CHAPTER 29

Why Annalists of Ideas Should Be Analysts of Ideas (1975)

Although I have worked in the philosophy of history and in the history of ideas, I have rarely combined these interests by writing in the philosophy of the history of ideas. Recently, however, I have developed a few thoughts in this second-story subject that I will try to communicate here. My main point is that it is absurd to write the history of ideas without understanding them, and I try to support this point by critically examining the work of some intellectual historians. Readers who think this is a truism may stop reading here, but I ask others to stay with me for a little while longer, especially those who are appalled as I am by the number of histories of ideas in which we are introduced to the historical "background", "foreground" "environment", "context", "origin", and "impact" of difficult ideas without being given a reasonably clear account of what those ideas are. I have in mind works about the Italian enlightenment, or the American idea of civilization, or the English idea of liberty—not to speak of ideas like rationalism, empiricism, pragmatism, and idealism—in which ideas are wrapped in social and cultural wadding to the point where we lose sight of them. They become something like Kant's things-in-themselves; indeed, we might call them "ideas-in-themselves", kept beyond the grasp of readers who are nevertheless asked to believe that they are interesting because they were created by a neurotic man and important because they influenced a sick society, in short, that we should focus more on the origins or effects of such ideas than on the ideas.

I don't mean to suggest that I disapprove of situating beliefs in their historical context, or of tracing their origins and their effects in individuals and societies. But I do mean to imply that it is time to blow the whistle on the notion that the least important thing about a philosophical belief—or, for that matter, any kind of belief—from a historical point of view is what its author intended to say. A century ago in his *Philosophy of Leibniz* (1900), Bertrand Russell remarked on the "tendency—which the so-called historical spirit has greatly increased—to pay so much attention to the *relations* of philosophies that the philosophies themselves are neglected", adding that the philosophies are sometimes compared "as we compare successive forms of a pattern or design, with little or no regard to their meaning" and that influences are sometimes traced by historians "without any comprehension of the systems whose causal relations are under discussion" (p. v). That tendency, I regret to say, has not disappeared but rather has increased

This is a considerably revised version of an introduction to my *Social Thought in America: The Revolt against Formalism* (1949) in a paperback edition published by Oxford University Press.

in the hundred years since Russell wrote this, and it is the tendency upon which I want to concentrate here.

I want to emphasize, however, that I am not opposed to discussing philosophical ideas in relation to historical and social developments. This is evident in my *Social Thought in America*, where I certainly do more than analyze philosophical ideas. That book contains discussions that link Dewey's philosophical beliefs with his educational and political beliefs, and with his impact on the political world; it also tries to situate the intellectual activity of figures like Holmes, Veblen, Beard, and Robinson in the society in which they lived. I point out there that the 1880s and the 1890s saw the growth in America of truculent capitalism, Social Darwinism, socialism, industrialization, and monopoly, and that these social and political phenomena help explain the concerns as well as the views of the thinkers with whom I was dealing. It is obvious that if unbridled capitalism had not been the economic system of Justice Holmes's time, many cases would not have come before him, and that if Social Darwinism had not been its supportive ideology, he would not have been obliged to announce in one of his decisions that "the Fourteenth Amendment does not enact Mr. Herbert Spencer's *Social Statics*". It is also obvious that Veblen would not have been writing on the struggle between the engineers and the price system if he were not working during that period of history, and clearly Beard would not have speculated about the connection between the economic interests of the men at the Constitutional Convention and the document they produced if he were not living at a time when that kind of speculation was rife. Moreover, the political philosophy, the educational philosophy, and even the epistemology of John Dewey have important connections with the technology and social relations of the age in which he lived.

