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INEVITABILITY IN HISTORY*

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Historians often tell us that certain historical events were more decisive than others. Indeed, propositions of this sort comprise an interesting — and, it could be argued, important — part of what historians know, or claim to know. What decisiveness is, in this context, and how it is confirmed, are (on the other hand) questions for the philosopher. True, the term is sometimes abused; but the fact that some people have engaged in the frivolous occupation of listing “the ten most decisive battles in history” should not discourage us from trying to give a conceptual analysis of historical decisiveness, any more than an aesthetician should be discouraged from analyzing the concept (or concepts) of beauty by the fact that some people persist in listing “the ten most beautiful words in English.”

Decisive events appear to be of two kinds. There are those that are said to make other events, or series of events, possible: events *sine qua non*. For example: the development of printing from movable type made the Protestant Reformation possible; the attack on Pearl Harbor made it possible for the Japanese navy to control the Western Pacific for several months; the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 made possible the registration of thousands of new black voters in the South. There are those that are said to make other events, or series of events, inevitable. For example: the Louisiana Purchase made the growth of the United States into a world power inevitable; the attack on Pearl Harbor made the defeat of Japan inevitable; the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 made an increase in the number of black elected officials in the South inevitable.

It is the second of these forms of decisiveness that I propose to discuss on this occasion, though the two are obviously connected. And the first step is to see what historians mean — and what they can sensibly mean — by saying that an event of one kind, E_1 , made a (later) event of another kind, F_1 , inevitable. (Note that for present purposes, I have to leave the concept of *event* unanalyzed, except to say that it here includes complex sets of events, and even states-of-affairs.) We require a good example, and to conserve the space that might be needed for interpreting the words of a particular historian, let us formulate our own:

The National Liberation Front's Tet offensive in early 1968 made the beginning of a withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam inevitable.

This is a typical example of an historical inevitability-statement, and I believe that some competent historians of the Indochina war would regard it as a substantially true one — though no doubt highly simplified. Certain features of it are fairly obvious, but perhaps should be briefly noticed before we analyze some of its more puzzling features.

First, the two events are referred to by descriptive phrases, though they could also be described in sentences: (1) The NLF carried out a totally unexpected and widespread attack on a number of cities in South Vietnam in February, 1968; (2) The first American troops were withdrawn from Vietnam in July, 1969. Second, the

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INEVITABILITY IN HISTORY

inevitability-statement presupposes, as one of its truth-conditions (and perhaps even intelligibility-conditions), that the two events referred to actually occurred: a nonoccurrent event can neither make inevitable nor be made inevitable. Third, the two events are somewhat separated in time. It is possible, but it is not usual, to speak of E_1 as making F_1 inevitable when F_1 follows hard on E_1 ; at least, the striking cases of inevitability (assuming at this stage that there are such cases) are those in which E_1 settles the fate of an event that lies somewhat distant in its future.

To analyze the meaning of inevitability-statements as they occur in historical discourse, we need not assume that any particular one — or indeed that any one at all — is true. But we must assume that some of them are sensible: that something not obviously absurd is meant. For example, to say that F_1 was made inevitable by E_1 is not to say that after E_1 , nothing could have prevented F_1 from happening. For we can imagine an accident — say, another blunder in the Defense Department's handling of its supplies of nerve gas — which, if it had occurred, would have rendered the continental United States uninhabited and uninhabitable, in which case the troops in Vietnam would have been better off where they were. Nor can the historian mean that the troops would have begun to return, no matter what anyone did, since someone had to desire them to return: that is, someone had to give orders to the (no doubt) reluctant field commanders, arrange for transport, etc. There probably are some historical events that occurred without anyone's desiring them to occur. This is not easy to conceive: although it is often said, for example, that in August, 1914 no one really wanted World War I to occur, what is true is that many of those involved in generating that war hoped or even expected that their diplomatic actions would avoid it: but in fact, when it came down to the wire, some persons in authority did desire certain armies to attack and conquer. I can imagine a riot — a violent confrontation, say, between a group of anti-war demonstrators and police — that no individual desires to happen, though through the combined actions of individual persons it does happen. In any case, most historical events, I should think, were desired by someone: and when a historian says that they were inevitable, he must mean that, given these desires, they could not have been prevented.

