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'History and the Social Sciences' by Mr. M. Oakeshott

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When I was asked to take part in this discussion it was suggested to me that, since it was improbable that I could make any serious contribution to the debate, I might as well provide the comic relief: I might, for example, consider my predecessor as an opponent and knock him down. But, having heard what he has to say, I fear the fun won't be so fast and furious as I had hoped. It is always more amusing (and also it is less trouble) to give the lie direct to an opponent than to fiddle about with fine distinctions and partial agreements; but it is rare to find two views so genuinely antithetical that they can be set at one another without more ado. And, since I cannot merely and altogether oppose what has already been said, I find myself in the invidious position of having to choose the less amusing part. I have no knock-out blow to deliver. The best I can manage is a feint with the right followed by a glancing left. It is difficult to forecast the effect of this somewhat oblique onslaught, but I can scarcely expect it to bring my opponent to the floor. I want first to understand what we are to mean when we speak of history. I think some confusion exists in the minds of many who use this word; and I believe that we shall not achieve a satisfactory view of the relationship of history and the social sciences until that confusion is dispelled. My feint, you see, consists in suggesting to my opponent that there is something important which he has not yet thought about; and just as he is beginning to give us his opinion, I shall jump in and tell him what his conclusions ought to be. It is so familiar a subterfuge that perhaps it will fail altogether to deceive. History, as I understand it, is a certain way of thinking and of writing about the past. There are many ways of thinking and writing about the past, but history is separated from all others by certain distinguishing characteristics. This, I know, is a clumsy and inaccurate way of speaking. The past is not "there," formless, meaningless material, waiting to be given shape and significance, if not by the historian, then by the philosopher or the sociologist. There is a past for every way of thinking: there is neither one preeminent past, nor is there any past at all except for some way of thinking. That of course, is philosophy, and therefore introduces unnecessary complications; it is better, perhaps, to keep to the falsity of commonsense and say that history is a certain way of thinking about the past. Yet, the word history is frequently used indifferently to mean a certain way of thinking about the past, to

mean any and every way of thinking and writing about the past, and to mean what those who believe in its existence would call the past course of events itself, what actually happened, what was. And sometimes, even, the word is made to bear more than one of these meanings in a single sentence. But I think we must decide which of these meanings the word is to have, for otherwise we shall not escape ambiguity and confusion. For myself I should like to dismiss at once the notion that history is the past course of events itself separated from anybody's ideas about it, that history is what actually happened. I should like to dismiss this notion because I find it altogether meaningless. It depends upon the separation of "what has come to us" and "our interpretation of it," and it introduces nothing but chaos into our intellectual world. History is not made by statesmen, by soldiers, or by men in the street, any more than entomology is made by insects; the one is made by historians, the other by entomologists. Of "what actually happened" we know and can know nothing at all; if history were that it would be at once nothing and unknowable. No event, no past is historical unless it has survived in record; and further, not even all recorded events are historical events. History is not "what actually happened"; it is "what the evidence obliges us to believe." And if history is "what the evidence obliges us to believe," then it is a way of thinking about the past, governed and controlled by rules of evidence, and is not the past itself separated from our knowledge of it. And further, I should like also to dismiss the notion of history as any and every way of thinking about the past; to dismiss the notion that every past is an historical past. There are, obviously, some pasts, or some ways of thinking about the past, which are distinct from the past in history. The remembered past, for example, is not as such, an historical past; for memory is essentially personal. And again, the imagined or fancied past is a past different from the past in history. An imagined past, a past of myth or tradition, may, for some purposes, be valuable and significant; it may, for example, have an immense and beneficial control over belief and activity; but it is a past alien from that of history. And once more, there is what may be called a practical past, which, though it may not be a merely mythical or traditional past, must nevertheless be distinguished from the historical past. Here the past is thought of as merely that which preceded the present, that from which the present has grown or developed, and the significance of the past is taken to lie in the fact that it has been influential in deciding the present or future fortunes of men. The past, that is to say, is thought of in terms of the present and as explanatory of the present: it becomes a storehouse of political wisdom, an authority for religious belief, the raw material for literature, or even a way of expressing a philosophical system. But this way of thinking of the past is, also, a distinct and different way of thinking of it from that which belongs, to history.

There are, then, ways of thinking and writing about the past which differ from the way in which the historian thinks and writes of it, there are pasts other than the past for history, and consequently history must be taken to mean something more definite and confined than merely any and every way of thinking about the past. History is a certain, specific way of thinking about the past; and we are left with the question, what distinguishes the historian's way of thinking about the past? A question calling for a careful and detailed answer, in place of which, however, I can offer here only two observations.

First, the past in history is a dead past, and it is a past essentially unlike the present. The historian is interested in the deadness of the past, and in its dissimilarity from the present. What attracts his eye and fires his enthusiasm is diversity. He has a preternatural sensibility for the minute and detailed differences which distinguish one situation from another, one man from another, one age from another. The modern instance does not attract him, for he knows that similarities appear only when details are neglected. The historical past is, thus, the product of the imagination; history is the perpetual recreation of lost worlds. No doubt there have been writers about the past so preoccupied with the condition and the problems of their present world that they were unable to distinguish past from present, but this failure of imagination is a measure of their failure to write history. Now, the engagement of the historian with diversity and with dissimilarity does not imply that for him the past is merely a succession of unique events and situations; it does not imply that, in any philosophical sense, events for the historian are singular. An historical is never a mere point-instant; it is something with a meaning, something that can maintain itself relatively intact and self-complete. Things in history are not bare particulars they are changing identities; but the point at which change creates a new identity is, for history, determined, without entering into any ultimate question, by a imaginative judgment based in each case upon the available evidence. In short, there may be similarities (and certainly because the historian chooses to neglect them does not mean that they do not exist and cannot be elucidated), but the historical past is essentially a world of relative dissimilarities and diversities. Nor does this neglect of similarities imply (as is sometimes supposed) that the historical past is not a generalised past, that generalisation is foreign to historical thinking, or that the historian is merely an archivist or a collector of information which he is powerless to coordinate. That, though a (sic) common, is an absurd notion. An historical person, situation or event is itself unavoidably a generalisation; and history, no less than every other form of knowledge, consists of nothing but generalisations. But it implies that generalisation in history is

