already passed through, because its power transcends every realization already achieved, every end already attained, and this transcendence provides the impetus for new accomplishments and new attainments. History, then, is run through with and driven by a meta-historical activity, which contains essential reasons within itself.

The purpose of philosophy always has been and always will be to pin down the permanent essence that holds the secret of becoming and forms the eternal present, which underlies the future no less than it does the past. Without this anxiety of the eternal, even time is flattened out and emptied, as becoming stops dead at what has already become.

It is not, therefore, a happy innovation that deprives philosophy of its proper, eminent domain, which tradition has assigned to it and which it is forever compelled by a profound spiritual need to reaffirm, making it the handmaiden of historiography. It may be objected that, for all we try to rise above the plane of history by means of philosophical speculation, we will never succeed, for history will always end up suppressing our vain urges. But this objection is not as strong as it appears, for even if it is true that individual needs and individual ideals, posited from time to time as transcending the plane of history, were continually reabsorbed and brought back to its level, it is also true that the impulse which sustains them re-emerges each time, creating new needs and new ideals, with a renewed transcendence.

This dynamic centre on which spiritual life hinges divides the whole of becoming into a multitude of points that enable us to connect the future with the past. The empirical present is thereby imbued with a deeper meaning, which comes to it from being a vehicle and a symbol of that higher spiritual presence. As a moment in history, it arises from those moments that came before it, and it is enclosed in the narrow confines of the series to which it belongs. As a moment of the spirit, however, it dominates the whole series as though from the outside, and rather than being limited by it, it limits and judges the series. This gives us a far more intimate and renovating catharsis than Croce presented, meaning liberation from the burden of the past, purely by dint of coming to know it. What we call catharsis is a kind of liberation from the past, a liberation that is not only formal but also real, for all that it is inadequate, discordant and even repugnant to the ideal needs of the human spirit. We are not satisfied with reality, nor do we judge it to be rational, but we feel that it always falls short of the idea that is in us, so it is in certain respects irrational, which is to say that it is confronted by limits and a kind of passivity that remains to be overcome.

This imbalance between the ideal and the real, which is revealed by our present, suggests above all an important historiographical canon. Since the spiritual present from which we proceed is above time, in every period we transfer it into every period of past history, certain of having found a domain ‘outside’ the facts on which the empirical course of things is based: that is, a vital dissatisfaction, a position of fecund antitheses and suggestive anticipations, an urge to transform and innovate; in short, a dialectical impulse, which makes the ways of the future endlessly unfurl from the crisis of the past. To this internal dialectic is entrusted the continuity of the historical process.

But the stated historiographical canon is just the translated expression of a principle which lies at the very centre of our spiritual life. The crisis that leads us to interpret the past is founded on the experience which, by means of reflection, we are trying to close through our action. The need to act, transform and innovate is born directly out of the disproportion and imbalance that we have seen between the real and the ideal, between what is and what ought to be, between the spirit as naturalized in history and the spirit that gains all its power from plunging back into the living, inner source. The action would be a miraculous explication if the reflection that preceded it were an epilogue that concludes and seals what has occurred, recognizing forms of rationality and necessity already exhausted and fixed in things. However, that reflection is but a prologue to, a premise of, action, because it reveals to us an uncompleted process, a partial rationality that needs to be overcome by means of reason, a contingency to be raised to the level of necessity: a task, in short, to be taken on. Thus the very material of the past is put in a new perspective and becomes a means actively to anticipate and prepare for the future. The merely backward-looking perspective of historicism is replaced by a broader one, in which the regress of reflection is a moment in a progression of actions, and rationality is given larger scope, because it is not limited to a sterile

consecration of what has already occurred, but leads from an ever-limiting judgement to the conditions of a new event, and thus the need for a more complete realization of itself.

This is not the right place to highlight the implications and consequences that stem from this more comprehensive philosophical point of view. I would like instead to point out that the consciousness of our time is ripe for a speculative orientation like that which I have sketched out – one which, without ignoring the merits of historicism, transcends them and makes them a means to a higher end.

