



LEONARD KRIEGER

Professor of History

Columbia University

COMMENT ON MONROE BEARDSLEY'S "INEVITABILITY IN HISTORY"

by
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As a practising historian I must pay tribute to Beardsley's true feeling for the problems which historians face and for the characteristic responses they make to these problems. Not only does this feeling make Beardsley's particular contribution relevant to students of history but it also implies a general philosophical respect for history as a domain of knowledge which is the necessary condition for any dialogue between philosophers and historians. It is the deprecation of historical knowledge, indeed, introduced into the philosophical tradition by Aristotle and renewed periodically by such as Descartes and Nietzsche, that has inhibited this dialogue and thereby postponed progress in the discussion of the crucial questions in the philosophy of history, such as the question of inevitability.

But precisely because the discussion is at an early stage, Beardsley's paper raises, in my mind at least, one primitive question which he does not raise but which must be raised if we are to understand the meaning of arguments like his. The question is this: since, as Beardsley's very title clearly implies, there are inevitabilities outside of as well as in history, what is the relationship between the extra-historical and the historical inevitability? Until this distinction is made explicit, we cannot know whether Beardsley is testing a general model of inevitability on history, using inevitability in history as a promising arena for the development of a general model which is being frustrated in its other employments, or working out a concept of historical inevitability that is *sui generis*. I infer — although I cannot know, because Beardsley has not told us — that he is writing in the second of these frameworks (applying to history a general model that has been hitherto undemonstrable elsewhere), for clearly his crucial notion of an IS-generalization has nothing to do with time and is designed to be applicable far beyond history, and just as clearly its actual application to the category of inevitability outside of history has been problematical, since, as Beardsley himself says: "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 no time to try to cope with it." But this is precisely the problem that he is coping with for history: what he maintains is that the relation between the "system of universal generalizations" and the non-accidental universal statement which only "derives in some way" from it in general somehow becomes a more definite relation in the particular atmosphere of history. Beardsley should, in short, make much clearer than he does, that he is forcing history, traditionally the most dubious of logical arenas, to bear a burden of problem-solving that, according to his own testimony, other philosophical arenas have not yet been able to bear.

The initial failure to specify the relationship between general and historical inevitability lies behind the circularity of Beardsley's argument for historical inevitability as such. He makes the "narrative bridge", which he carefully shows to

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be incompatible with inevitability-statements in its paradigmatic historical usage since it is composed of evitable links, provide the materials for (admittedly loose) systems of generalizations which then can be read back into other narrative chains with the imputation of inevitability. But since the analogies and the psychological generalizations from these narrative bridges which supply the support for IS-generalizations require a classification into common categories which is far more questionable in history than in other fields, and since we are not shown, even granted the classification, how these analogies and generalizations become the "system" of generalizations which is Beardsley's casual but crucial medium of inevitability, it is not clear how the statements lifted out of historical processes acquire their non-accidental function unless they are assumed in these processes to begin with. In short, unless some magic is attributed to narration which turns its accidental links into non-accidental materials of generalization, statements lifted out of historical time have a more unreliable base and a no more reliable function for inevitability than any statement whatsoever on the model of all *A*'s are *B*'s. When historians question the very possibility of generalization from history, Beardsley's unexplained escalation of such generalization into a system of generalization is almost as doubtful as is the policy of escalation in his historical illustration of the Vietnam War.

There seems to be an assumption that the concept of inevitability as it may be applied to all human events is the same as historical inevitability. I wish to question that assumption, and I think most of my colleagues in the field of history also would question it, although perhaps in a more radical way than I. The assumption is that concepts of possibility and inevitability operate (or should operate) for the historian in the same way as they appear to do in other areas. I should like to ask whether there is not a distinctive historical context for inevitability, to which general notions of inevitability must be adapted.

Most historians seem to operate on the assumption that the universe is pluralistic; that is, they have the notion that their historical realm is an autonomous one, that they operate as historians within a world where all philosophical assumptions and questions are either suspended or so radically transformed as to constitute new species. Consequently, some historians are apt to say that possibility and inevitability are concepts that do not apply to history. Others may admit that the concepts apply, but still insist that their application is entirely different from the way in which such concepts would be used outside of an historical setting.

My own position is that the philosophical questions and assumptions concerning possibility and inevitability to apply to the writing of history, but that there are distinctively historical forms of it which command more consensus among historians than the general logical model which Beardsley claims historians use on the historical process. The first, and most obvious kind of such intra-historical inevitability, if I may so call it, comes not from the Historian at all but solely from the historical agent — it comes, that is, from an event's occurring because an historical agent believed its occurrence to be inevitable. Let us take, as an example, the case of the outbreak of the Seven Years' War in 1756. The outbreak was occasioned by the Prussian Frederick the Great's invasion of Saxony. Frederick invaded Saxony in 1756 because he was convinced that a coalition of Austria,

Russia and France was going to invade Prussia in 1757. And because he was convinced that this coming was inevitable, he made the war inevitable. In this sense, whether historians pronounce historical events inevitable or not depends on whether they find men in their history believing an event to be inevitable and acting on that belief. For the historian, this is second-hand inevitability.

But there is another kind of intra-historical inevitability that is, perhaps, of more interest to philosophers. This is what we may call an inevitable inevitability which comes solely from the historian and has nothing to do with the character of historical agents or events. For the historian, every event that has happened, because it has actually happened, becomes inevitable to him *as an historian*. When an historian looks back at an event and seeks to explain it, he must start and end with this event and no other. Whether or not the historical agents had any choice in bringing about the event, the historian has none. Even when the historian concludes that an event was not inevitable for the people concerned in it, it remains inevitable for him. He may recognize other possibilities for the agent; he himself has none. Events are retrospectively inevitable.

I should like to suggest that, in general, even if the logic of inevitability were in a better state than it apparently is, no such logic could be applied to history without adjustment to account for time. Thus even if we move from the limited notions of inevitability which we have just been discussing to the relationship between the historian and the historical process which is Beardley's context, we should recognize that when historians characterize an event as inevitable, they generally do so as a projection from a whole series of events which create a momentum in a certain direction and a whole set of limiting conditions confining it there. Whether such attribution of inevitability is valid is for the philosophers to tell us, and they will have to tell us in a way that checks on our use of historical time before we can thank them for more than arousing in us the most general kind of awareness that we are not exempt from the requirements of reason.