

by Ernest Gellner

# Time machines

**Raymond Aron:** Introduction to the Philosophy of History. An Essay on the limits of historical objectivity. Weidenfeld & Nicolson. 36s.

IN 1984, he who controls the past controls the future: the will and spirit of men is broken by making it impossible for them to orient themselves by referring to a stable and objective past. For Winston Smith, the idea that there *is* an objective past at all, becomes a desperate act of faith and not, as it still is for the unreflective, a tranquil recognition of a truism. There is a mainly continental tradition of philosophic thinkers who, without being driven to it by deliberate manipulation of evidence and vision on the 1984 scale, are preoccupied with the problem. Professional and generally professorial Hamlets, they wonder whether conscience will make sceptics of them all.

Is this a genuine and serious problem? I have no doubt but that it is. Manipulation of the past is not a modern invention, still less a product of George Orwell's imagination. Primitive tribes are expert at it: the absence of documentation not merely facilitates the task, but also makes it more imperative—for if arrangements cannot be ratified in writing, they must be consecrated by tribal 'memory' . . .

Moreover, the problem is particularly acute for 'historical' cultures, for societies in which there is both a sense and a reality of cumulateness, in which people have the habit of seeing themselves against a historical background. ('You have *never* had it so good.') This backcloth of human history provides the context of our conduct as much as the physical environment in which we move, if not more so: most of our actions consist not of shifting matter—or only incidentally—but of affecting people. But how do we *know* this milieu in which we act?

This problem is both different and more serious than that of the knowledge of our physical environment (tables, apples, hands, bent sticks), which provides the more usual stamping ground for theoreticians of knowledge. Discrepancies in sense-perception (if not in its interpretation) are not great: moreover, if someone chooses to adopt a new theory of the material world, or of the way it is accessible to knowledge, he still goes on *seeing* it as he did, before and as others do, whether he likes it or not. Nature has a way of imposing herself irrespective of the vagaries of our thoughts: Clio is less autocratic, or has less powerful means of

compulsion at her disposal. Hence the theory of (natural) knowledge can claim, with plausibility if not with full justification, to be a merely passive inquiry into *how* we know, and to ignore the question of *whether* we do at all, on the grounds that it is not worth putting this in doubt. But a theory of historical knowledge cannot do this with even a shadow of plausibility. Total scepticism may perhaps be excluded: but the question of just how much knowledge there is, and of what kind and with how good a standing, cannot be avoided. It is this kind of formulation which Professor Aron adopts at the beginning of his



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study: ' . . . we shall ask: "Is a universally valid science of history possible? To what extent?" Lacking a science of history whose existence would be universally accepted, we substitute the search for *limits* for that of *bases*.'

The 'philosophy of history' with which Aron is concerned is, of course, this investigation into the nature of historical and social knowledge, rather than a disclosure of the design on the unrolling carpet of history: his very first sentence is concerned to warn the reader not to expect something like 'the great systems of the beginning of the nineteenth century, so discredited today'. Thus his concern is with epistemological though not with technical questions: he is not concerned with 'the proof of facts or the criticism of texts', but, taking for granted their 'strictly scientific character', he is concerned with the 'choice, interpretation, the organisation of the material'. This approach does not, however, exclude a preoccupation with the 'meaning' of history, for the inquiry is Kantian in this general sense, that the investigated activities of interpretation turn out also to be closely related to those of valuation. . . .

This inquiry does, as indicated, face difficulties other than those facing a study of physical knowledge. Aron alludes to the inseparability, in this context, of knowledge and thing known, because ' . . . man's

consciousness of the past is one of the essential characteristics of history itself'. This emerges in connection with the cumulateness of human history: 'Man . . . builds structures which survive him, collects the monuments of the past. History *and* the awareness of history begin when men start to pass on to each other their gains. . . .' (I have re-written the English of this passage, which, as it stands in the translation, is barely intelligible.) The consequence of this for a theory of historical knowledge are, that the knowledge investigated (history, *sense one*) is also a constituent of its own object (history, *sense two*). . . .

Cumulateness is indeed a crucial feature of history. Naïve theories of history as the Education of the Human Race are happily out of fashion, whether this education is conceived as the systematic instruction of individuals by experience or, worse, as the private ruminations of a collective spirit in a state of spontaneous growth. It is social structures, and not minds or Mind, which change. Nevertheless, a more sophisticated study of the *extent* to which history *is* (and is not) like a ledger, in which past entries affect subsequent ones, and of the way in which precedents are established and followed, or possibilities eliminated, and of the organisational conditions which make transmission and accumulation easier—all this is perhaps due for a revival.