Unlike those earlier generations that lived in conditions favourable to a more peaceful, progressive life, which gave them a fairly optimistic view of reality, ours no longer looks upon history with unconditional adoration. We know, of course, that it is the sole domain in which human activity is carried out, but we also see that this domain is full of horror, injustice and folly. The notion that the real is rational sounds to our ears like mockery; the notion of the necessity of past occurrences strikes us as an empty logical (or tautological) formula that disguises the real contingency of events too often entrusted to the blindness and stupidity of men; the notion of liberty as the animating force behind history strikes us as the consecration of a vain and unreflective conceit; and the notion of making a religion of historicism strikes us as sacrilegious idolatry.

We think, however, that rationality, necessity, liberty and piety are not vain idols, but real needs that have a profound echo in our spirit; and that the overly restricted zone of 'what has occurred', that is, of past history, is unsatisfactory because the cycle of its explication is much more extensive. The presence of these values in our spirit gives us the surest testimony; and we are therefore compelled to integrate the past into the future and to enlarge the range of historical action, to regard what the experience reveals to us as not yet accomplished as a task for us to carry out. From this loftier vantage point, even those parts of the past that frustrate

us with their inadequacy, repel us with their injustice or disappoint us with their errors can reveal to us a secret longing for rationality or for justice, a beginning sometimes more secure, sometimes more uncertain, to a goal that, remote as it may be, can never be wholly absent from the consciousness of the times. Thus we see unreasonableness and injustice, though sometimes triumphant, ultimately give way to reason and justice. This is more reliable than the inadequate experience of the past, the overriding experience of that ideal and eternal history which lives in our spirit.

Historicism offers us a vision of a world that is to be protected and conserved. Its logic, its ethics and its religion were instruments and prerogatives of an optimistic conservatism, which already fades in the very act with which that world crumbles before our eyes. We aim at a vision of the world beyond the reach of historicism – a world that remains to be reconstructed and renewed.

4. Historicism and Politics

So far in this essay I have sought to establish the philosophical aspects of the historicist mentality and to formulate certain needs ‘beyond historicism’ that I felt vividly and sincerely in our day. To complete my investigation, I now propose to examine the problem of the politics of historicism, to find out whether within its ambit there arises an equal need to break the confines in which historicism has enclosed itself.

I have already said that the arguments for historicism play out on two fronts, against irrationalism and against Enlightenment rationalism. So far as it is itself a rationalistic doctrine, its more direct adversary is irrationalism, in all its forms; but, so far as the rationality to which it aspires has a historical-dialectical character, its other adversary is radical, Jacobin rationalism.

If we look to the origins of historicism, we can see these two fronts being drawn up. As is well known, with the arrival of *Sturm und Drang* came a great explosion of irrationalism in European culture. It was a revolutionary movement, turbulent and irresponsible, which exalted instinct, life and pure force, which found its *prosopopoeia* in the Titanism of the 'superman'. Back in the eighteenth century this mythical figure was kept within the bounds of the literature in which he was born: his speechifying took place amid the drama of the theatre and the novel. Since then, though, he has been preparing the weapons that would much later prove deadly.

Against the Titanism of the *Sturm* rose the more mature Romantic thought of the next generation. It is interesting to note that the same men who in their youth started out on the road to irrationalism, tried to contain its spread when they became adults. Herder, Goethe and Schiller, to name but a few, made up for the revolutionary tendencies of their youth with the more irenic and pacific attitudes of their later years. The historicist perspective introduced by the Romantic spirit, which culminated in Hegel, was one of the factors that contributed to this conversion. History showed that the world was not made, so it cannot be remade, in a single day; that individuals have but a limited part to play in this process; and that improvisations and whims are fleeting things, the punctuation in a story slowly woven by reason, even if the story does not make itself apparent, obscured as it is by the illustrations and arabesques that decorate it.