To say that after the Tet offensive, the beginning of troop-withdrawal became inevitable, must mean, then, that no efforts to prevent the beginning of withdrawal would have been successful. Efforts by whom? Not by those who were in favor of withdrawal, since if President Nixon, for example, had not desired it, it would not have occurred. Efforts, then, by individuals who were opposed to withdrawal — individuals like General Westmoreland, who was constantly calling for more troops, in order to enlarge that light at the end of the tunnel. Let us try the following analysis:

To say " E_1 made F_1 inevitable" is to say

- (1) " E_1 and F_1 occurred, in that temporal order; and
- (2) "After E_1 , and because of E_1 , no action within the power of any living person or persons who desired F_1 *not* to occur would have been followed by the nonoccurrence of F_1 ."

A few points about this formula should be noted. First, I say "because of E_1 " to rule out coincidences. Thus, suppose there was a trash-collector's strike in

MONROE C. BEARDSLEY

Philadelphia that coincided with the Tet offensive; then it might be true that after the trash-collector's strike no action within the power of any person who opposed troop-withdrawal would have been followed by the nonwithdrawal of troops, but of course the strike did not make the withdrawal inevitable. In using the phrase "because of," I do not mean to smuggle in the notion of causality, but only that of (partial) explanation. If the occurrence of E_1 enters, directly or indirectly, into the explanation of the withdrawal, then, if opposition would have been futile, we can attribute its futility to E_1 (among other events). Second, when I speak of an action as being within a person's power, I mean only that if he had attempted to perform it, he would have performed it. The word "attempt" has a guarded sense here: it includes trying to something, where there is a hindrance of some sort to be overcome; and where there is no hindrance, it includes beginning the action and continuing to act for as long as it would take for the act to be completed. Which does not entail, of course, that the act *is* completed: *A* has made an attempt on the life of *B* if he aims a loaded gun (i.e., thinks that the gun is well-aimed) and pulls the trigger, whether or not his attempt succeeds. Various actions were within the power of those persons who opposed troop withdrawal before July, 1969. But to say that the start of withdrawal was inevitable (after February, 1968) is, I think, to say that none of those actions would have prevented it.

It is an interesting question, I think, whether the correct analysis of inevitability-statements requires any further restrictions on the sorts of action whose preventive efficacy is ruled out. Sometimes extreme measures are overlooked. When we say, for example, that a series of campaign blunders by a Presidential candidate made his opponent's election inevitable, we may be thinking only of the latter's capacity to garner votes, by charisma or fraud, and not of the way in which his health might be affected by an assassination-attempt. It may be that the word "inevitable" is very often context-bound in this way, and that to be fair to a particular historian we ought to construe his inevitability-statements as ruling out only legal or constitutional actions. Yet this restricted usage may have the unfortunate effect of making us exaggerate the inevitability of the historical process — until we are reminded by revolutionaries that there may lie within the power of dedicated or desperate persons many violent actions that would have their effects. Of course, it can also be argued that these effects are also limited to certain insignificant kinds of events (such as elections), while the larger events (such as the intensification of certain social conflicts) remain unaffected by victories at the polls or by assassinations. This view raises other questions, and I shall return to it a little later.

If my analysis of inevitability-statements is on the right track, it is understandable that historians differ considerably in their squeamishness about the word "inevitable" and words like "insure" and "doom" that easily translate into it. A historian like Motley, deeply moved by the rush of historical events, the ironies of history, and the terrible difficulty that men have in determining what will happen to them, may be given to making inevitability-statements in one form or another. A contemporary historian, and particularly one who draws from history the lesson that our present social system must be radically changed, may have little use for the concept of inevitability: it appears very seldom, if at all, for example, in the recent works of William Appleman Williams.

INEVITABILITY IN HISTORY

To say that E_1 made F_1 inevitable, on this analysis, is to deny an indefinite number of contrary-to-fact conditional statements. If the Tet offensive made the start of troop withdrawals inevitable, then even if Vice President Agnew had pleaded with President Nixon, withdrawal would still have begun; even if the joint chiefs of staff had put on a nationwide television campaign to whip up enthusiasm for winning the war at any cost, or even if the Attorney General had ordered a round-up of all peace demonstrators, to be held in "preventive detention;" or even if . . . and so forth. You can write your own list. The point is that if we single out each opposed person living at the time whose actions might conceivably have made a difference, alone or in concert with others, and imagine an indefinite number of plausible actions that were within his power, then when we say that F_1 was made inevitable by E_1 , we are committed to a denial that any of these actions would actually have prevented F_1 from occurring.

