

Popper

The Poverty of Historicism

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‘Popper’s work is of far greater than mere academic value; it has an immediate manifest bearing on the political decisions everyone has to make.’

The Listener

‘Karl Popper was a philosopher of uncommon originality, clarity and depth, and his range was exceptional.’

The Times

‘One of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century.’

The Daily Telegraph

‘This is one of the three or four most important books on the methodology of the social sciences to appear since the war.’

New Statesman

Karl Popper

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In memory of the countless men, women and children of all creeds or nations or races who fell victims to the fascist and communist belief in Inexorable Laws of Historical Destiny.

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HISTORICAL NOTE

The fundamental thesis of this book—that the belief in historical destiny is sheer superstition, and that there can be no prediction of the course of human history by scientific or any other rational methods—goes back to the winter of 1919–20. The main outline was completed by 1935; it was first read, in January or February 1936, as a paper entitled ‘The Poverty of Historicism’, at a private session in the house of my friend Alfred Braunthal in Brussels. At this meeting, a former student of mine made some important contributions to the discussion. It was Dr. Karl Hilferding, soon to fall a victim of the Gestapo and of the historicist superstitions of the Third Reich. There were also some other philosophers present. Shortly afterwards, I read a similar paper in Professor F. A. von Hayek’s Seminar, at the London School of Economics. Publication was delayed by some years because my manuscript was rejected by the philosophical periodical to which it was submitted. It was first published, in three parts, in *Economica*, N.S., vol. XI, no. 42 and 43, 1944, and vol. XII, no. 46, 1945. Since then, an Italian translation (Milano, 1954) and a French translation (Paris, 1956) have appeared in book form. The text of the present edition has been revised, and some additions have been made.

K. R. P.

1957

PREFACE

I tried to show, in *The Poverty of Historicism*, that historicism is a poor method—a method which does not bear any fruit. But I did not actually refute historicism.

Since then, I have succeeded in giving a refutation of historicism: *I have shown that, for strictly logical reasons, it is impossible for us to predict the future course of history.*

The argument is contained in a paper, ‘Indeterminism in Classical Physics and in Quantum Physics’, which I published in 1950. But I am no longer satisfied with this paper. A more satisfactory treatment will be found in a chapter on Indeterminism which is part of the *Postscript. After Twenty Years* to my *Logic of Scientific Discovery*.

In order to inform the reader of these more recent results, I propose to give here, in a few words, an outline of this *refutation of historicism*. The argument may be summed up in five statements, as follows:

1. The course of human history is strongly influenced by the growth of human knowledge. (The truth of this premise must be admitted even by those who see in our ideas, including our scientific ideas, merely the by-products of material developments of some kind or other.)
2. We cannot predict, by rational or scientific methods, the future growth of our scientific knowledge. (This assertion can be logically proved, by considerations which are sketched below.)
3. We cannot, therefore, predict the future course of human history.
4. This means that we must reject the possibility of a theoretical history; that is to say, of a historical social science that would correspond to *theoretical physics*. There can be no scientific theory of historical development serving as a basis for historical prediction.
5. The fundamental aim of historicist methods (see sections 11 to 16 of this book) is therefore misconceived; and historicism collapses.

The argument does not, of course, refute the possibility of every kind of social prediction; on the contrary, it is perfectly compatible with the possibility of testing social theories—for example, economic theories—by way of predicting that certain developments will take place under certain conditions. It only refutes the possibility of predicting historical developments to the extent to which they may be influenced by the growth of our knowledge.

The decisive step in this argument is statement (2). I think that it is convincing in itself: *if there is such a thing as growing human knowledge, then we cannot anticipate today what we shall know only tomorrow*. This, I think, is sound reasoning, but it does not amount to a *logical proof* of the statement. The proof of (2), which I have given in the publications mentioned, is complicated; and I should not be surprised if simpler proofs could be found. My proof consists in showing that *no scientific predictor*—whether a human scientist or a calculating machine—*can possibly predict, by scientific methods, its own future results*. Attempts to do so can attain their result only after the event, when it is too late for a prediction; they can attain their result only after the prediction has turned into a retrodiction.