Historicism's first front in the battle against irrationalism is of greater cultural than political importance, because *Sturm und Drang* found more generically cultural expressions than it did political expressions. But it was not always without political significance, which would increase later, when irrationalism spread from the world of culture to the world of empirical reality.

The second front, by contrast, is more obviously and immediately concerned with politics. Jacobin rationalism was the hallmark of the French Revolution, which turned all of Europe on its head; so it makes sense to say that the weapons of Romantic historicism were levelled against it. Running through the historicist mentality of the early nineteenth century – that of Burke, de Maistre, Novalis and Hegel – for all its variations in gradation and accent, we find the same conservative impulse, the same need to save the continuity of life and tradition, to close the split created by revolutionary thought and action. Yet the opposition to Jacobin democracy, in this more tempestuous phase of the Restoration, took on a decidedly reactionary character, marked by nostalgia for a distant mediaeval past, which it claimed to integrate into itself.

But this reactionary attitude is some way from completely expressing the spirit of the new historicism. Remote history, with its traditions and customs profoundly rooted in the life of the people, is not, in fact, the whole story. Even the Revolution, for all its radicalism, has become just part of history, having brought about an upsurge in the innovations that produced its effects, which historicism cannot ignore without denying its own premises.

This gives us the outlines of a comprehensive, synthetic task: to connect remote and recent history, the need for conservation and for progress; and to maintain the continuity of becoming, if only through the oppositions that internally articulate it. In this phase, historicism acquires a liberal physiognomy: it is informed by the political doctrines and activities of the great French doctrinaires, from Constant to Guizot; English liberals like Gladstone; and men of the Italian right, like Cavour and Spaventa. But liberalism always has a more or less explicitly conservative aspect, which is at once to its credit and its detriment. History, from which it draws its own titles and its own orientation, in fact turns its back on the future: its gaze is turned backward and its view is never wholly complete. The search for the new is not, as such, included in its activities; it can recognize and evaluate new

developments, even accept them, when they fall within its purview; but it is disinclined to introduce them, and at any rate it does not have the means to do so. So it is that historicism, as a political doctrine, better expresses the needs of a society in the course of its normal, continuous development than those of a society in crisis, which is forced to find a new path to follow.

This rapid run through the origins of historicism can shed much light on its contemporary form, which is represented most eminently by Benedetto Croce. He, too, fights his battle on two fronts, against Nazi-Fascist irrationalism and against democracy, in the name of a historical, dialectical liberalism.

The first front acquired far greater political importance than it had in the past, for its enemy was no longer the mythical depiction of passionate visionaries but, moving from literature to life, had become a diabolical incarnation of primitive, savage instincts and overpowering brute forces which were at the point of overturning all the hard-won achievements of human history. We should be immensely grateful to Croce for having fought this battle in such a firm and decisive way, with all the resources of an acute intelligence and the benefit of a vast culture. Only a fool would deny or try to diminish these merits, so I will not dwell on them here.

But Crocean historicism also has a second, less obvious front, which has become a kind of internal front, inside the ambit of rationalism itself. This is the front on which its historicist liberalism comes up against Jacobin democracy. For Croce this represents the most juvenile and immature phase of the modern political spirit: that of abstraction, anti-historical reason, utopian ideals, natural law theory, the mechanical levelling of men, and revolutionary convulsions which give rise to dictatorships. And just as individuals cast off their radicalism and acquire more reflective and mature tendencies as they pass from youth to adulthood, so

too has society overcome and goes on overcoming the ‘democratic’ phase of its development, to adopt the ways of a better informed, more moderate liberalism.

It cannot now be denied that the liberal mentality of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries represents a step forward from eighteenth-century Jacobinism. But can it be said that it coincides with the democracy of today? There is no doubt that for Croce the one survives as part of the other; and his opinion is partly justifiable, since there is something antiquated in the doctrinal principles of democracy, which, even in the course of its development during the nineteenth century, was overloaded with positivistic and naturalistic dogmas left over from the eighteenth century. Yet the democracy of today is something profoundly new; it is not the old hollow political façade it once was, but a total form of life in development; it voices a need for renewal which rises from the roots of society; it represents an aspiration unfulfilled by the institutions of the past, tends toward the future and prepares the way for it in its ideals and its utopias, which in the view of historicism might seem abstract but, as they win over the hearts of the people, become vital, potent forces.

