

What is history?

According to William James, "history" is "a double-barrelled word," in that it quite properly refers both to the facts of the past themselves and to an understanding or account of these facts. This seems to me to be one of the two distinctions that need to be employed in answering the question, What is history?

The other arises from the two different ways in which we can experience facts of the past and understand or give an account of them. Rudolf Bultmann clarifies these two ways when he says that "the one reality [*sc.* of the past] can be seen under a double aspect in accordance with our double possibility as human beings of existing authentically or inauthentically. In inauthentic existence we understand ourselves in terms of the world that stands at our disposal, whereas in authentic existence we understand ourselves in terms of the future of which we cannot dispose. Correspondingly, we can look at the history of the past in an objectifying way or else as personal address, insofar as in it the possibilities of human self-understanding become perceptible and summon us to responsible choice" (*NTM*: 158).

My view is that Bultmann's clarification is only strengthened if his distinction between the objectifying and existential ways of experiencing the past is seen to be a high-level special case of Whitehead's still more fundamental distinction between "perception in the (pure) mode of presentational immediacy," or "the (mixed) mode of symbolic reference," on the one hand, and "perception in the (pure) mode of causal efficacy," on the other. But be this as it may, both the facts of the past and our understanding or account of them are different, depending upon whether or not we turn to them in an objectifying way or, rather, in an existential way, allowing that, in the economy of human existence, both ways are necessary if we are either to survive or to prosper.

One way of formulating this second distinction is to distinguish between "*die Historie*" and "*die Geschichte*" after the manner of Martin Kähler as well as Bultmann himself. Another way is to distinguish with H.

Richard Niebuhr between "external history" and "internal history." My own way of making what I understand to be essentially the same distinction is to distinguish "*the empirical-historical*" from "*the existential-historical*." In the case of history in either sense, the principle is upheld that history is what it is only in relation to someone *for whom* it is history. In other words, facts of the past become historical facts or events only insofar as they are viewed either empirical-historically or existential-historically, or both. To this extent, justice is done to James's basic point about "the double-barrelled" meaning of "history." But also upheld is the further difference between the two ways in which facts of the past can become properly historical for us.

Following are several relevant passages from Bultmann's essays, which fill out this basic answer to the question.

". . . historical phenomena . . . are of a different kind from the phenomena of nature, As historical phenomena they do not exist at all without a historical subject who understands them. For facts of the past become historical phenomena only when they become meaningful for a subject who exists in history and participates in it. They become historical phenomena only when they speak, and this they do only for the subject who understands them. This is not to say, of course, that the subject simply attaches a meaning to them by arbitrary preference; it is to say, rather, that they acquire a meaning for anyone who is bound together with them in historical life. Thus, in a certain sense, it belongs to a historical phenomenon that it should have its own future in which it alone shows itself for what it is.

". . . every historical phenomenon is complex and many-sided; it is open to different ways of asking questions, whether the way of intellectual history, psychology, sociology, or what have you, provided only that it arise out of the historical bond between the interpreter and the phenomenon. Any such way of asking questions leads to objective, unambiguous understanding if the interpretation is carried through in a methodical way. . . .

". . . The way of asking questions as such does not grow out of individual preference but out of history itself, in which every phenomenon, in keeping with its complex nature, offers different aspects, that is, acquires—

or, better, claims—significance in different directions. And it is in this same history that every interpreter, in keeping with the motives present in the variety of historical life, acquires the way of asking questions within which the phenomena begin to speak.

"Thus, the demand that the interpreter has to silence his or her subjectivity and quench any individuality in order to achieve objective knowledge could not be more absurd. It makes sense and is justified only insofar as it means that the interpreter must silence his or her personal wishes with respect to the results of interpretation—such as a wish, say, that the text should confirm a certain (dogmatic) opinion or provide useful guidelines for praxis. . . . For the rest, however, this demand completely misjudges the nature of genuine understanding, which presupposes the utmost liveliness of the understanding subject and the richest possible unfolding of his or her individuality. . . . Here the 'most subjective' interpretation is the 'most objective,' because the only person who is able to hear the claim of the text is the person who is moved by the question of his or her existence" (84 ff.).

". . . it belongs to a historical event that it has a meaning in the continuous course of history, a meaning that first raises it to the rank of a historical event" (135).

". . . historical phenomena are [not] ambiguous, but they are many-sided. They can be seen under several aspects, under different perspectives. And this is so because human beings themselves are complex. They consist of body and soul (or if one prefers, of body, soul, and spirit); they are possessed of drives and reason; they have material and spiritual needs, wishes, and imagination. . . . It is just as possible, therefore, to see and describe history as political history as to see and describe it as the history of economics, the history of problems, the history of ideas, or the history of individuals and personalities. . . . Each of these ways of looking at history is open to one side of the phenomena, and something objectively right becomes evident under every aspect (provided there are not any methodical errors). The picture is falsified only when one way of looking is absolutized and turned into a dogma. . . .

"In every perspective something objectively right is seen. The subjectivity of historians (given the strictness of their methods) does not mean that they see falsely, but only that they choose certain ways of asking questions. Without such, however, no picture of history can be projected at all, insofar as it seeks to get beyond a merely chronological and narrative presentation and tries to show the play of forces in the course of events and their connection" (135 f.).

". . . historical phenomena are not what they are as such—precisely as historical phenomena—without the historical subjects who understand them" (136).