limited, limited by the presuppositions in terms of which the historical past is constructed. And it implies that generalisation which conflicts with the historical concepts of person, situation, event, etc., is and must always remain, foreign to history.

My second observation is that history is thinking about the past for the sake of the past; it is a way of thinking about the past free from all extraneous interests. For many people the past has interest only in so far as the knowledge of it can be used for some ulterior purpose, just as there are people whose interest in horse-racing is confined to the money they can make by it. But of the one class it must be said that those who compose it are without the genuine historical sense, and of the other that they are not true racing enthusiasts but merely business men. For the historian the enjoyment of his pursuit depends upon no extraneous purpose or result; the attempt to imagine and elucidate a past, lost and different world from that in which he lives is, taken by itself, completely satisfying. And the introduction of an extraneous purpose, because it involves a totally different way of thinking about the past, is not merely the perversion of history, but its destruction. This, again, does not mean that the study of the past can yield nothing over and above an historical knowledge of the past; it means that the *historical* study of the past can yield nothing more. Now, what I have attempted is to suggest a definite meaning for the word history, because I believe that until we know exactly what we mean by it we cannot determine its relations with the social sciences or with anything else. My view is that history is this particular (and no other) way of thinking about the past. And if it be this, then the absolute impossibility of deriving from history any generalisations of the kind which belong to a social science will, I think, follow. And I believe that only those who attach no particular meaning to the word history (taking it to be any and every way of thinking about the past), or those who think that history is "what actually happened," a course of events altogether independent of experience, can reasonably hold that history itself can supply either material or evidence for a social science. I believe, in short, that history and social science can be brought together only by those who are ignorant of the nature of either and careless of the interests of both - the professional matchmakers of the intellectual world.

This view of the matter depends, of course, as much upon a conception of science and social science as upon a conception of history; and consequently I must at least indicate what I take to be the nature of scientific knowledge. But here again a few observations only can be made. Science is the attempt to conceive the world in what may perhaps be called the most abstractly

universal manner possible; it is the attempt to conceive and to generalise the world under the category of quantity, the type of generalisation aimed at being a statistical generalisation in some form or other. And a social science which conforms to this general character may, at least, be imagined. And if it is objected that there are at present few sciences which closely approximate to this character, we may somewhat reduce our requirements without surrendering our principle, and say that scientific knowledge is always in the form of universal generalisations. And again, a social science of this character may easily be imagined. It would be an attempt to discover and establish generalisations about the life and conduct, or some particular aspects of the life and conduct, of societies; and the observations with which such a science or sciences, would be concerned, no doubt, be taken partly from the present and partly from the records of the past. With the observations which might be made in the contemporary world we are not here concerned: what we have to consider are those derived from the past, for it is at this point that social science and history are said to come together in a common undertaking, it is at this point that history is said to contribute to, or even to be transformed into, a science of society. Now, in order to make scientific use of records of the past each event or situation must be transformed into an instance of a general rule; facts of the past must be regarded as ephemeral instances of the stable generalisations which a science of society seeks to propound. At first sight it would appear to be difficult to discover a means by which this can be achieved. If the facts of the past could somehow be reduced to figures, the difficulty would disappear; stable statistical generalizations would at once become possible. But to reduce the life and conduct of social life to the category of quantity, except in the case of such things as population and wealth, has been found so difficult an undertaking that sociologists have had to resort to less scientific methods. Recorded facts, they say, even when they cannot be reduced to figures, may be related and compared with one another in such a way as to give generalisations of value and significance. With the serious logical defects of the comparative method we are not concerned; all we need observe is that directly the facts of the past become instances of a general rule they cease to be historical facts. The scientific way of thinking about the past at this point, as at some others, begins where the historical way ends: where comparison begins, as a method of generalisation, history ends.

But there is another obvious way in which the scientific use of the records of the past is different from the historical use - a difference which, I believe, establishes a genuine cleavage. For the historical way of thinking, the position of an event or situation in the past, and its pastness are both essential aspects: whereas the scientific

use of the facts of the past is based upon the neglect of these aspects. The world of scientific generalisation is a world ignorant alike of past and future as such; it knows nothing of historical time, and recognises time only within its own world as a method of relating concepts. To regard a fact as an instance of a general rule lifts it at once out of the domain of history but depriving it of its pastness.

My conclusion, then, which I have been able to support only with a few random observations, is that in spite of the use a social science may be able to make of the facts of the recorded past, it can make no use whatever of historical facts. Social science and history must think about the past in different ways and with different presuppositions. What history says is not denied by science, it is simply irrelevant to science. And only when history is misconceived and science is misunderstood is it possible to think of them concerned in a common undertaking.