The historicist mentality is too backward-looking to perceive this novelty, which does not precede but follows from its liberalism and represents the extension and development of the same. It confuses what from the perspective of history is young, but is in fact old, with what is young from the perspective of life, which is something that is without precedent in past history and belongs instead to history *in fieri.*

This explains Croce’s impatience with any attempt to give liberalism a new political content or to formulate a programme that anticipates the future. His liberalism is meta-political in the sense that it belongs to history and, like history, it is like a common channel through which all the currents are directed. However, it is not itself one of the currents, because it lacks a differential element, which can be distinguished not from past history, but from the new life that arises from it. It is a formal methodological canon, which has been and

still can be greatly efficacious so long as it demands that the forces of liberty form a single front against a common enemy, but has no resources to fall back on to differentiate these forces from within.

There is one last aspect of historicist politics that merits consideration. Given its backward-looking character, it necessarily favours the continuity of historical life and its institutions. It is easy to see that this principle of conservation is greatly important, because without it, life would lack any stability or possibility of gradual progress. But there are times when that continuity is suddenly fractured and it is better to take a leap than to force oneself to repair the broken fragments. After the leap, the historicist will be able to recognize that this, too, is a means to ensure continuity; but beforehand, he will lack the impetus to do so, because he is held fast to the ground. Qualities other than his are needed to elicit that impetus. Principal among these is a capacity to anticipate the future, which draws its strength more from the idea of history-still-being-made than from history-as-fact. This consideration leads us back to that critical position, that meta-historical standpoint, which we discussed earlier in the essay.

5. Reply

In the very review where the preceding observations were first published (*La Nuova Europa*), Croce has courteously replied, reaffirming his historicism.[17] For this reason I feel the need to give a short reply to explain and clarify my point of view.

I have noted that historicism is too backward-looking. It concludes a phase of historical reality, but does not open up a new one, thereby sacrificing history-still-being-made

[17] [Translator's note: de Ruggiero refers to B. Croce, 'Indagine storica e risoluzione morale: risposta', *La Nuova Europa,* 2: 6 (1945), which Croce republished six months later in *Quaderni della "Critica",* 1: 2 (1945), pp. 88–92. The first three parts of what is presented here as de Ruggiero's essay appeared in successive issues as 'Lo storicismo: i precedenti', in 2: 2; 'Lo storicismo: La fase crociana', in 2:3; and 'Al di là dello storicismo', in 2:4.]

to history-as-fact. In his reply, Croce admonishes me for having missed out an important step in his deduction. He writes,

> You have not paid attention to the first of the links I placed in the chain of that relationship [between history-still-being-made and history-as-fact]. Having omitted it, you have left the relationship itself up in the air. That first link is the urgent need for some as-yet-undetermined practical and moral action, demanded by whatever particular situation gives rise to it. This need takes the form of restlessness, agitation and anxiety, because one cannot see the way forward – the course of action to be undertaken. Who would not recognize this moment that, almost without regard for ordinary, habitual resolutions, grows until it is of the greatest intensity and importance, its consequences sometimes severe enough to leave us despairing, with our heads in our hands? To overcome it, to escape from it, one first needs light (for, as the Evangelist says, our enemies are the darkness); and this light is clarity on reality, on the reality which is history, on the present which is laden with the past; and the investigation of thought, and historical thought in particular, is therefore a function of that need and that moral anxiety. Having come to a conclusion (and when the problem is serious and complicated, concerning e.g. the direction to be taken in one's own life, this might take years of uncertainty and meditation), the obstacle before the moral conscience is removed. This creates the individual action for which each man is responsible in the particular situation in which he finds himself. So much for something 'added on from the outside', as you put it! In this process the moral conscience is the first and the last, the condition and the conclusion, and historical thought is the mediator; hence the importance of history for the human spirit, as well as my reduction of it, even that which is called 'philosophical', to concrete knowledge.
>
> Is that clear? It seems so to me. The circle is drawn and narrowed so as not to leave open any gaps or allow it to be fragmented. It proceeds without leaps and without interference from above, but with only the spurs applied to the conscience from within.[18]

[18] [B. Croce, 'Indagine storica e risoluzione morale: risposta', *Quaderni della "Critica",* 1: 2 (1945), pp. 88–92; quotation from 90–91.]