So inevitability-statements are by no means easy to establish. They are strong statements. All it takes to refute one is a single well-established counterfactual whose antecedent describes an action within the power of some opposed person living at the time and whose consequent states that the allegedly inevitabilized event would not have occurred. I say "all it takes," but supplying well-established historical counterfactuals is a large order in itself — we do not really know, for example, what would have been the result if, say, the Chinese government (supposing that it desired to keep American troops bogged down in Indochina for the present) had forced North Vietnam to accept a sizeable contingent of Chinese "volunteers" or "advisers." Inevitability-statements are sometimes difficult to refute, as well as to establish.

Difficulty of refutation is not in itself a *prima facie* recommendation for any kind of empirical statement, and some might argue that the two difficulties in question amount to an impossibility of obtaining a significant probability either for an inevitability-statement or for one of its contrary counterfactuals. In that case, inevitability-statements would be mere speculation, rather than knowledge, and the philosopher's best advice to the historian would be to avoid them. This skeptical line of argument opens up a number of problems, most of which have to be set aside on this occasion. As far as disconfirmation is concerned, I believe that historians do know, and do fairly well establish, some historical counterfactuals, and thus are sometimes in the position of being able to show that certain events did not make certain other events inevitable. But I shall not argue that thesis here. More central to our inquiry is the question whether inevitability-statements are ever reasonably well supported by historians, and if so, how.

My first analysis of inevitability-statements was negative, and it brings out the indirect way in which *some* degree of plausibility may be given to such statements. Given that a large and increasing number of American citizens, including many who were highly articulate and-or extremely angry, wanted to begin the withdrawal of troops from South Vietnam, and given that the President and his chief advisers had themselves come to desire this event, what could have stopped it from being carried out? We can see how it might have been delayed even more than it was, how the rate of withdrawal could have been affected, and so on; but what could anyone or any group, however powerful, have done to prevent it completely? Even

MONROE C. BEARDSLEY

if all the higher brass at the Pentagon had gone on strike (if such a thing can be imagined), no doubt civilians could have been found to take over the task of selecting, notifying, and transporting troops.

Part of what it says is that one event depends upon the other, a notion captured by ordinary conditionals: "If E_1 , then F_1 ." But that sense, by itself, is too weak to oppose all those counterfactuals; what the historian is saying is that in view of E_1 , F_1 *had* to happen — there is a connection between them that was not merely unruptured, but that precluded a rupture. Borrowing a term from the literature on counterfactuals, we can call this a *nonaccidental* connection — not to solve our problem, but to help identify it. The word "must" is ordinarily used to mark such connections, in the present tense; let us use "had to" in the past tense. Our example may be taken to say something like:

(1) The Tet offensive and the beginning of American troop withdrawal took place in that temporal order; and

(2) If the NLF carried out the Tet offensive in February, 1968, then a withdrawal of American troops *had to* begin at some later time (or, to be more informative, within the next two years).

But what is the nature of this (nonaccidental) connectedness between the inevitabilizing and the inevitabilized event? If we press the historian to show us the connection between the two — to explain how it is that one led to the other — he typically supplies a *story*: that is, he tells us about various events and states-of-affairs that intervened, and that make the dependence of the later upon the earlier understandable. He may point out, for example, that the vigor of the Tet offensive was utterly at variance with the optimistic reports and predictions that had been coming out of the administration for years, and that the army's desperate effort to counter its effect that summer led only to high casualties; that general confidence in the Vietnam policy was seriously undermined; that the Democrats appeared already to have lost the election well before November; that the incoming president was highly conscious of public relations; and so forth. Let us call this story the "narrative bridge" between E_1 and F_1 .

