

**Knowledge and Explanation in History**  
An Introduction to the Philosophy of History

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# Knowledge and Explanation in History

An Introduction to the  
Philosophy of History

R. F. Atkinson

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MACMILLAN

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TO  
M. J. A.

# Contents

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<i>Preface</i>	ix
Introduction	i
I Philosophy and History	4
1 <i>Philosophy of History</i> 2 <i>History</i> 3 <i>Philosophers and     Historians on History</i>	
II Knowledge of the Past	39
1 <i>The Problems</i> 2 <i>Direct Observation, Memory,     Testimony</i> 3 <i>The 'Existence' of the Past</i> 4 <i>Referring     to a Point in Time</i> 5 <i>History and Prophecy</i> 6 <i>Past Actions</i> 7 <i>Truth and Probability</i>	
III Objectivity	69
1 <i>The Problems</i> 2 <i>Never the Whole Truth</i> 3 <i>Selection in History and Science</i> 4 <i>An Absolute     Basis for Selection?</i> 5 <i>The Limits of Objectivity</i>	
IV Explanation	95
1 <i>Description, Interpretation, Explanation</i> 2 <i>Law     Explanations</i> 3 <i>Rational Explanations</i> 4 <i>Narrative as     Explanatory</i>	

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V	Causation	140
	1 <i>Historians' Causes</i> 2 <i>The Use of 'Cause'</i>	
	3 <i>Particular Causal Connections</i> 4 <i>The 'True' Cause</i>	
	5 <i>Levels of Causal Explanation</i>	
	6 <i>Necessity and Chance, Constraint and Free Will</i>	
VI	Values	188
	1 <i>Introduction</i> 2 <i>History as Factual</i> 3 <i>Moral Judgement in History</i>	
	4 <i>Progress</i>	
	<i>Works Cited in the Text</i>	219
	<i>Index</i>	225

## Preface

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The present book is a series of discussions of certain central topics, or clusters of topics, in the philosophy of history. It does not, inevitably, cover the whole subject. I have concentrated on topics about which I thought I had something to say, though I have also tried to set my remarks in context by giving an account of recent work, by both historians and philosophers, in the opening chapter.

The *content* of the book is not, except inadvertently, elementary; nor is it intended to be exclusively introductory, though I have tried to write in a way that does not presuppose prior acquaintance with philosophy. No doubt I will be found to have succeeded better in some places than in others. It is to be feared too that the difficulty and disagreeableness which laymen sometimes complain of in philosophical writing is less a matter of technical apparatus, which it is relatively easy to do without, than of direction of interest, conception of relevance, level of abstraction – all of which, being close to the essence of the subject, cannot be avoided. I hope, none the less, that I have succeeded in bringing into view some of the philosophical questions which are asked about history; and even that I have managed to outline reasonable answers to some of them. Any such answers will not be final. Philosophy does not progress by finding definitive answers; it is rather that people (sometimes) progress within it, by improving their understanding of its problems and the ways in which they arise.

I hope too that, despite the high line taken about the autonomy of philosophy at the beginning of chapter 1, it will not be thought that I regard philosophising about history as necessarily more worth while than the practice of history itself. My concern is only to emphasise that it is different, and that the questions I address myself to in this book are philosophical, not historical. Obviously, as I emphasise in several places in the text, it is only because history is a distinctive and rich field of

intellectual endeavour – because it is clearly valuable in itself – that it is worth philosophising about.

As regards my intellectual debts, I have tried, so far as practicable, to give references to the works I have drawn upon or reacted to. The authors from whom I believe myself to have learnt most, maybe not always the lessons they intended to teach, are Walsh, Dray and Gallie. Beyond this, I became constantly more conscious as I wrote how much of the interest there is in the subject derives from Collingwood. I do not agree with many of his pronouncements, and nobody could agree with them all; but for stimulus and illumination he is unsurpassed.

*References.* A complete list of works cited will be found at the end. Where there is only one by an author, it will normally be referred to in the text by author's name and page or chapter numbers. Where there are more than one, the works will be distinguished by date, usually that of first publication in the original language. Dates of editions and translations used will be given in the list at the end, and page references will be to these.

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R. F. A.