This argument, being purely logical, applies to scientific predictors of any complexity, including ‘societies’ of interacting predictors. But this means that no society can predict, scientifically, its own future states of knowledge.

My argument is somewhat formal, and it may therefore be suspected to be without any real significance, even if its logical validity is granted.

I have, however, tried to show the significance of the problem in two studies. In the later of these studies, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, I have selected some events from the history of historicist thought, in order to illustrate its persistent and pernicious influence upon the philosophy of society and of politics, from Heraclitus and Plato to Hegel and Marx. In the earlier of these two studies, *The Poverty of Historicism*, now published for the first time in English in book form, I have tried to show the significance of historicism as a fascinating intellectual structure. I have tried to analyse its logic—often so subtle, so compelling and so deceptive—and I have tried to argue that it suffers from an inherent and irreparable weakness.

K. R. P.

Perm, Buckinghamshire,
July 1957

Some of the most discerning reviewers of this book were puzzled by its title. It was intended as an allusion to the title of Marx’s book *The Poverty of Philosophy* which, in turn, was alluding to Proudhon’s *Philosophy of Poverty*.

K. R. P.

Perm, Buckinghamshire,
July 1959

Introduction

Scientific interest in social and political questions is hardly less old than scientific interest in cosmology and physics; and there were periods in antiquity (I have Plato's political theory in mind, and Aristotle's collection of constitutions) when the science of society might have seemed to have advanced further than the science of nature. But with Galileo and Newton, physics became successful beyond expectation, far surpassing all the other sciences; and since the time of Pasteur, the Galileo of biology, the biological sciences have been almost equally successful. But the social sciences do not as yet seem to have found their Galileo.

In these circumstances, students who work in one or another of the social sciences are greatly concerned with problems of method; and much of their discussion of these problems is conducted with an eye upon the methods of the more flourishing sciences, especially physics. It was, for instance, a conscious attempt to copy the experimental method of physics which led, in the generation of Wundt, to a reform in psychology; and since J. S. Mill, repeated attempts had been made to reform on somewhat similar lines the method of the social sciences. In the field of psychology, these reforms may have had some measure of success, despite a great many disappointments. But in the theoretical social sciences, outside economics, little else but disappointment has come from these attempts. When these failures were discussed, the question was soon raised whether the methods of physics were really applicable to the social sciences. Was it not perhaps the obstinate belief in their applicability that was responsible for the much-deplored state of these studies?

The query suggests a simple classification of the schools of thought interested in the methods of the less successful sciences. According to their views on the applicability of the methods of physics, we may classify these schools as *pro-naturalistic* or as *anti-naturalistic*; labelling them 'pro-naturalistic' or 'positive' if they favour the application of the methods of physics to the social sciences, and 'anti-naturalistic' or 'negative' if they oppose the use of these methods.

Whether a student of method upholds anti-naturalistic or pro-naturalistic doctrines, or whether he adopts a theory combining both kinds of doctrines, will largely depend on his views about the character of the science under consideration, and about the character of its subject-matter. But the attitude he adopts will also depend on his views about the methods of physics. I believe this latter point to be the most important of all. And I think that the crucial mistakes in most methodological discussions arise from some very common misunderstandings of the methods of physics. In particular, I think they arise from a misinterpretation of the logical form of its theories, of the methods of testing them, and of the logical function of observation and experiment. My contention

is that these misunderstandings have serious consequences; and I will try to justify this contention in chapters 3 and 4 of this study. There I will try to show that various and sometimes conflicting arguments and doctrines, anti-naturalistic as well as pro-naturalistic, are indeed based upon a misunderstanding of the methods of physics. In chapters 1 and 2, however, I will confine myself to the explanation of certain anti-naturalistic and pro-naturalistic doctrines that form part of a characteristic approach in which both kinds of doctrines are combined.