To a number of contemporary philosophers, it has seemed evident that the supplying of narrative bridges is the paradigm form of historical explanation, the historian's own way of making the historical process intelligible. This theory of historical explanation suggests a theory of nonaccidental connectedness in history. On this theory — which it is convenient to call the Action Theory — an individual human action provides the model of intelligibility: we understand directly, and even empathically, how character gives rise to motive, motive to action, experience to response. The function of the narrative bridge, then, is to exhibit the overarching connection between E_1 and F_1 by analyzing it into smaller action-links. We see President Johnson withdrawing from the presidential race out of fear that he would be humiliated; we see Vice President Humphrey concluding that he could not safely repudiate the administration's past policies; we see more and more people coming to expect the new president to reverse the long escalation of the war, to cut casualties, to ease the terrible strains on American society. There is no question that the narrative bridge does enormously increase our understanding of how the troop withdrawal came about: to this extent the Action Theory is correct. But it

INEVITABILITY IN HISTORY

does not. I think, explain inevitability. However rich the details by which we fill in the gap between E_1 and F_1 , we have not established a nonaccidental connection between them, unless the smaller links themselves are also nonaccidental. If the Action Theory can show how the relations between character and motive, between motive and action, etc., are nonaccidental, then it will follow that a sequence of such relations is also nonaccidental; we know not only that, say, President Nixon had a reason to withdraw some troops, but that he had to act on that reason.

The philosophers who have the best reason for adopting an Action Theory of historical inevitability are those who hold that historical explanation consists characteristically and centrally in supplying a narrative bridge. But these are just the philosophers who deny any element of necessity or determinism (hence of nonaccidentalness) in the action-links. They say that reasons do not determine action, because agents are free. Thus to give an account of historical inevitability they would have to try to build a nonaccidental chain out of accidental links, and it is more consistent of them to conclude that there is in fact no inevitability in history, and consequently no need to explain it. No historical event *has* to occur, whatever the circumstances, so that it is never true to say that one event made another inevitable.

This conclusion would be a bit of a wrench for some of these philosophers, who pride themselves (and properly) on their faithfulness to the special task of the historian and on their willingness to accept the usual modes of historical discourse as cognitively legitimate. Still, perhaps historians are no more exempt from endemic, institutionalized error than other students of reality, and if it turns out that they cannot have empirical evidence, explanation, interpretation — all that, and inevitability too — then something's got to give. Inevitability-statements (and along with them counterfactual possibility-statements) must simply be eschewed.

The only way to avoid this skeptical conclusion is to find an alternative theory of historical nonaccidentalness that will explain how historical inevitability-statements can indeed be known to be true or false — though perhaps not with the highest assurance. Such a theory, it is plain, has to make use of a concept that an Action Theory would chiefly be designed to dispense with: namely, *universality*. If two events are nonaccidentally connected, it must be in virtue of the *kinds* of events they are: that is, their belonging to certain classes of events. Nonaccidentalness then must be or involve a relationship between event-types. Since it is not an analytic relationship, and since it cannot be a merely statistical or probabilistic one — that would not enable us to say that E_1 *had to be* followed by F_1 — it can only be a tie of universal association. Nonaccidentalness requires participation in such a pattern of regularity.

Let us now introduce the concept of the generalization of an inevitability-statement ("IS-generalization," for short). Corresponding to each inevitability-statement there is a set of IS-generalizations, each deriving from a pair of true descriptions of the two events involved. In my notation, E_1 and F_1 are particular events of the types E and F respectively. But the Tet offensive, for example, is a particular of many types: it is a set of battles, an assertion of power by a revolutionary army, an attack on supposedly safe cities, an act of terrorization, etc. An IS-generalization places the two events involved under some true descriptions,

MONROE C. BEARDSLEY

assigning them to two classes, and it states that events of one class depend on events of the other class.

Now suppose that we agree to characterize the Tet offensive as consisting of widespread attacks on supposedly safe cities by a revolutionary group in a civil war (abbreviate all this as "wide-spread revolutionary attack"), and the initial troop-withdrawal as a beginning of troop-withdrawal by a foreign power heavily engaged in supporting the regime in power (abbreviate: "foreign troop withdrawal"). The next step is to formulate the appropriate generalization of our inevitability-statement. This turns out to be a difficult problem, which I have probably not solved. In the first place, a simple universal statement will not do: no one would want to say that widespread revolutionary attacks must *always* be followed by foreign troop-withdrawals, even in cases where foreign troops are on the scene. But there may be a set of conditions under which foreign troops must begin to withdraw if there is a widespread revolutionary attack. The problem is to formulate this generalization in a non-trivial way.

