

## TELLING A STORY ABOUT THE PAST

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History is more than a discipline, and philosophy of history has to be more than a description, justification, or even critique of what professional historians do. History is a way (not the only way, and perhaps not the most important way) of telling a story about the past. How do we distinguish telling such a story from merely telling a story? By asserting that "this actually happened." But what do we mean when we assert that something "actually happened?" Why do we *want* to assert this? Here, it seems to me, is the primary question—at least the first question—in philosophy of history.

By way of asking and, I hope, answering it, I will be relying throughout on the philosophy of history outlined in Heidegger's *Being and Time*,<sup>1</sup> of which I should therefore provide a summary—not just because I regard it as the most valuable recent contribution to the field and agree with its main points, but because it illustrates clearly the lack of a decisive answer to the question of how history is to be distinguished from "story."

Heidegger claims that the science of history is only possible because human beings are "primarily historical" (433, 447). "Historicality" and "historizing" are the terms Heidegger uses for humanity's passage from birth to death (427). He sees this as an activity of "handing down" to ourselves the possibilities of action that were available to people who no longer exist (435)—not mainly by recording them and passing the record down but by *repeating* them in our own actions (437). Authentically, such repetition is intelligent and informed response to the necessity of my death (438) and is possible only for a being who has a future and is concerned about living rightly in the light of that future. History therefore concerns the future (437). The selection of historical facts and narratives by the historian also has its source in the historian's attitude and behavior toward his or her future (447). Historical documents and artifacts on the

basis of which historical science preserves the past are called "secondarily historical" (433) because they reflect the *world* of "primarily historical" beings who no longer exist (432). Historical science can be both "universally valid" and contain particular facts because humans are universally concerned about the future and have to deal with their peculiar "factual" situations as they find them (447-48).

But observe that what is "handed down" in historical existence is *possibilities*. "Dasein may choose its hero" (437) because possibilities of action worth repeating have been communicated in historical records. Aren't they also communicated, though, in pure "stories"? Can't Odysseus or Galahad or Frodo Baggins be chosen as a hero quite as well as Alexander, Joan of Arc, or Abraham Lincoln? In his analysis of history Heidegger never gives reasons for distinguishing "what actually happened" from fiction. Fiction also renders genuine human possibilities for "repetition," even if these possibilities were never made actual. Granted that documents of the past are only valuable (and "truly historical" [see 448]) insofar as they help me deal with my future, isn't any fictional story valuable in the same way? Again, why is the assertion that some events took place and others didn't significant, and what is its sense?

To make the problem accessible in a less technical way, take the following sentences, all in the past tense:

- (1) Dinosaurs once roamed the earth.
- (2) America declared independence from Britain in 1776.
- (3) Jesus rose from the dead.
- (4) Once there was a man who had a dog.

What is it that distinguishes sentence (4) from the first three? All the sentences tell a story, but sentence (4) would not *necessarily* be understood as telling an historical story. Why? What is it about the first three sentences that makes us assume they are (true or not) assertions about what "actually happened"? Is the meaning of "actually" or "happened" distinct in each case? It does seem to be. In sentence (1) a claim is made about a past state of affairs that is indefinitely located:

even were one to specify the era in which dinosaurs were extant, to the popular conception saying "once" or "a long time ago" would do just as well for the information conveyed. On the other hand, sentence (2) gives an imaginable date and to most of us an intelligible date, one we can fix with some reliability, however vague, within our frame of reference—not yesterday, not a year ago, but at a conceivable time. The word "actually" in these first two cases seems to have a comparable use; it is the word "happened" that differs. The event in sentence (1) isn't conceived as happening at any *particular* point in past time. I may even have been begging the question, in fact, when I called it an "event." Sentence (1) is, logically speaking, a description of a state of affairs, sentence (2) a description of something that, properly speaking, happened. There are then two ways of "happening," if this word is legitimately used in both cases. "This happened" can mean "a state of affairs existed," and it can mean "something happened, properly speaking, within a given state of affairs"—the state of affairs relevant to sentence (2) being, presumably, the political relationship of Britain and America in the eighteenth century. If we are to stick with the ordinary conception of the past—and at this stage there isn't any reason why we shouldn't—the past seems to contain two types of things, states of affairs and happenings or events.<sup>2</sup>

With sentence (3), the meaning of "actually" comes into question. "Happened" is apparently being used in exactly the sense of sentence (2), but there seems to be a difference in this case between the question, "Did this happen?" and the question, "Did this *actually* happen?" Some Christians, of course, would be prepared to admit the resurrection didn't actually happen if it could be proved to them that no event fitting the description took place, but the great majority, I think, would not. No matter how much of a fundamentalist you are, you put more stress on the meaning of the event than on its occurrence properly speaking. The meaning of a religious event *is* its actuality, and so to say that it "actually" happened is to say that the event is meaningful for the past (and so for the future) regardless of whether it took place: or that whether or not it