This approach which I propose first to explain, and only later to criticize, I call 'historicism'. It is often encountered in discussions on the method of the social sciences; and it is often used without critical reflection, or even taken for granted. What I mean by 'historicism' will be explained at length in this study. It will be enough if I say here that I mean by 'historicism' an approach to the social sciences which assumes that *historical prediction* is their principal aim, and which assumes that this aim is attainable by discovering the 'rhythms' or the 'patterns', the 'laws' or the 'trends' that underlie the evolution of history. Since I am convinced that such historicist doctrines of method are at bottom responsible for the unsatisfactory state of the theoretical social sciences (other than economic theory), my presentation of these doctrines is certainly not unbiased. But I have tried hard to make a case in favour of historicism in order to give point to my subsequent criticism. I have tried to present historicism as a well-considered and close-knit philosophy. And I have not hesitated to construct arguments in its support which have never, to my knowledge, been brought forward by historicists themselves. I hope that, in this way, I have succeeded in building up a position really worth attacking. In other words, I have tried to perfect a theory which has often been put forward, but perhaps never in a fully developed form. This is why I have deliberately chosen the somewhat unfamiliar label 'historicism'. By introducing it I hope I shall avoid merely verbal quibbles: for nobody, I hope, will be tempted to question whether any of the arguments here discussed really or properly or essentially belong to historicism, or what the word 'historicism' really or properly or essentially means.

I

The Anti-Naturalistic Doctrines of Historicism

In strong opposition to methodological naturalism in the field of sociology, historicism claims that some of the characteristic methods of physics cannot be applied to the social sciences, owing to the profound differences between sociology and physics. Physical laws, or the 'laws of nature', it tells us, are valid anywhere and always; for the physical world is ruled by a system of physical uniformities invariable throughout space and time. Sociological laws, however, or the laws of social life, differ in different places and periods. Although historicism admits that there are plenty of typical social conditions whose regular recurrence can be observed, it denies that the regularities detectable in social life have the character of the immutable regularities of the physical world. For they depend upon history, and upon differences in culture. They depend on a particular *historical situation*. Thus one should not, for example, speak without further qualification of the laws of economics, but only of the economic laws of the feudal period, or of the early industrial period, and so on; always mentioning the historical period in which the laws in question are assumed to have prevailed.

Historicism asserts that the historical relativity of social laws makes most of the methods of physics inapplicable to sociology. Typical historicist arguments on which this view is based concern generalization, experiment, the complexity of social phenomena, the difficulties of exact prediction, and the significance of methodological essentialism. I will treat these arguments in turn.

1 Generalization

The possibility of generalization and its success in the physical sciences rests, according to historicism, on the general uniformity of nature: upon the observation—perhaps better described as an assumption—that in similar circumstances similar things will happen. This principle, which is taken to be valid throughout space and time, is said to underlie the method of physics.

Historicism insists that this principle is necessarily useless in sociology. Similar circumstances only arise within a single historical period. They never persist from one period to another. Hence there is no long-run uniformity in society on which long-term generalizations could be based—that is, if we disregard trivial *regularities*, such as

those described by the truism that human beings always live in groups, or that the supply of certain things is limited and the supply of others, like air, unlimited, and that only the former can have any market or exchange value.

A method which ignores this limitation and attempts a generalization of social uniformities will, according to historicism, implicitly assume that the regularities in question are everlasting; so that a methodologically naïve view—the view that the method of generalization can be taken over from physics by the social sciences—will produce a false and dangerously misleading sociological theory. It will be a theory denying that society develops; or that it ever changes significantly; or that social developments, if there are any, can affect the basic regularities of social life.