The previous length of the war, the disappointment of many hopes based on government promises, the growing moral revulsion against the effects of the war upon the people involved, and the existence of freedom of speech in the foreign country — these would presumably be among the conditions under which a widespread revolutionary attack is nonaccidentally followed by foreign troop-withdrawal. Other conditions would need to be added, to make a completely explicit generalization. (Indeed, it is the second function of what I have called the narrative bridge to bring out some of these conditions.) Yet even before conditions are identified, the following IS-generalization may still be truly asserted:

There is a nonredundant set of conditions (which are among those present in South Vietnam and the United States between February 1968, and July, 1969) under which foreign troops *must* begin to withdraw within two years if there is a widespread revolutionary attack.

The (somewhat arbitrarily chosen) word "nonredundant" is essential here. It is put in to insure that the conditions referred to are not by themselves sufficient to lead to the troop withdrawal. For then the revolutionary attack would be superfluous. The problem here is to preserve the analysis from triviality. I am proposing certain truth-conditions of inevitability-statements, and I hope that the conditions I offer are not only necessary but sufficient. To have recourse to abstract notation, for the sake of terseness, when a particular event E_1 makes another particular event F_1 inevitable, then both E_1 and F_1 must have occurred, and there must be a true IS-generalization to connect them. Moreover, whenever an E-event and an F-event occur in that order (preferably with a noteworthy time-lapse), and there is a true IS-generalization connection E-events and F-events, then that particular E-event made that particular F-event inevitable. Now, suppose there is a set of conditions, C, under which Tet-type attacks must occasion American-type withdrawals. And suppose also that a Philadelphia trash-collectors' strike occurred in February, 1968, and was therefore followed in due course by the American troop-withdrawal. There is indeed a set of conditions under which trash-collectors' strikes must always be followed by American-type troop withdrawals — namely, the C-conditions that include a Tet-type offensive. It follows that the trash-collectors'

INEVITABILITY IN HISTORY

strike made the troop-withdrawal inevitable — just as the Tet offensive made it inevitable. It follows, that is, unless we insert the word “nonredundant,” the purpose of which is precisely to rule out this possibility. For though there are indeed sets of conditions under which Philadelphia trash-collectors’ strikes always lead to American troop withdrawals, there are all sets of conditions under which the withdrawal would have taken place anyway, even without the strike. There is, I am quite sure, no set of *nonredundant* conditions under which Philadelphia trash-collectors’ strikes must be followed by American troop-withdrawals.

If — and only if — the IS-generalization of our exemplary inevitability-statement, or some other IS-generalization of it, is true, can the Tet offensive be truly said to have made the start of American troop withdrawal inevitable.

An IS-generalization is universal, but contingently or conditionally so. It is formulated as a nonaccidental sentence, though whether or not to call it a “law” perhaps need not be decided here. In any case, if it is a law, it is an “immediate law,” that is, it is designed to cover precisely the event-types to which we assign the two particular events in which we are interested. It is not restricted in scope to those particular events, for the conditions alluded to (though not fully specified) could occur at other times and places. But it applies to those *kinds* of events, and in that sense is the most modest, or cautious, generalization that can confer upon the two particular events a relationship of inevitability. It is a minimally universal connection.

One of my theses, then, is that anyone who asserts an inevitability-statement is committed to some IS-generalization of it: in other words, the truth of some one of its IS-generalizations is a truth-condition of the inevitability-statement itself, and the defense of the inevitability-statement requires an appeal to some defensible IS-generalization. Those who reject this thesis are free to propose their own explication of inevitability-statements; those who accept it will divide at this point into two sects: some will draw the skeptical conclusion that historians can never know any inevitability-statements, since they can never know any generalizations of the relevant form; some will admit that inevitability-statements can be known, and prepare themselves to investigate the puzzling question *how* they are known. (Note that the skepticism of the first sect takes a different form from that of the Action Theorists.) Certainly much doubt has been cast on the claim that historians possess, or can possess, knowledge of anything in the shape of a universal generalization, much less one that is nonaccidental.

