

JOHANN GOTTFRIED VON HERDER
IDEAS TOWARD A PHILOSOPHY OF THE HISTORY OF MAN (1784-1791)

Herder, Johann Gottfried. "Ideas Toward a Philosophy of the History of Man." Theories of History. Ed. Patrick L. Gardiner. New York: Free Press, 1959. 34-49.

BOOK XII

Chapter 6 "The Principal Laws of History"

Here, Herder identifies the "principal law of history" (35) as the principle that "everywhere on our Earth whatever could be has been, according to the situation and wants of the place, the circumstances and occasions of the times, and the native or generated character of the people" (35). He contends that "human powers" (35) are in a "determinate relation to the age, and to their place on earth" (35). "Time, place, and national character alone, in short the general cooperation of active powers in their most determinate individuality, govern all the events that happen among mankind" (35-36).

Herder argues, firstly, that "as man originates from and in one race, his figure, education, and mode of thinking, are thus genetic" (36). Hence, that striking national character, which, deeply imprinted on the most ancient people, is unequivocally displayed in all their operations on the Earth. As a mineral water derives its component parts, its operative powers, and its flavour, from the soil through which it flows; so the ancient character of nations arose from the family features, the climate, the way of life and education, the early actions and employments, that were peculiar to them. The manners of the fathers took deep root, and became the internal prototype of the race. (36)

This is evident, for example, in the case of the Jews who, "in the land of their fathers, and in the midst of other nations, . . . remain as they were; and even when mixed with other people they may be distinguished for some generations downward" (36). The "more secluded they live, nay frequently the more they were oppressed, the more their character was confirmed" (36). In fact, he suggests that, ideally, "if every one of these nations had remained in its place, the Earth might have been considered as a garden, where in one spot one human national plant, in another, another, bloomed in its proper figure and nature" (36).

However, Herder realises that just "as men are not firmly rooted plants, the calamities of famine, earthquakes, war and the like, must in time remove from their place to some other more or less different" (36). And even though they might adhere to the manners of their forefathers with an obstinacy almost equal to the instinct of the brute, and even apply to their new mountains, rivers, towns, and establishments, the names of their primitive land; it would be impossible for them to remain eternally the same in every respect, under any considerable alteration of soil and climate. Here, the transplanted people would construct a wasp's nest, or anthill, after their own fashion. The style would be a compound arising from the ideas imbibed in their original country, and those inspired by the new: and this may commonly be called the youthful bloom of the nation. (36)

Almost every people on Earth, he points out, "has migrated at least once, sooner or later, to a greater distance, or less" (36). The impact of this migration is shaped by the "time when the migration took place, the circumstances by which it was occasioned, the length

of the way, the previous state of civilisation of the people, the reception they met with in their new country, and the like" (36).

The danger in all this is that of deracination and its consequences. "Though the tree lift its head" (37), Herder sermonises, "and overshadow whole quarters of the Globe, if it be not rooted in the earth, a single blast of wind may overturn it" (37). Arguing that the "complexion of a kingdom . . . depend[s] principally on the time and place in which it arose, the parts that composed it, and the external circumstances by which it was surrounded" (37), Herder contends that a "monarchy framed by wandering tribes whose political situation is a continuation of their former mode of life, will scarcely be of long duration: it ravages, and subjugates, till at last itself is destroyed" (37). This is not the case, however, "with states, which, springing up from a root, rest on themselves: they may be subdued, but the nation remains" (37).

Herder envisages at every turn a close relationship between human history and natural history, human civilisation and nature, frequently using the metaphor of a plant and its roots in order to draw an analogy between the two. Moreover, he is a naturalist through and through (i.e. he believes that the world and everything in it can be grasped in purely natural terms):

Nature has given the whole Earth to mankind, her children; and allowed everything, that place, time, and power would permit, to spring up thereon. Everything that can exist, exists; everything that is possible to be produced, will be produced; if not today, yet tomorrow. Nature's year is long: the blossoms of her plants are as various as the plants themselves, and the elements by which they are nourished. (37)

In addition, though he is a historicist, he believes that a scientific objectivity is possible in the grasping of social and historical phenomena. The historian, he argues, must strive to "see with eyes as impartial as those of the creator of the human race, or the genius of the Earth, and judge altogether uninfluenced by the passions" (37). He must cultivate a "mind wholly free from hypothesis" (37) if he is to grasp the meaning of each culture and social order in all its particularity.