Historicists often emphasize that behind such mistaken theories there is usually an apologetic purpose; and indeed, the assumption of unchanging sociological laws can easily be misused for such ends. It may appear, first, as the argument that unpleasant or undesirable things must be accepted since they are determined by invariable laws of nature. For example, the ‘inexorable laws’ of economics have been invoked to demonstrate the futility of statutory interference with the wage bargain. A second apologetic misuse of the assumption of persistence is the fostering of a general feeling of inevitability, and thus of a readiness to endure the inevitable calmly and without protest. What is now will be for ever, and attempts to influence the march of events, or even to evaluate it, are ridiculous: one does not argue against the laws of nature, and attempts to overthrow them can only lead to disaster.

These, says the historicist, are the conservative, apologetic, and even fatalistic arguments which are the necessary corollaries of the demand that a naturalist method should be adopted in sociology.

The historicist opposes them by maintaining that social uniformities differ widely from those of the natural sciences. They change from one historical period to another, and *human* activity is the force that changes them. For social uniformities are not laws of nature, but man-made; and although they may be said to depend on human nature, they do so because human nature has the power to alter and, perhaps, to control them. Therefore things can be bettered or worsened: active reform need not be futile.

These tendencies of historicism appeal to those who feel a call to be active; to interfere, especially with human affairs, refusing to accept the existing state of things as inevitable. The tendency towards activity and against complacency of any kind may be called ‘*activism*’. I will say more about the relations of historicism to activism in sections 17 and 18; but I may here quote the well-known exhortation of a famous historicist, Marx, which strikingly expresses the ‘activist’ attitude: ‘The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point however is to change it.’¹

2 Experiment

Physics uses the method of experiment; that is, it introduces artificial controls, artificial isolation, and thereby ensures the reproduction of similar conditions, and the consequent production of certain effects. This method is obviously based on the idea that where circumstances are similar, similar things will happen. The historicist claims

that this method is not applicable in sociology. Nor would it be useful, he argues, even if it were applicable. For, as similar conditions occur only within the limits of a single period, the outcome of any experiment would be of very limited significance. Moreover, artificial isolation would eliminate precisely those factors in sociology which are most important. Robinson Crusoe and his isolated individual economy can never be a valuable model of an economy whose problems arise precisely from the economic interaction of individuals and groups.

It is further argued that no really valuable experiments are possible. Large-scale experiments in sociology are never experiments in the physical sense. They are not made to advance knowledge as such, but to achieve political success. They are not performed in a laboratory detached from the outside world; rather, their very performance changes the conditions of society. They can never be repeated under precisely similar conditions since the conditions were changed by their first performance.

3 Novelty

The argument just mentioned deserves elaboration. Historicism, I have said, denies the possibility of repeating large-scale social experiments in precisely similar conditions, since the conditions of the second performance must be influenced by the fact that the experiment has been performed before. This argument rests on the idea that society, like an organism, possesses a sort of memory of what we usually call its history.

In biology, we can speak of the life-history of an organism since an organism is partially conditioned by past events. If such events are repeated, they lose, for the experiencing organism, their character of newness, and become tinged with habit. Yet this is precisely why the experience of the repeated event is not the same as the experience of the original event—why the experience of a repetition is *new*. Repetition of observed events can therefore correspond to the emergence of novel experiences in an observer. Since it forms new habits, repetition produces new, habitual conditions. The sum total of the conditions— internal and external—under which we repeat a certain experiment on one and the same organism cannot therefore be sufficiently similar for us to speak of a genuine repetition. For even an exact repetition of environmental conditions would be combined with new internal conditions in the organism: the organism learns by experience.

The same, according to historicism, holds true of society, since society too experiences: it too has its history. It may learn only slowly from the (partial) repetitions of its history, but it cannot be doubted that it does learn, in so far as it is partially conditioned by its past. Traditions and traditional loyalties and resentments, trust and distrust, could not otherwise play their important role in social life. Real repetition must therefore be impossible in social history; and this means that one must expect that events of an intrinsically new character will emerge. History may repeat itself—but never on the same level, especially if the events concerned are of historical importance, and if they exert a lasting influence on society.