Yet surely their condition is not so hopeless as this. I believe that in fact historians are in a position to have reasonable grounds for accepting IS-generalizations (and, consequently, the corresponding inevitability-statements). First, an IS-generalization, such as the example we have just considered, may be suggested and commended to the historian by his knowledge of other historical events and processes. The role of historical parallels and analogies is, I think, a vital one, however sparingly it may be used by careful historians. It is true that the start of American troop withdrawals was a rather unusual sort of event, with few close historical parallels, if any. The French experience in Algeria has often been cited as instructively similar in certain ways, and I think that it does throw light on the Vietnam withdrawal, and help to bolster the assumed IS-generalization. But of

MONROE C. BEARDSLEY

course, as those who harp on the "uniqueness" of historical events would no doubt point out. It is also notably different. If our example had been, say, that of a nation capitulating and signing a treaty after a series of military disasters, there would have been many more parallels, and a consequently greater inductive support for the generalization underlying a statement such as

The dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki made the capitulation of Japan inevitable.

(If, indeed, it was not already inevitable.)

But second, an historical IS-generalization derives its strongest support from being fitted (even if loosely) into a system of psychological generalizations of a similar logical form. The historian knows that there are (nonredundant) conditions under which a proud politician will avoid highly probably defeat, other conditions under which a party tagged with a discredited policy that led to some 25,000 military casualties will be defeated at the polls, other conditions under which a public-relations-conscious president will decide that he has more to gain than to lose by starting the withdrawal of troops from a counter-productive military venture, etc. It is these psychological generalizations, even if they are also conditional and incomplete, that bolster his confidence in his original IS-generalization. And this is the third function of the narrative bridge; it supplies material for a number of applicable psychological generalizations that together constitute backing for the IS-generalization — and also give that IS-generalization its nonaccidental character. The problem of distinguishing between accidental and nonaccidental statements (between "All *A*'s are *B*'s" and "All *A*'s must be *B*'s") awaits final solution, and this is not time to try to cope with it. But one thing has been pretty well established, I think, and that is that the nonaccidentalness of a universal generalization ("All *A*'s must be *B*'s") derives in some way from its belonging to a system of universal generalizations, in terms of which the *B*-ness of *A*'s can be seen as a consequence of, as required by, other features of *A*'s. The precise logical character of such a system, and the criteria for admission to it, are at issue. All I want to suggest here (and that quite tentatively) is that the historian's knowledge of (conditional) universal generalizations about human motives and actions, about characters and motives, about experiences and responses, play the role of a (loose) system that may give logical support to an IS-generalization, and consequently to the inevitability-statement on which it depends.

We are now in a position to see what is meant by speaking of historical events as inevitable *tout court*: an inevitable event is (roughly) one that became inevitable — was made inevitable — at some time before it occurred. This brief formula could be, and probably should be, refined. To mention one kind of consideration, some events cannot be prevented from completing themselves once they are under way — for example, an avalanche or a riot. Others take a considerable time, and it is within the power of some persons opposed to their completion to stop them at any time: such an event, strictly speaking, has not occurred until it has run its course. There is always a last moment before an event is completed at which no efforts would prevent it from being completed; but in that sense, it would be trivial to say that all historical events are inevitable. What we require is some notion of a cut-off point for each kind of event — the last moment before which some *conceivable*

INEVITABILITY IN HISTORY

action would have prevented its beginning or its completion, even if the conceivable action was not within anyone's power. Then we can say the event was inevitable if it was made inevitable at some time before its cut-off point. But of course the interesting, the significant, cases of historical inevitability will be those in which the moment of inevitabilization preceded the cut-off point by some span of time.

It is also important to avoid trivialization by not neglecting the essential reference in the definition of "inevitability" to the actions of those who were opposed to the occurrence of the event. In speaking of natural events, of floods and hurricanes, we can often say that no action (now) within the power of any human beings would have prevented them. And I do not deny that such natural events can be historical events, when they impinge importantly upon the development of human institutions. But the great body of historical events are actions, individual or group actions, and they do not occur — this is tautological — in the absence of human intentions (even if the act performed is not the act intended). It is therefore confusing to argue that *no* historical events are inevitable because if those who wanted them to occur, and tried to make them occur, had changed their intentions, those events might not have occurred. This would be a sensible reply to anyone who held the view that historical events occur no matter what people's intentions are; but this view cannot be made convincing.¹

It is also confusing to argue that *all* historical events are inevitable because the intentions and efforts that made them occur — if intentions can be said to make events occur — were themselves the effects of previous causes. This thesis, of course, is simply determinism — which I am prepared to assume, while arguing that it leaves room for an important and interesting distinction between inevitable and non-inevitable historical events. For I believe this distinction is very much the concern of the historian, as well as of those of us who are willing to learn from him.

