

**THE CONCEPT ACTION IN  
HISTORY AND  
IN THE NATURAL  
SCIENCES, PP. 231-332**

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The Concept Action in History and in the Natural Sciences, pp. 231-332 by Percy Hughes

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AND IN  
THE NATURAL SCIENCES

BY  
PERCY HUGHES, A.M.

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## INTRODUCTION

The title of this essay suggests a certain antithesis between history and the natural sciences. This antithesis, which is maintained in Germany and France much more commonly than here or in England, I intend to set out along lines that seem to me somewhat more clear, at least to English-speaking people, than those adhered to by German logicians. The gain results, in my opinion, largely from our possession, in the common word and concept *action*, of an instrument of speech and logic to which no German term, in its common use, is equal for this particular purpose.

To establish this antithesis is to exhibit the independence and importance of historical science proper, as contrasted with sociology, with political or any other science that notes "uniformities of sequence or co-existence." In their efforts to bring home to all the existence of historical science, and to exhibit its peculiar purpose and value, such men as Kant, Hegel, Droysen, Windelband, Münsterberg and Rickert have insisted that it is through the appreciation of the nature of historical construction that the common thought of the times can free itself from the tendency wrongly to employ mechanical concepts, to rest in fatalism and individualism, to neglect or even positively to scorn all those deeper interpretations of the world, which, escaping or transcending the demands of a science of *law*, serve to substantiate Bacon's dictum that it is through histories, rather than through natural science, that men become wise.

But, until we can set over and against the purpose and

ideal of natural science, against the definite concept of *law*, a no less definite and complete concept, purpose and ideal of historical science, the impression must remain common that the eulogies of that science are marked rather by fervor and fine speaking than by the clear thinking and residence with the fact on which the naturalist insists, and which, in large measure, he has attained. In the concepts of teleology, individuality and freedom, by which the above-mentioned writers and others have defined the nature of historical construction, there may lie the whole truth which they sought. But it is certain that no general acceptance has been gained for any of the accounts yet given of the nature of history. The latest and clearest is that of Professor Heinrich Rickert, in *Die Grenzen der Naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung*. But even this, I think, in asserting the bold antithesis of the sciences of *individuals* and of *universals*, fails to grasp the wealth and positive character of the historian's work, or really to unite under one concept the full purpose of historical as contrasted with naturalistic construction.

My thesis is, that to describe the content and purpose of historical construction the concept *action* is fully adequate. And I have the less sense of temerity in advancing this theory, that I feel my position is really in close touch with those above mentioned; and particularly with that of Droysen, a practical historian, a philosopher and a logician. *Action*, then, as contrasted with *Law* is to be the central theme of this essay.

The plan of this essay is as follows: First, by tracing the history of the attempt to establish the logical basis of historical science, I introduce my own theory as a development of those preceding. Then, in chapters II and III, I intend to show, inductively, that action *is* the concept of historical content and construction, and also, de-

ductively, starting from the most obvious character of history, that action *must* be that concept. Chapters IV and V would show that the constant drift of natural sciences towards mechanical science proper is the elimination of the historical element in the concrete *facts* from which those sciences start; that those concrete *facts* are actions, but that natural science, in seeking laws, eliminates the conception of action; and that the elimination of action is the elimination of qualitative differences.

Chapter VI answers some logical difficulties and propounds others; in general, it *outlines* the field of the logic of history so far as I have surveyed it. Chapter VII exhibits the great significance of historical science for ethics. History furnishes the proper material of ethics. To neglect history is to have a formal ethics; to neglect the wider constructions of historical science is to have a petty ethical perspective.