In the world described by physics nothing can happen that is truly and intrinsically

new. A new engine may be invented, but we can always analyse it as a re-arrangement of elements which are anything but new. Newness in physics is merely the newness of arrangements or combinations. In direct opposition to this, social newness, like biological newness, is an intrinsic sort of newness, historicism insists. It is real newness, irreducible to the novelty of arrangements. For in social life, the same old factors in a new arrangement are never really the same old factors. Where nothing can repeat itself precisely, real novelty must always be emerging. This is held to be significant for the consideration of the development of new stages or periods of history, each of which differs intrinsically from any other.

Historicism claims that nothing is of greater moment than the emergence of a really new period. This all-important aspect of social life cannot be investigated along the lines we are accustomed to follow when we explain novelties in the realm of physics by regarding them as re-arrangements of familiar elements. Even if the ordinary methods of physics were applicable to society, they would never be applicable to its most important features: *its division into periods, and the emergence of novelty*. Once we grasp the significance of social newness, we are forced to abandon the idea that the application of ordinary physical methods to the problems of sociology can aid us in understanding the problems of social development.

There is a further aspect of social newness. We have seen that every particular social happening, every single event in social life, can be said to be new, in a certain sense. It may be classified with other events; it may resemble those events in certain aspects; but it will always be unique in a very definite way. This leads, as far as sociological explanation is concerned, to a situation which is markedly different from that in physics. It is conceivable that, by analysing social life, we may be able to discover, and to understand intuitively, how and why any particular event came about; that we may clearly understand its *causes and effects*—the forces which occasioned it and its influence on other events. Yet we may nevertheless find that we are unable to formulate *general laws* which would serve as a description, in general terms, of such causal links. For it may be only the one particular sociological situation, and no other, which could be correctly explained by the particular forces that we have discovered. And these forces may well be unique: they may emerge only once, in this particular social situation, and never again.

4 Complexity

The methodological situation just sketched has a number of further aspects. One which has been discussed very frequently (and which will not be discussed here) is the sociological role of certain unique personalities. Another of these aspects is the complexity of social phenomena. In physics we are dealing with a subject-matter which is much less complicated; in spite of that, we further simplify matters artificially by the method of experimental isolation. Since this method is not applicable in sociology we are faced with a twofold complexity—a complexity arising out of the impossibility of artificial isolation, and a complexity due to the fact that social life is a natural phenomenon that presupposes the mental life of individuals, i.e. psychology,

which in its turn presupposes biology, which again presupposes chemistry and physics. The fact that sociology comes last in this hierarchy of sciences plainly shows us the tremendous complexity of the factors involved in social life. Even if there were immutable sociological uniformities, like the uniformities in the field of physics, we might very well be unable to find them, owing to this twofold complexity. But if we cannot find them, then there is little point in maintaining that they nevertheless exist.

5 Inexactitude of Prediction

It will be shown in the discussion of its pro-naturalistic doctrines that historicism is inclined to stress the importance of prediction as one of the tasks of science. (In this respect, I quite agree with it, even though I do not believe that *historical prophecy* is one of the tasks of the social sciences.) Yet historicism argues that social prediction must be very difficult, not only on account of the complexity of social structures, but also on account of a peculiar complexity arising from the interconnection between predictions and the predicted events.

The idea that a prediction may have influence upon the predicted event is a very old one. Oedipus, in the legend, killed his father whom he had never seen before; and this was the direct result of the prophecy which had caused his father to abandon him. This is why I suggest the name '*Oedipus effect*' for the influence of the prediction upon the predicted event (or, more generally, for the influence of an item of information upon the situation to which the information refers), whether this influence tends to bring about the predicted event, or whether it tends to prevent it.