Still, it might be true, and provable on some other grounds, that all historical events are inevitable. And there have always been philosophers of history haunted by this possibility. There is a kind of Providentialism according to which everything comes about through the agency of a supernatural power that requires no assistance from terrestrial agents; on such a view, it would be true to say, of any event that occurred, that no action within the power of anyone would have been followed by its nonoccurrence. However, this Total-Inevitability Thesis has not seemed plausible to reflective philosophers of history, who have more often inclined to what might be called a General-Inevitability Thesis: namely, that all *important* historical events are inevitable.

Spengler, to take him as an interesting example, distinguishes between those events that are "Destiny" and those that are merely "incident."

It was Destiny that the discoveries of oxygen, Neptuen, gravitation and spectrum analysis happened as and when they did.

One feels that it was more or less an incident when Goethe goes to Sesenheim (for a student holiday), but destiny when he goes to Weimar; one regards the former as an episode, and the latter as an epoch.²

Yet since he also says that "only so long as we *do not* think upon destiny do we really know it."³ and claims to distinguish the two types of historical event by a

MONROE C. BEARDSLEY

special "physiognomic flair."⁴ We cannot easily be certain what this distinction entails. Perhaps his best statement — unfree though it is from puzzling aspects — is this:

For if it is incidental that the history of higher mankind fulfills itself in the form of great Cultures, and that one of these Cultures awoke in West Europe, about the year 1000; yet, from the moment of awakening, it is bound by its charter. Within every epoch there is unlimited abundance of surprising and unforeseeable possibilities of self-actualizing in detail-facts, but the epoch itself is necessary, for the life-unity is in it. That its inner form is precisely what it is, constitutes its specific determination (*Bestimmung*). Fresh incidentals can affect the shape of its development, can make this grandiose or puny, prosperous or sorrowful, but alter it they cannot.⁵

The importance of a historical event for Spengler lies in its relation to a particular Culture within which it occurs: it either expresses the unique soul of that Culture or it signifies the transition from one stage of development to another (e.g., from its period of full flowering to its period of "civilization" and decline). These important events are the inevitable ones — in the sense in which I have analyzed the term, though for reasons quite peculiar to Spengler. It is not inevitable that a Culture is born when and where it is, or that it continues to exist, rather than being snuffed out or repressed by another Culture. But, to take one example, it is characteristic of the comparatively late stage of every Culture that engineers and builders become dominant, acquire the power to carry out their ends and exert a strong influence over the lives and activities of people. These individual lives and activities are not important, and not inevitable; but that there are engineers, and that they dominate, is inevitable. This entails that the general spirit of the people will be such that they admire engineers and depend on them, and think them infinitely superior to poets, politicians, and even philosophers. But — at least so long as the Culture remains in being — even if engineers were detested and hunted down by misguided rulers, Spengler seems to hold, more would spring up, and finally would be accepted. This no action within anyone's power could prevent. He seems to have the same view of the great artistic and mathematical periods in every culture — take away Pheidias or Bach, and you would not keep those periods from happening.

I remind you of this theory of Spengler's, not because I think there is the slightest plausibility in it, but because I think it shows that the kind of analysis of inevitability-statements that I have given helps to clarify, and thus sometimes to expose, the views of speculative philosophers of history who hold some form of General-Inevitability Theses. Spengler's view is a supernaturalistic or transcendental one, but we can discern in the writings of others (e.g., of some Marxists) elements of a more naturalistic view. It would invoke the distinction between individual actions (a particular general giving an order) and group actions (the advance of a division), and it would stipulate that all important historical events are group actions. Suppose, then, it could be shown that historical group actions occur in such a way as never to permit a true counterfactual with an individual antecedent and a consequent denying the occurrence of that action — that is, a true counterfactual of the form "If individual *I* had performed section *A*, then this group

INEVITABILITY IN HISTORY

action would not have occurred." Then all group actions could be inevitable, in the sense in which I have defined this term. Note that this view would not rule out the possibility of true counterfactuals with *social antecedents*: it might still be true that if another *group* action had been performed, then this group action would not have been performed ("If the Senate had not passed the Tonkin resolution, the division would not have advanced"). But it would be true that no individual action, or series of individual actions, would have prevented the advance.

