

[1966. Review of *Scepticism and Historical Knowledge*, by Jack W. Meiland. *The Gordon Review* (Spring).]

Scepticism and Historical Knowledge, by Jack W. Meiland. New York: Random House, 1965, 209 pp. \$195.

This book is a brilliant and detailed argument for the Construction Theory of history. Although the author makes no mention of Barth, Bultmann, or Cullmann and avoids all discussion of the relation between history and faith, anyone interested in the latter topic ought to study some secular historiography. This work and Collingwood's *The Idea of History* are the best to begin with.

The first part of Meiland's volume requires some knowledge of Croce, Oakesshott, and Collingwood; but after page 83 the author is on his own. Two chapters are given to Historical Relativism. In the first he shows that the usual objections to relativism, and especially Ernest Nagel's, are not sound. In the second he attempts his own refutation of relativism, which the reviewer judges to be the poorest part of the book.

The author then proceeds to argue that nothing can serve as evidence for past events and that therefore historical knowledge is impossible. The argument is: In order for E to serve as evidence for H, an historical event, a correlation must first have been established between things like E (documents, ruins, etc.) and events like H. This is how X rays are taken as evidence for TB. But H is a past event, and nothing other than a past event can be sufficiently like H to serve in a correlation. But E is in the present. Hence the establishment of a correlation repeats the problem *ad infinitum*.

If in replying to this argument anyone wishes to use the trustworthiness of memory, Meiland shows that no one can prove that any memory is correct. To check memories by present observations requires generalizations that depend on previous memories and again this begs the question.

Furthermore, it is impossible to have a concept of the past. The past can be defined neither ostensibly nor by genus and species. All empirical theories about learning time fail, and the *a priori* theories "involve many difficulties."

History must then be seen as a construction in which a story accounts for present documents and artifacts. The historian cannot discover past facts; the only past there is, is the past the historian creates by his story. Thus the past can change as various historians make different constructions.

Before anyone rejects the Construction Theory out of hand, he will do well to consider Meiland's challenge: "Some will feel that the Construction Theory is not only extremely paradoxical (which it is) but also very implausible and even, perhaps, obviously unsatisfactory. But such a belief can be supported only by a refutation of each argument supporting the theory or the setting forth of serious objections to the Constructionist view itself." Thus the author sends us to the arguments.

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