It is equally obvious, however, that the fact that a history of ideas is not *exclusively* devoted to the explication of ideas does not mean that it should not be devoted in part to that. An author who places ideas in a historical and social context must understand those ideas whether they are philosophical or not, and therefore anyone who thinks that the philosophical explication of such ideas proceeds from a perspective which is the opposite of that used in the psychology, sociology, or history of ideas must be confused about the nature of those disciplines or about the nature of explication itself. It is true that some historians of ideas go beyond analyzing them, but in that case they *supplement* the explication of ideas, they do not make it unnecessary. The scholar who tells us what the Protestant ethic is gives an analysis of it, and when he tells us how it is causally linked to capitalism, he advances a sociological or historical thesis about it. How, then, can the perspective of philosophical analysis and that of sociology of ideas be opposed? On the contrary, the history, sociology, and psychology of ideas presuppose rather than oppose the analysis of those ideas—all of which amounts to saying that if you are going to talk about the causes and consequences of philosophical beliefs, you had jolly well better know what those beliefs *are*. Strangely enough, however, there are students of the history of ideas who seem to deny this, and so startling does their denial seem to me that I want to devote some space to examining what some of them have said in this connection.

One of the basic ideas of such historians is that a philosophical or so-called internal historian of beliefs approaches them "formalistically", seeking their meaning in what some historians regard as a superficial way. Often the aversion or indifference that such historians display toward the philosophical clarification of beliefs is based on the notion that philosophical analysts focus on what those scholars call the *apparent* meaning of a belief whereas historians, sociologists, or psychologists deal with its *real* meaning. But such scholars often fail to say clearly what they have in mind when they distinguish between real and apparent meaning. Consider, for example, a statement by the eminent historian, Franco Venturi, who declares in his *Italy and the Enlightenment* (1973) that the historian of ideas "can be satisfied less and less with the apparent logic of intellectual forms and increasingly seeks to understand what the terms, words, concepts and myths really meant" (p. 2). Venturi is far from alone in making such pronouncements. He seems to think that because philosophically-minded historians deal with "the apparent logic of intellectual forms", they stay on the surface of things whereas historians probe more deeply, and such an invidious contrast between the historian of philosophy and the professional historian, sociologist, or psychologist is often associated with the view that the historian of philosophy is some kind of innocent or simpleton who is content to present the apparent meaning because he is unable or unwilling to seek the real meaning to which his more knowing historical colleagues seek access.

Every serious student of the history of ideas has met critics of "merely internal history of ideas" who work above (or below) the texts. Sometimes they are psychoanalysts who are prepared to tell us the real meaning of the ontological argument, of the categorical imperative, or of "esse est percipi". Sometimes they are Marxists who offer to tell us the real meaning of the principle of gravitation, and sometimes they are historians of deism who try to tell us what it really is without the least understanding of what Toland, Tindal, or Collins said. I have known intellectual historians who could discourse pompously on the causes and effects of pragmatism without being able to give an exposition, not to speak of a critical exposition, of Peirce's views in "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" or of James's views in *Pragmatism*. And that should not be surprising to readers of the following statement in the *Rise of American Civilization* by Charles and Mary Beard: "In his late years, William James went entirely over to the devastating pragmatism of Charles Peirce—a curious combination of chance, love, and law, hospitable to all pertinent ideas, trusting somewhat naively in the general good and the general run" (vol. 2, p. 758). In their efforts to situate pragmatists in "The Machine Age", the Beards are reduced to embarrassing obscurity in their comments on Peirce and James, and that is one of the great dangers facing historians who flee from what they regard as the thinness or superficiality of pure exposition to the muddled profundity of social history of ideas. Calling Charles Peirce's work "a curious combination of chance, love, and law"—that is the abysmal level to which they can sink when they abandon what philosophers intend to say for "the real meaning" of their words! We are injured when we are not given any analysis of what

a philosopher says, but we are insulted when we are told that "the real meaning" of what he says is to be found in its impact on the machine age.

Professional historians are not alone in avoiding the analysis of philosophical ideas while concentrating on their origin or impact. The literary historian Gay Wilson Allen in his *William James: A Biography* (1967) tries to forge a link between the philosophical life of William James and his emotional life while expounding James's philosophical ideas without notable success. Such superficiality, as I have pointed out in my *Pragmatism and the American Mind* (1973), arises in part because studies of American philosophical ideas are