Historicists have recently pointed out that this kind of influence may be relevant to the social sciences; that it may increase the difficulty of making exact predictions and endanger their objectivity. They say that absurd consequences would follow from the assumption that the social sciences could ever be so far developed as to permit *precise* scientific forecasts of every kind of social fact and event, and that this assumption can therefore be refuted on purely logical grounds. For, if such a novel kind of scientific social calendar were constructed and became known (it could not be kept secret for long since it could in principle be re-discovered by anybody) it would certainly cause actions which would upset its predictions. Suppose, for instance, it were predicted that the price of shares would rise for three days and then fall. Plainly, everyone connected with the market would sell on the third day, causing a fall of prices on that day and falsifying the prediction. The idea, in short, of an exact and detailed calendar of social events is self-contradictory; and exact and detailed scientific social predictions are therefore impossible.

6 Objectivity and Valuation

In stressing the difficulties of prediction in the social sciences, historicism, we have seen, advances arguments which are based on an analysis of the influence of

predictions upon predicted events. But according to historicism, this influence can, under certain circumstances, have important repercussions upon the predicting observer. Similar considerations play a part even in physics, where every observation is based on an exchange of energy between the observer and the observed; this leads to the uncertainty, usually negligible, of physical predictions, which is described by the 'principle of indeterminacy'. It is possible to maintain that this uncertainty is due to an interaction between the observed object and the observing subject since both belong to the same physical world of action and interaction. As Bohr has pointed out, there are analogies in other sciences to this situation in physics, especially in biology and psychology. But nowhere is the fact that the scientist and his object belong to the same world of greater moment than in the social sciences, where it leads (as has been shown) to an uncertainty of prediction, which is sometimes of great practical significance.

We are faced, in the social sciences, with a full and complicated interaction between observer and observed, between subject and object. The awareness of the existence of tendencies which might produce a future event, and, furthermore, the awareness that the prediction might itself exert an influence on events predicted is likely to have repercussions on the content of the prediction; and the repercussions might be of such a kind as gravely to impair the objectivity of the predictions and of other results of research in the social sciences.

A prediction is a social happening which may interact with other social happenings, and among them with the one which it predicts. It may, as we have seen, help to precipitate this event; but it is easy to see that it may also influence it in other ways. It may, in an extreme case, even *cause* the happening it predicts: the happening might not have occurred at all if it had not been predicted. At the other extreme the prediction of an impending event may lead to its *prevention* (so that, by deliberately or negligently abstaining from predicting it, the social scientist, it may be said, could bring it about, or could cause it to happen). There will clearly be many intermediate cases between these two extremes. The action of predicting something, and that of abstaining from prediction, might both have all sorts of consequences.

Now it is clear that social scientists must, in time, become aware of these possibilities. A social scientist may, for instance, predict something, foreseeing that his prediction will cause it to happen. Or he may deny that a certain event is to be expected, thereby preventing it. And in both cases he may be observing the principle which seems to ensure scientific objectivity: of telling the truth and nothing but the truth. But though he has told the truth, we cannot say that he has observed scientific objectivity; for in making forecasts (which forthcoming happenings fulfil) he may have influenced those happenings in the direction that he personally preferred.

The historicist may admit that this picture is somewhat schematic, but he will insist that it brings out sharply a point we find in almost every chapter of the social sciences. The interaction between the scientist's pronouncements and social life almost invariably creates situations in which we have not only to consider the truth of such pronouncements, but also their actual influence on future developments. The social scientist may be striving to find the truth; but, at the same time, he must always be exerting a definite influence upon society. The very fact that his pronouncements *do* exert an influence destroys their objectivity.

We have so far been assuming that the social scientist really strives to find the truth, and nothing but the truth; but the historicist will point out that the situation we have described brings out the difficulties of our assumption. For where predilections and interests have such influence on the content of scientific theories and predictions, it must become highly doubtful whether bias can be determined and avoided. Thus we need not be surprised to find that there is very little in the social sciences that resembles the objective and ideal quest for truth which we meet in physics. We must expect to find as many tendencies in the social sciences as can be found in social life; as many standpoints as there are interests. It may be questioned whether this historicist argument does not lead to that extreme form of relativism which holds that objectivity, and the ideal of truth, are altogether inapplicable in the social sciences where only success—political success—can be decisive.

