

A HISTORY
OF
PHILOSOPHY

VOLUME VI

Modern Philosophy:
From the French
Enlightenment to Kant

Frederick Copleston, S.J.



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PART III

THE RISE OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

CHAPTER VIII

BOSSUET AND VICO

Introductory remarks; the Greeks, St. Augustine—Bossuet—Vico—Montesquieu.

I. ACCORDING to Aristotle in the *Poetics*,¹ poetry is 'something more philosophical and of graver import than history, because its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are particular'.² Science and philosophy are concerned with the universal, whereas history is the sphere of the particular and of the contingent. Poetry, of course, is not philosophy or science; but it is 'more philosophical' than history. It is true that Aristotle makes general statements about historical development, which might possibly be classified under the heading of philosophy of history. For, like Plato before him, he speaks in the *Politics* of the various kinds of revolution which tend to occur under different institutions, of their causes and of the means of preventing them and of the tendencies in certain types of constitution to turn into other types. But such remarks are obviously general reflections on history of the kind which could perfectly well be made by the historian himself. If we mean by philosophy of history a total view of historical development purporting to show that this development, as made known by historical research, follows a rational pattern and fulfils some plan or exemplifies certain universal and necessary laws, we can hardly say that the Greeks elaborated a philosophy of history. They had, of course, their historians, such as Thucydides, but this is a different matter. True, the notion of a cyclic return in the history of the world was common enough, and this theory can, indeed, be called a philosophy of history. But it can scarcely be claimed that the Greeks elaborated the theory. And if we concentrate our attention on the tradition

¹ 1451b, 3-8.

² On the meaning of this statement, as far as poetry is concerned, see Vol. I, pp. 361-2.

which ultimately came to dominate Greek philosophy, namely the Platonic tradition, we find a marked tendency to belittle the importance of historical development, a tendency connected, of course, with the Platonic insistence on unchanging spiritual reality as the sphere of true being in contrast with the sphere of becoming. The most impressive expression of this tendency is probably that found in Plotinus,¹ when he depicts historical events as so many incidents in a play which must be set in sharp contrast with the interior life, the spiritual return of the soul to God. True, Plotinus does not subtract history from the rule of law and of 'providence'. And his view of human history must be accounted a philosophy of history, inasmuch as it is closely linked with his general philosophical outlook: it is part of his system, just as the Stoics' view of cosmic history as a series of cycles was part of their system. But the tendency of Plotinus is to belittle the events to which prominence is accorded by the historian. And in any case there is no idea of human history in general as a development towards a goal which is attained in and through history.

The idea of history not as a series of cycles but as a process of progressive development towards an ultimate goal is characteristic, not of Greek but of Jewish and Christian thought. But the intimate connection between this idea and the doctrines of the Messiah in Judaism and of the Incarnation in Christianity, as well as with Jewish and Christian eschatological doctrines, leads to a theory of historical development which is theological in character, in the sense that it presupposes theological doctrines. The most notable example of a specifically Christian philosophy of history is, of course, the theory of St. Augustine as presented in his *De civitate Dei*, in which the history of the Jewish people and the foundation and growth of the Christian Church play important roles. I do not wish to repeat here what I have said in the second volume of this *History*² about St. Augustine's philosophy of history. It is sufficient to remark that he thought in terms of a total 'Christian wisdom' rather than in terms of a systematic distinction between theology and philosophy. The fact, therefore, that his view of history is largely a theological interpretation with reference to God's providential dealings with the Jews as manifested in the Old Testament and with reference to the Incarnation and its prolongation, so to speak, in the Church, Christ's mystical body, is in no way inconsistent with his general outlook. And it is,

¹ *Enneads*, III, 2.

² See Vol. II, pp. 85-9.

indeed, arguable, at least from a Christian point of view, both that an interpretation of history as a process of development towards a determinate goal cannot be anything else but a theological interpretation and that a non-theological interpretation of history, so far as it is capable of validity, is reducible to the sort of statements about history which historians themselves are competent to make. In other words, it is arguable, from a Christian point of view, that there can be no such thing as a philosophy of history, if this term is understood to mean an interpretation of the whole of history as an intelligible movement towards a determinate goal and if a systematic distinction between philosophy and theology is presupposed. However, if it is claimed that there can be no such thing as a philosophy of history in this sense, the claim must obviously be understood with reference to a valid philosophy of history. For it is clear enough that philosophies of history which do not presuppose theological doctrines have been and are presented. The Marxist philosophy of history is a case in point. And though we are not concerned with Marxism in this volume, we are concerned with the transition from a theological to a non-theological interpretation of history. X

2. Jacques Bénigne Bossuet (1627-1704), the great orator who was bishop first of Condom and afterwards of Meaux, expounded a theological interpretation of history in his *Discourse on Universal History* (*Discours sur l'histoire universelle*, 1681). In his preface to the work, dedicated to the Dauphin, he emphasizes two aspects of universal history, the development of religion and that of empires. For 'religion and political government are the two points on which human affairs turn'.¹ Through a study of history princes can be made aware of the abiding presence and importance of religion in its successive forms and of the causes of political changes and of the transition from one empire to another.

Obviously, these two themes could be treated by a non-religious historian, without any theological presuppositions. But in his *Discourse on Universal History* Bossuet has apologetic considerations in mind. In the first part he outlines twelve epochs: Adam, or creation; Noe, or the Deluge; the vocation of Abraham; Moses, or the written Law; the taking of Troy; Solomon, or the building of the Temple; Romulus, or the foundation of Rome; Cyrus, or the re-establishment of the Jews; Scipio, or the conquest of Carthage; the birth of Jesus Christ; Constantine, or the peace of

¹ *Dessain général.*

the Church; and Charlemagne, or the establishment of the new empire. In other words, Bossuet is concerned with the providential dealings of God with the chosen people, with the spread of the Roman empire as a preparation for Christianity, with the Incarnation and with the establishment of the Church and of Christian society. Oriental empires enter upon the scene only in function of their relations with the Jewish people. India and China are omitted. The theological doctrines of creation, of divine providence, and of the Incarnation form the framework of the author's historical scheme. And the twelve epochs fall under seven 'ages of the world', the birth of Christ ushering in the seventh and last.

In the second part, devoted to the development of religion, apologetic considerations are again dominant. We pass from the creation through the time of the Patriarchs to the revelation of the Law to Moses; and from the kings and prophets to the Christian revelation. Bossuet discusses, indeed, some religions, such as those of Rome and Egypt, other than Judaism and Christianity; but his remarks are incidental to his main theme, that Christianity is the perfect development of religion. 'This Church, always attacked and never conquered, is a perpetual miracle and a striking testimony to the changelessness of the counsels of God.'²

The idea of divine providence is prominent also in the third part of the *Discourse*, which deals with the fortunes of empires. Thus we are told that 'these empires have for the most part a necessary connection with the history of the people of God'.³ God used the Assyrians and Babylonians to punish the Jews, the Persians to re-establish them in their land, Alexander and his first successors to protect them, and the Romans to maintain their liberty against the kings of Syria. And when the Jews rejected Christ, God used these same Romans to chastise them, though the Romans did not understand the significance of the destruction of Jerusalem. Bossuet does not, of course, confine himself to such general familiar statements. He discusses the particular causes of the falls of a number of empires and States from Egypt to Rome, and he endeavours to draw lessons for the Dauphin from these discussions. His final conclusion is that no man can rule the course of history according to his own plans and wishes. A prince may intend to produce one effect by his actions and in actual fact produce another. 'There is no human power which does not serve,

² *Discourse*, Part II, 13.

³ *Ibid.*, Part III, 1.