> often written by scholars who are inadequately trained in philosophy. And they are inadequately trained in part because of the vacuum which sucks them into the task for which they are inadequately trained: philosophers themselves are not interested enough in the history of American philosophy. While this vicious circle rolls along, those who write on Edwards and James, for example, without a proper understanding of them try to transcend their ignorance by offering "deep" interpretations of their hero's thought. Hence they fail to communicate and analyze what the philosopher in question may have been most concerned to communicate, because the less one is able to expound the philosopher's thoughts, the more one is impelled to dilate on his feelings alone. One begins by trying to connect the ideas and the feelings but soon one loses one's grip on the ideas, and the whole enterprise collapses into . . . an entertaining biography which is adorned with useless snippets about Peirce, Darwin, Mach, Bain, Stumpf, Renouvier, Bergson, Pillon, et al., about whom the author knows very little and about whom, I venture to say, he couldn't care less (p. 38).

Having mentioned studies of Jonathan Edwards, I must reluctantly say that even the late Perry Miller, for all his great learning, was quite capable of making the philosophical ideas of Edwards on free will appear trivial in order to justify burrowing beneath his text for a message about modern American culture. Miller tells us that through most of Edwards's *Freedom of the Will* the author seems "to be altogether happy with Dr. Holmes's characterization of it: that logic is logic is all he says". Then Miller tells us that "the strength of the book is not the logic it says [sic], but the inner principle that sustains it. The surface play of dialectic is supported by a deeper and hidden flow of energy". And, finally, Miller tells us in his *Jonathan Edwards* (1949) that this flow of energy was better discerned by the psychoanalyst Erich Fromm in *Escape from Freedom* (1941) than by Edwards's own age (pp. 259–61).

Once we are persuaded by Miller that Edwards's "surface play of dialectic" merely issued in the truism "logic is logic", we are supposedly prepared to see that the serious scholar's task is to find the "deeper and hidden flow of energy" which underlay Edwards's argument against the view that choices or volitions are not causally necessitated. Miller seems to think that the philosophical interpreter who tries to expound some of the more difficult and more profound passages of Edwards' argument is missing the point. But what, according to Miller, is the point? It is that Edwards was trying to warn us obliquely that the doctrine of uncaused choices attributes to man a freedom from which he is bound to escape

in the manner described by Fromm. All of this is linked with Miller's view that Edwards's "*Freedom of the Will* is an immense cipher" and that "Read as a cipher, as all Edwards's writings must be, it is a penetrating analysis of modern culture, and specifically of the American variant" (ibid., p. 263). But Miller offers little convincing evidence for this view of *Freedom of the Will* and even less for the really ludicrous view that through most of that book Edwards was altogether happy to be thought of as saying that logic is logic.

So far I have mentioned three social historians—Charles Beard, Mary Beard, and Franco Venturi—and two literary historians—G. W. Allen and Perry Miller—who on occasion have encouraged or engaged in the kind of approach to philosophical ideas that I have been criticizing. Now, in a further effort to clarify what I am concerned about, I want to say something more affirmative. When philosophers believe, they believe that something is the case, just as the rest of us do. The attitude of belief may be distinguished, therefore, from what is believed—sometimes called the proposition believed or the *content* of the belief. I have used language that might seem excessively Platonic because it seems to assume the existence of propositions regarded as extralinguistic abstract entities, but I do not wish to commit myself on that debatable issue here since the point I want to make may be made even if having a belief is regarded as having an attitude toward a sentence instead of a proposition. However one analyzes the notion of believing that something is the case, believing may be causally efficacious. When a man believes something, he may write something that causes a reaction in his readers, and so there may be a causal chain that begins with Bishop Berkeley's sentence "To be is to be perceived", which is read by others who then proceed to a political belief that leads them to engage in certain political behavior.

The first thing to observe about the method of Franco Venturi, who invidiously contrasts "the apparent logic of intellectual forms" and what certain terms, words, concepts, and myths "really mean", is that he may fail to see that a statement such as Berkeley's is different from a causal *consequence* of reading it, which may be the acceptance of another statement and the performance of a certain action. For this reason, Venturi may think that only those political consequences of reading an epistemological statement like Berkeley's are worth a historian's interest whereas the logical implications of what Berkeley intended to say are not.