To illustrate these arguments the historicist may point out that whenever there is a certain tendency inherent in a period of social development, we may expect to find sociological theories which influence this development. Social science may thus function as a midwife, helping to bring forth new social periods; but it can equally well serve, in the hands of conservative interests, to retard impending social changes.

Such a view may suggest the possibility of analysing and explaining the differences between the various sociological doctrines and schools, by referring either to their connection with the predilections and interests prevailing in a particular historical period (an approach which has sometimes been called ‘histor-ism’, and should not be confused with what I call ‘historicism’), or to their connection with political or economic or class interests (an approach which has sometimes been called the ‘*sociology of knowledge*’).

7 Holism

Most historicists believe that there is an even deeper reason why the methods of physical science cannot be applied to the social sciences. They argue that sociology, like all ‘biological’ sciences, i.e. all sciences that deal with living objects, should not proceed in an atomistic, but in what is now called a ‘holistic’ manner. For the objects of sociology, social groups, must never be regarded as mere aggregates of persons. The social group is *more* than the *mere* sum total of its members, and it is also more than the mere sum total of the merely personal relationships existing at any moment between any of its members. This is readily seen even in a simple group consisting of three members. A group founded by A and B will be different in character from a group consisting of the same members but founded by B and C. This may illustrate what is meant by saying that a group has a *history* of its own, and that its structure depends to a great extent on its history (see also section 3 above on ‘Novelty’). A group can easily retain its character intact if it loses some of its less important members. And it is even conceivable that a group may keep much of its original character even if *all* of its original members are replaced by others. But the same members who now constitute the group might possibly have built up a very different group, if they had not entered the original group one by one, but founded a new one

instead. The personalities of its members may have a great influence on the history and structure of the group, but this fact does not prevent the group from having a history and a structure of its own; nor does it prevent the group from strongly influencing the personalities of its members.

All social groups have their own traditions, their own institutions, their own rites. Historicism claims that we must study the history of the group, its traditions and institutions, if we wish to understand and explain it as it is now, and if we wish to understand and perhaps to foresee its future development.

The holistic character of social groups, the fact that such groups are never fully explained as mere aggregates of their members, throws light on the historicist's distinction between novelty in physics, which merely involves new combinations or arrangements of elements and factors which themselves are not new, and novelty in social life, which is real and irreducible to a mere novelty of arrangement. For if social structures in general cannot be explained as combinations of their parts or members, then clearly it must be impossible to explain *new* social structures by this method.

Physical structures, on the other hand, can be explained as mere 'constellations', historicism insists, or as the mere sum of their parts, together with their geometrical configuration. Take the solar system, for instance; although it may be interesting to study its history, and although this study may throw light on its present state, we know that, in a sense, this state is independent of the history of the system. The structure of the system, its future movements and developments, are fully determined by the present constellation of its members. Given the relative positions, masses, and momenta, of its members at any one instant, the future movements of the system are all fully determined. We do not require additional knowledge as to which of the planets is older, or which was brought into the system from outside: the history of the structure, although it may be interesting, contributes nothing to our understanding of its behaviour, of its mechanism, and of its future development. It is obvious that a physical structure differs widely in this respect from any social structure; the latter cannot be understood, nor its future predicted, without a careful study of its history, even if we had complete knowledge of its momentary 'constellation'.

Such considerations strongly suggest that there is a close connection between historicism and the so-called *biological or organic theory* of social structures—the theory which interprets social groups by analogy with living organisms. Indeed, holism is said to be characteristic of biological phenomena in general, and the holistic approach is regarded as indispensable in considering how the history of various organisms influences their behaviour. The holistic arguments of historicism are thus apt to stress the similarity between social groups and organisms, although they need not necessarily lead to an acceptance of the biological theory of social structures. Similarly, the well-known theory of the existence of a *group-spirit*, as the carrier of the *group-traditions*, although not necessarily itself a part of the historicist argument, is closely related to the holistic view.

8 Intuitive Understanding