Now, to a view like this one, the obvious rebuttal is an appeal to the principle of the dependence of group actions upon individual actions. If no individual soldier had moved, the division would not have advanced. According to reductionist philosophers, this is a tautology; I regard it as a synthetic statement, though an obvious one. In either case, it is true; but it may not dispose of the Social Action version of the General-Inevitability Thesis. For, conditions might have been such that if the soldiers in this division had balked, some other division was bound to be found or raised to make the attack, for there would be enough soldiers who desired an advance (whatever their motives might be) so that no *individual* actions by other persons would have prevented the advance. Thus the social action would be inevitable, even though the individual actions were not. The same could be said of all historical group actions. I do not claim that this thesis is true, or even that, in the final analysis, it is completely coherent. I judge that some historical group actions are inevitable in something like this way, but many are not.

It is plain enough, I think, from the preceding discussion that to discern the inevitable events in history from the evitable ones is not an easy task, and any conclusions are likely to be far from certain. But I would urge by way of conclusion that it is one of the historian's important tasks, and his conclusions are among the most valuable things he can teach us.

The question "What does history teach us?" is still a debatable one. It is never out of order to remind ourselves of the grave dangers incurred by any attempt to generalize simply and directly from past events to present problems. Certainly, IS-generalizations, by their very nature, do not permit of anything more than the most cautious and exploratory extension to current events. I like that passage in Anatole France's *Penguin Island* describing how, when the inhabitants of Alca are menaced by the supposititious dragon, the holy monk Mael, after six months of research and prayer reports to a younger colleague: "I have studied at length the history and habits of dragons, not to satisfy a vain curiosity, but to discover examples to follow in the present circumstances. For such, Samuel, my son, is the use of history."⁶ History has no doubt often been put to such "uses," both by those who are bent on making basic changes in the political or economic character of a society and by those who wish to debar such changes. It is always a comfort to the reformer or revolutionary to believe that the change he seeks to foster has already reached a point of no return, and that the realization of his goals can no longer be evaded, just as it is a comfort to the conservative or reactionary to believe that a continuation of the present state of things is fixed inevitably in the historical process.

What do we learn from history? I think a good deal can be said in answer to this question, but I will be content to suggest one of the answers here. If it does not provide us with rules of thumb to know which of our recent or contemporary

conditions are inevitable and which are not, or even with generalizations of the sort that can readily be applied to what happens around us, still it teaches us something about inevitability. It helps us to know what to look for in grasping the strength of today's currents of change; it acquaints us with some of the factors, both in individual wills and in group dynamisms, that make some developments so difficult to turn aside; it sensitizes our perception of the subtleties and complexities of historical change, and of the variety of features that can affect our control over the course of events. Above all, it helps to sustain a healthy skepticism about all unproved claims of inevitability, and thus reaffirms, even in the midst of trials such as we face today, the potential power of human beings over their own destinies — a power whose bounds may be fixed, but whose range is still largely unexplored.

FOOTNOTES

1. An accident occurs when a person acts in such a way that the action he performs is not the action he intended: he intends to grasp the salt, and knocks over the pepper. It is possible to conceive of the historical process as a series of accidents in this sense—that all the actions that make it up were different from those intended by the agent. But even in that case, we could not say that the events would have occurred no matter what the intentions were (if our clumsy diner had not the intention to reach the salt, he would not have knocked over the pepper). If this Total Accident Thesis were plausible, which it is not, it would make all historical events unavoidable, in a queer sense. For anyone who acted with the intention of preventing one of them would necessarily fail: he could only prevent it accidentally — by not trying to — and so preventing it (strictly speaking) would not be within his power.
2. Oswald Spengler, *THE DECLINE OF THE WEST* (1918, 1922), trans. C. F. Atkinson, one-vol. ed., N.Y.: Knopf, 1932, I, 119, 139.
3. *IBID.*, II 267n.
4. *IBID.*, I, 116.
5. *IBID.*, I, 145.
6. Anatole France, *PENGUIN ISLAND*, N.Y.: Modern Library, 1933, p. 59.

Note: The analyses and arguments in this paper are from a book in progress, entitled *THE LANGUAGE OF HISTORY*.