I should emphasize therefore that I am not opposed to tracing the causes and effects of a belief, nor am I concerned to press Venturi too hard on his phrase "what the terms, words, concepts and myths really meant" for I can imagine his abandoning that unfortunate phrase and being content to say that a historian is interested in the political effects of a theorist's statement. But, though I have no quarrel with a historian's focusing on the practical effects of an author's belief, I should like to point out that if a historian is to trace those effects, he must know how Berkeley's reactionary readers, to continue with that illustration, understood his statement. If Lenin tells us that reading it led certain Russian idealists to engage in reactionary political behavior, we are entitled to ask what those idealists understood Berkeley to be saying, and this would require asking what

they thought the logical consequences of his statement were. After all, the historian is not interested in Berkeley's sentence as a mere stimulus; he is interested in it as an *understood* stimulus. So, if the Russian idealists *mis*understood Berkeley, the historian should know what their mistaken interpretation was in order to support his belief that Berkeley's statement had the political effect that he the historian attributes to it. That is what I have in mind when I say that the psychology and sociology of philosophical ideas *presuppose* rather than *oppose* the analysis of these ideas.

Of course, I am aware that often the social historian of ideas may deal with a belief which is so clear that the historian may see no need to analyze it by spinning out its logical consequences. For example, if a historian tries to explain why a greedy person did something good for which he could not possibly be rewarded on earth by citing that person's belief that he would be rewarded in heaven, we need no lengthy analysis of what the person believed; it is clear enough for our purposes and it might be sufficient to account for his action. And a historian of thought like John Dewey, who wished to explain certain features of German society in the nineteenth century—its combination of efficiency and idealism—by connecting them with Kant's distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal worlds, did not have to expound the whole of the *Critique of Pure Reason* to accomplish his purpose. What I protest against is the idea that the social history of philosophical ideas may be written with virtually no knowledge of what the philosophical ideas are on the misguided theory that one can assert and establish the causal connections between philosophical beliefs and society while ignoring the insides, so to speak, of those beliefs.

In a sense, such ignorance is an extremely ironical development in the history of the discipline of history, which has recently become so open to the influences of other disciplines like demography, statistics, and economics, which are supposed to make the historian a real tough scientist. Since the historian is now willing to use numbers and count, why should he be wary of logically analyzing the ideas whose histories he writes? Too many historians seem bent on regarding the philosophical beliefs they study as so many black boxes into which they need not look as they pore over their outsides, but although we may see why a falling heavy box caused a dent in the ground without knowing anything about the contents of the box, it is impossible to see why Kant's distinction between free noumena and causally determined phenomena made a dent on German society without knowing what that distinction was and how it encouraged the combination of idealism and efficiency of which Dewey speaks in his *German Philosophy and Politics*.

Although I am heartily in favor of the historian's disclosing the personal motives or temperamental features that prompt the beliefs of intellectuals, I must add that this is a very difficult thing to do and that most efforts of this kind are either ludicrously oversimplified or too complicated to be supported by the evidence that may be used by a responsible scholar. Here I am reminded of some observations made by David Hume in his essay "On the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences", where, in spite of his great interest in explaining phe-

nomena by appealing to general laws, he wrote: "A man, who should inquire why such a particular poet, as Homer, for instance, existed at such a place, in such a time, would throw himself headlong into chimera, and could never treat of such a subject without a multitude of false subtilties [*sic*] and refinements. He might as well pretend to give a reason why such particular generals as Fabius and Scipio lived in Rome at such a time, and why Fabius came into the world before Scipio".[1] I confess to feeling very much like Hume when it comes to giving psychological explanations of intellectual phenomena. It is not that I am opposed to psycho-history, but like Hume I hesitate to throw myself headlong into chimera by trying to account psychologically for certain beliefs, especially beliefs which are not clear.