Given the interest of the subject and the distinction of the author, does this book altogether fulfil the high expectations it arouses? Very regretfully, one must say No. The book is an early work of a man who has since acquired, rightly, a quite outstanding reputation as a social thinker and an incisive writer. But the present volume bears too many unfortunate signs of its time and place of origin, of the youth of the author at the time he wrote it, and of a very hasty translation. (Occasionally sentences only become intelligible if one reflects on the French word order.)

Some of the arguments are local polemics,

which only a most unhistorical parochialism could suppose to be of universal interest. For instance, the very first pages plunge one into criticism of Cournot which, explicitly, 'assume a familiarity with Cournot's philosophy'. How many readers of the English translation can be assumed to possess this familiarity? One has a feeling of eavesdropping on a conversation at the Ecole Normale, and in the 1930's at that. In other places, one has the even worse impression of listening in to a thinker's private and unedited thoughts: one is forced to speculate about his private associations and meanings in order to make much sense of the argument.

There are too many sentences like this one: 'If every relationship must be, at one and the same time, both *sinnadäquat* and *kausaladäquat*, conformable to logic (either psychological or intellectual) and to an observed regularity, no proposition would be scientifically acceptable, because of the mere fact that it would be intelligible.' Now this statement, though hardly good English, does mean something, contrary to appearances: but it is no easy matter to find out just what. (It means: if two conditions are required of an historical interpretation, then—naturally—one of these conditions alone is not sufficient. The two conditions are also specified: one is that the interpretation should make sense psychologically, and the second, that there should be factual evidence of its truth. But could not the translator have sorted out the tautology and the classification now all mixed up in one sentence?—and substituted 'was' for the final 'would be'?)

Or again, the translator, going rather mechanically from French into English, refers to something called the 'Ruse of Reason'. But this originally German, Hegelian phrase, is already naturalised—more or less—in English as the *Cunning of Reason*, and there is no call to re-name it. (Sociologists have turned it into 'latent

function'.) It is a good and picturesque way of referring to the doctrine that a supra-human agency controls history, but without visible interference, for it leads men to fulfil *its* ends in history through their generally unsuccessful pursuit of their own ends. (The only trouble with the *Cunning of Reason* is that it is neither cunning nor reason.)

But here the author is at fault too: he lucidly describes the idea itself and warns us of the difficulty of applying it now that mankind recognises 'neither master nor guardian', and of the danger of falling into 'the platitudinous and cowardly attitude of those who worship the outcome', i.e. the bandwagon-jumpers who use this notion simply to rubber-stamp *any* outcome as the proper and moral end. Quite so: but he himself refrains from facing squarely the dilemma of whether such ascriptions of direction and purpose to historical processes is legitimate; he seems to prevaricate, to refer to this 'intelligibility' as 'doubtful', and yet at the same time 'superior': also as 'foreign' to the individual consciousness and perhaps part and parcel of the human spirit. Determinism (he goes on to say) is inherent in reality and a construct of science, partial, and yet without limits set in advance'.

I simply cannot make out from this passage (and making all allowances for context) whether Aron, when he wrote it, thought that I was, or was *not*, a slave of forces bigger than myself acting through my ends for the achievement of their own. It appears to be doubtful *and* inherent in the association of individuals with each other; inherent in reality *and* a construct of science . . . *which?* It is indeed far from clear whether Aron is describing the *idea* as inherent in thought *about* history, or whether he is saying that the idea is itself true, and in that sense inherent *in* history itself. The fact that the two issues are connected does not excuse the confusion.

Also, there are too many intellectual purple passages, much less acceptable in translation, at any rate in prose: ' . . . perhaps man succeeds if he defines himself even as he creates himself, in overcoming history by recognising and determining it.' Amen?

It would seem that French philosophy has suffered from German measles far too long. The worst symptom is loss of lucidity. The compatriots of Descartes delude themselves that they still possess it, but only by confusing it with elegance. The elegance, however, disappears in the English translation . . .

In brief, stimulating though much of it is, how much better this book could have been if only Professor Aron had rewritten it recently, and translated it himself.