This response strikes me as unsatisfactory, for it does not seem to move beyond the points I criticized. Given that restlessness or moral anxiety precedes historical knowledge and poses the problem that it solves, the process ends here, with this clarification. I do not see what space there is in this for action and the creation of new history. In order for the process of creating new history to get started, it is necessary for past history not to comprise the entire reality and rationality of the spirit, but to leave out certain unsolved problems, unsatisfied needs and unrealized ideals that call for a new course of action. But who can judge past history in this way, using contrasts between light and darkness, realized solutions and open problems, rationality and irrationality? Only the spirit, which transcends history within itself, which in its infinity senses the inadequacy of all its finite explications, and which continues to draw on its capacity to come up with new explanations.

Croce does not perceive that spirit and its history occupy different levels. For him, the spirit is too deeply immersed in the historical process and lacks the power to re-emerge from it. And this happens because Croce has already included in history, a reality that has already emerged, a notion of rationality and 'ought' that is in fact a prerogative of the spirit in its higher unity, in which an emergent reality, as well as the potential for new courses of action, are contained. He criticizes me for detaching what is from what ought to be and tells me that 'the identification of *Sein* with *Sollen*, of the real with the rational, is a logical achievement that no philosophical critic can deny'.[19] In response, I point out the following: this identification can be taken as a given only if the spirit is taken at its source, in the extra-temporal, meta-historical unity of past and future, the real and the ideal, what is done and the doing of it, but not in what has already been accomplished. The true achievement that no philosophical critic can deny is that which grants what ought to be a being of its own, a living reality in the human consciousness, though it is a being and a reality incomparable with

[19] [Ibid., p. 91.]

empirical being and empirical reality: it is precisely spiritual being, being as a need, a force, an impulse of realization.

Contrary to what Croce claims, the real philosophical achievement does not belong to Hegel, who identified the real directly with the rational, what is with what ought to be, and concluded with an institutional history of the spirit, putting ethics above morality and the state above the conscience, which he deprived of the absolute sovereign judgement that Kant ascribed to it. I know full well that Croce rejects these ultimate consequences of Hegelianism; why, then, does he hold firm to its premises? And why does he still admit a rationality wholly collapsed into historical reality, which is at odds with the testimony of both the moral conscience and empirical experience itself?

Last of all, Croce admonishes me for my use of the term ‘transcendence’. Here there is a misunderstanding to be cleared up. I have talked about the transcendence of the spirit with respect to its historical products. This is the same as the transcendence of the artist with respect to his works, the scientist with respect to his discoveries, and the moral man with respect to his actions. It is a transcendence that expresses the impossibility of any finite creation matching the infinite spiritual activity of its creator. As such this transcendence is a condition of a new action or a new creation, which is to say, of immanence. I believe that philosophy must escape from the excessively pointed and empirical immanentism it has taken on in recent times, its overwhelming love of concreteness leading it to sacrifice a major component of spiritual life, just as concrete, albeit in a different way. I do not see why a dialectical conception of the spirit should not celebrate the supreme dialectical antithesis of immanence and transcendence, which in its moments expresses the very rhythm of spiritual life, in its incessant movement from possession to anxiety about the new, from the known to the unknown, from the past to the future. But this higher dialectic implies the attainment of

that meta-historical standpoint which I have been talking about, on which transcendence and immanence are founded in a moving synthesis.

Translated by J. R. M. Wakefield