I have used a number of figures in trying to describe the situation of which I have been complaining. Let me try another in which the historians who find "the real meaning" of historical beliefs are what may be called "forest-men" whereas the philosophical analysts of past ideas are called "tree-men". In that case, I should make my point as follows. There are some historians who are so preoccupied with the size and shape of the forest in which philosophical tree-ideas grow that they can neither see nor touch those trees, not to speak of penetrating their barks. They are, as it were, helicopter-historians, who never touch ground as they fly over idealistic oaks and materialistic elms, content with pointing to their superficial differences or with measuring the length and the width of the forest. Often, therefore, they cannot tell a philosophical tree from a hole in the ground. Another figure puts the "real" historian in that hole, making him a mole who burrows and burrows without ever seeing much of what he works beneath. Once again, the intellectual effect is similar. The roots are investigated, but the oaks and the elms themselves are never observed or penetrated.

I now want to deal with a standard reply to the kind of argument that I have been developing. There is a tendency among social historians of philosophical belief to say that what interests them is not the belief held by the philosopher in question but rather that version of his belief which trickles down to the politicians or workers who "make" history. In that case, it is more important, such historians say, to study the beliefs of less exalted thinkers. I have a number of comments to make on this view. First of all, I have no objection to a historian's studying whatever it is that interests him. Popularizations of Newton written by lesser minds like Voltaire might well be of greater interest than Newton's *Principia* to certain historians of ideas. All of that is obvious. But if the historian in question insists that the popularization has trickled down from the greater intellect's work, then the historian must understand the greater intellect's work to show that it *has* trickled down into the mind of the lesser intellect.

Furthermore, if the historian seeks to establish that there was a causal chain that began with Newton's work, continued with Voltaire's interpretation of it, and then reached the "low life" of the French intellectual world in which the

[1] David Hume, *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, in *Philosophical Works* (edition published in 1854), vol. 3, pp. 122–23.

historian may have his greatest interest, the historian has an obligation to support his contention that the chain was indeed causal. In offering such support he will have to understand Newton's ideas, since saying that one work is a correct interpretation of another is analogous to saying that a portrait is a successful portrait of a person. And how can one make this last claim without knowing something independently about the original? No amount of casuistry will diminish the need to know that, unless the historian of ideas is prepared to give up the claim that he has shown the impact of Newton on French intellectual low life by way of Voltaire.

One may, of course, surrender that claim by starting one's investigation at Voltaire, by treating him as the *terminus a quo* of the remaining narrative, and by disclaiming any desire to show that Voltaire's version of Newton was a correct version of Newton. In a sense, Richard Hofstadter did something analogous to that in his *Age of Reform* (1956), a valuable work on the same period covered by my *Social Though in America*. He indicates there that his study of the Progressive era "is not a study of our high culture, but of the kind of thinking that impinged most directly upon the ordinary politically conscious citizen". Hofstadter adds that "Morton G. White in his *Social Thought in America* has analyzed the impact of the Progressive era upon more advanced speculation in philosophy, political theory, sociology, and history" whereas Hofstadter's chief concern in the *Age of Reform* "is not with such work, not with the best but with the most characteristic thinking" (p. 6). An examination of Hofstadter's book bears this out. The index contains no references to Holmes, and the more theoretical ideas of Dewey, Beard, and Veblen receive only the most cursory treatment.

While I believe it is possible and often desirable for historians of the thought of one period to divide their labor so that one takes, so to speak, the high road and the other the low road—as Hofstadter suggests that our labor on the Progressive era was divided—the fact is that our studies are not related in that simple a way. True, my book deals with those whom Hofstadter regards as advanced thinkers of the Progressive era, but it also deals with kinds of thought that are close to what ordinary men in that era were thinking. It is therefore an example of intellectual history that moves from level to level since it links Dewey's epistemology and ethical theory with his educational and political thought, and I do not see how anyone can give an illuminating account of the latter without analyzing the former. Dewey's general antipathy to what he calls dualism, which is formulated in his epistemology and his ethics, lies at the heart of his educational and his political theory, and it is difficult to understand what Hofstadter calls middle-brow thinking without understanding its logical roots in high-brow epistemology and ethics.