"History speaks in the sense of disclosing its essence only to those who themselves stand in history and participate in it. Only to them are historical phenomena visible in their meaning. This does not mean, naturally, that the subjects who understand the phenomena ascribe a meaning to them by subjective preference that they do not have in themselves. . . .

"Events or figures of the past are not historical phenomena at all simply 'in themselves,' not even as parts of a causal continuum. They are historical phenomena only in their relatedness to the future, for which they have meaning and for which the present has responsibility. One can say, then, that to every historical phenomenon belongs its own future in which it first shows itself for what it is; more exactly, in which it *more and more* shows itself for what it is. For it will definitively show itself for what it is only when history has reached its end. . . .

"If we today no longer presume to know the goal and the end of history and, therefore, regard the question about the meaning of history as a whole as meaningless, still the question about the meaning of our own history, as the history out of which we come, is not only meaningful but imperative. It is the question about the meaning of the historical phenomena on which we look back for the present, which is called to responsibility by the future. Such a question can be answered only by each new present, but it also demands to be answered. . . .

"By means of this kind of historical reflection, the phenomena of the past become real historical phenomena and begin to disclose their meaning. But this means that objectivity in historical knowledge is not to be attained either in the sense of conclusive knowledge or even in the sense that a phenomenon in its being in itself is perceived by the historian in some purely receptive way. There simply is not any such being in itself of a real historical phenomenon.

". . . this does not mean that historical knowledge is subjective in the sense that it depends on the individual preference of the historian who is its 'subject.' If the historical way of asking questions grows out of the historical life of the responsible historian, it includes a readiness to hear the claim that is encountered in the historical phenomenon. For just this reason the demand applying to all scientific research, that it be conducted without presuppositions, also applies to historical research. Of course, historians may not presuppose the results of their work but must silence any of their own personal wishes with respect to its results. But this does not mean that they have to quench their personal individuality for the sake of the objectivity of their knowledge. On the contrary, genuine historical understanding presupposes the utmost liveliness of the 'subjects' who understand, the richest possible unfolding of their individuality. Only those are able to understand history who are themselves moved by sharing in history, that is, who are open to the language of history by their own responsibilities for the future. In this sense it is precisely the 'most subjective' interpretation of history that is the 'most objective.' Those alone who are moved by the question of their own historical existence are able to attend to history's claim.

"Even in this case understanding history gives rise to a scientific, 'objectifying' presentation. . . . The living participation of historians in history, their existential encounter with it, shifts into the role of a means for acquiring 'objective' historical knowledge. Thus historians who are involved the most intensively and the most passionately force themselves to a perceiving that attains the highest degree of objectivity. . . .

"But while [the genuine understanding of history] soon becomes the means to an objectifying presentation and submits its knowledge to discussion, there is an existential understanding that is solely my own and out of which there can indeed arise a practical way of leading my life but not any objectifying presentation" (137 ff.).

"If we question history out of a lively concern with our own problems, it really begins to speak to us. Through discussion with the past it comes alive, and in learning to know history we learn to know our own present: historical knowledge is at the same time knowledge of ourselves. To understand history is possible only for one who does not stand over against it as a neutral, nonparticipating spectator but also stands within it and shares responsibility for it. We speak of this encounter with history that grows out of one's own historicity as the 'existential encounter.' The historian participates in it with the whole of his or her existence.

"This existential relation to history is the basic presupposition for understanding it. This does not mean that understanding history is 'subjective' in the sense that it depends on the personal preference of the historian and thereby loses all objective significance. On the contrary, it means that history can be understood precisely in its objective content only by a subject who is existentially concerned and alive" (149 f.).

". . . historical knowledge is never closed or definitive any more than is the presunderstanding with which the historian approaches historical phenomena in asking about them. If historical phenomena are not facts that can be neutrally observed but rather disclose themselves in their meaning only to one who approaches them alive with questions, they are always understandable only now in that they speak anew to every present situation. Indeed, the questioning itself arises out of the historical situation, out of the claim of the now, out of the problem that is given in the now. For this reason historical research is never closed but must always be carried further. . . . Hence, one must say that a historical event can be known for what it is—precisely as a historical event—only in the future. And one may also say that the future of a historical event belongs to it" (150 f.).

". . . the historical meaning of an event can be understood only from the standpoint of its future. Its future belongs to the very essence of the event" (157).

"If . . . the science of history seeks to clarify the possibilities of self-understanding that are manifested by human decisions, it must also present the concrete situations of past history. But these situations disclose themselves only to an objectifying view of the past. Even if such a view cannot grasp the historical meaning of an act or an event, it nevertheless can and must seek to know the sheer facts of acts and events and, in *this* sense, to establish 'how it really was.' . . . Therefore, it is quite clear that existentialist interpretation of history has need of objectifying observation of the historical past. Even if such observation cannot grasp the historical meaning of an act or an event, existentialist interpretation is equally unable to dispense with the (most reliable possible) determination of facts. . . . If one means by 'fact' a historical fact in the full sense, inclusive of its meaning and its significance in the continuum of historical processes, the statement [*sc.* Nietzsche's statement that there are no facts but only interpretations] is correct. In this sense a fact is always an 'interpretation,' a picture drawn by the historian who is personally involved in it. But an interpretation clearly is not a creature of fantasy but the interpretation of something, and this something to be interpreted is the 'fact' that (within whatever limits) is accessible to the historian's objectifying view" (158 f.).