In this connection, I should point out that John Dewey recognized in his *German Philosophy and Politics* that it is one thing to expound Kant's distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal worlds and another to say that such a distinction was causally related to what Dewey regarded as the chief feature of German civilization before the First World War: "its combination of self-conscious idealism with unsurpassed technical efficiency" (p. 28). In a summary of

Dewey's thinking on this matter, I wrote in *Social Thought in America*: "Given their high-powered mechanization and efficiency, one might have expected the Germans to run to materialism and utilitarianism more than they did. But they didn't, because Kant revealed the limited sphere of mechanism. He put it in its place, so that Germany might end the paralysis of action arising from the conflict between science and spirit" (pp. 150–51). By arguing, said Dewey, that mechanical or causal necessity holds only in the phenomenal realm whereas the noumenal world of spirit is free, Kant provided a rationale for the German combination of idealism with technical efficiency. This account in *German Philosophy and Politics* of the connection between Kant's "advanced speculation" and a certain feature of German society did not lead Dewey to conclude that the latter constituted "the real meaning" of Kantian speculation, even though Dewey comes close to saying things like that in his *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (1920). In *German Philosophy and Politics* he was primarily concerned to show that in spite of "its highly technical, professional, and predominantly a priori character" German philosophy had close connections with the tendencies of German social life. Furthermore, I observed in *Social Thought in America* that according to Dewey, "the German university system placed an unusually high value on its philosophy of law and religion, and the universities trained the German bureaucracy. Thus German metaphysical ideas slid rapidly along a well-greased chute from the universities into the affairs of political life" (p. 150).

Dewey's causal sequence from the metaphysical beliefs of Kant to those of professors in German universities, to the actions of the German bureaucracy, to the affairs of German political life in 1914 represents a comparatively clear model of making connections between ideas and society without claiming that the behavior of the German street constitutes "the real meaning" of *The Critique of Pure Reason*. I do not advocate it as a model way in which all such studies should be conducted since such a way of proceeding may oversimplify the interrelationships among the various factors dealt with by a social historian of philosophical ideas. But it is like the model employed in *Social Thought in America* in at least two very important respects that bear on the main issues raised here. I do not deal there only with the epistemological and ethical beliefs of Beard, Dewey, Holmes, Robinson, and Veblen without linking them with the brass tacks, the staples, or the bread-and-butter of the Progressive era as conceived by its professional historians, but I do not confuse the contents of those beliefs with their causal origins or consequences.

Of course, I am aware of the great difficulty involved in writing a book in which one analyzes the contents of beliefs, causally traces their consequences, and views them as parts of a movement that is linked to certain features of society and of the individual thinkers themselves. That difficulty is what makes the psychological or social history of ideas a very demanding discipline. On the other hand, it seems to me more honest and more helpful to acknowledge the difficulty of such a complex enterprise than to omit—and to produce bogus defenses of one's right to omit—a straightforward explication of the ideas themselves. I think it is a mistake to write on the causes and effects of, for example, Dewey's belief

that ethics is an empirical science without giving a philosophical account of Dewey's effort, especially in the tenth chapter of his *Quest for Certainty* (1929), to analyze the notion of being *desirable* or what *ought to be* desired in a way that would render judgments of value scientific. It is absurd to try to trace the origin and impact of Holmes's belief that law is a science without giving a philosophical account of what Holmes meant when he said in "The Path of the Law", "The prophecies of what the courts will do in fact, and nothing more pretentious, are what I mean by the law" (*Collected Legal Papers*, 1920, p.173). It is impossible, without analyzing Veblen's conceptions of pragmatism and science, to explain causally why he wrote: "Pragmatism creates nothing but maxims of expedient conduct. Science creates nothing but theories. It knows nothing of policy or utility, of better or worse" (*The Place of Science in Modern Civilization*, 1919, p. 19). We cannot know why and to what effect Veblen adopted his philosophical views on pragmatism and science unless we know what those views were. And so, if Plato warned those about to enter the Academy not to do so unless they knew some geometry, we may warn those who go in for the psycho-history and sociology of philosophy that they had better know some philosophy. Even a little philosophy would do a lot for most of them in spite of Pope's warning in *An Essay on Criticism* about a little learning. When Pope issued his warning, he wrote:

> A little learning is a dang'rous thing;
> Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring:
> There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
> And drinking largely sobers us again.

I suspect, however, that even a swig of what I've been prescribing would do wonders for some annalists of ideas.