Herder then turns his attention to "*how transitory all human structures are*" (38): the "plant blossoms, and fades; your fathers have died, and moulded into dust: your temple is fallen: your tabernacles, the tables of your law are no more; language itself, that bond of mankind, becomes antiquated" (38). For this reason, he asks, "shall a political constitution, shall a system of government or religion . . . erected solely on these, endure for ever? If so, the wings of Time must be enchained" (38). The customs of various peoples grow so quickly out of date. This leads Herder to criticise the stranglehold of "Tradition" (38) which, though

in itself . . . an excellent institution of Nature, indispensable to the human race: but when it fetters the thinking faculty both in politics and education, and prevents all progress of the intellect, and all the improvement, that new times and circumstances demand, it is the true narcotic of the mind, as well to nations and sects, as to individuals. (38)

The inevitability of change is something which must not be ignored.

BOOK XIII

Chapter 7 "Reflections on the History of Greece"

Herder argues here that, just as the "botanist cannot obtain a complete knowledge of a plant, unless he follow it from the seed, through its germination, blossoming, and decay"

(38), so too must the historian seek to understand the uniqueness of the present by reference to its roots in the past. The first principle to bear in mind in this regard is that "*[w]hatever can take place among mankind, within the sphere of given circumstances of time, place, and nation, actually does take place*" (39).

In "natural philosophy we never reckon upon miracles: we observe laws, which we perceive every where equally effectual, undeviating, and regular" (39). Man, he contends, "with his powers, changes, and passions" (39) is not able to "burst these chains of nature" (39), i.e. step outside or transcend nature, as a result of which human civilisation is subject to the same rules and principles as is the natural world. Accordingly, the examining mind must exert all its acumen on every historical event, as on a natural phenomenon. Thus in the narration of history it will seek the strictest truth; in forming its conceptions and judgment, the most complete connexion: and never attempt to explain a thing which is, or happens, by a thing which is not. With this rigorous principle, every ideal, all the phantoms of a magic creation, will vanish: it will endeavour to see simply what is: as soon as this is seen, the causes why it could not be otherwise will commonly appear. As soon as the mind has acquired this habit in history, it will have found the way to that sound philosophy, which rarely occurs except in natural history and mathematics. (39).

Such an approach, Herder argues, prevents us "from attributing the facts, that appear in history, to the particular hidden purposes of a scheme of invisible powers, which we would not venture to name in connexion with natural phenomena" (39). Fate, he contends, "reveals its purposes through the events that occur, and as they occur: accordingly, the investigator of history develops these purposes merely from what is before him, and what displays itself in its whole extent" (39).

The modern Greeks, for example, "have become what they are only by the course of time, through a given series of causes and effects" (39). All this is true no less of "every other nation upon Earth" (39) for the "whole history of mankind is a pure natural history of human powers, actions, and propensities, modified by time and place" (39):

Had Greece been peopled with Chinese, our Greece would never have existed: had our Greeks been fixed where Darius led the enslaved Eretrians [sic] they would have formed no Athens, they would have produced no Sparta. . . . Why did the enlightened Greeks appear in the World? Because Greeks existed; and existed under such circumstances, that they could not be otherwise than enlightened. (39)

Why, for example, did Alexander invade India?

Because he was Alexander, the son of Philip; and from the dispositions his father had made, the deeds of his nation, his age and character, his reading of Homer, etc., he knew nothing better that he could undertake. (39-40)

The danger in all this is if we

attribute his bold resolution to the secret purposes of some superior power, and his heroic achievements to his peculiar fortune; we run the hazard, on the one hand, of exalting his most senseless and atrocious actions into designs of deity; and, on the other, of detracting from his personal courage, and military skill; while we deprive the whole occurrence of its natural form. (40)

He who "takes with him into natural history the fairy belief, that invisible sylphs tinge the rose, or hang its cup with pearly dew-drops . . . may be an ingenious poet, but will never shine as a naturalist or historian" (40) for history is the "science of what is, not of what possibly may be according to the hidden designs of fate" (40).

Secondly, Herder contends that "*[w]hat is true of one people, holds equally true with regard to the connexion of several together; they are joined as time and place unites them; they act upon one another, as the combination of active powers directs*" (40). Arguing that the Greeks "have been acted upon by the Asiatics, and the Asiatics reacted upon by the Greeks" (40) who have been "conquered by Romans, Goths, Christians, and Turks" (40), and so on, Herder advances the view that the "whole of the cultivation of our minds has depended precisely upon the most trivial and precarious circumstances" (40). He denies the workings in all the vicissitudes of human existence of any "secret purpose of fate" (40), arguing instead in favour of seeking out the "natural cause" (40) in every instance.

Thirdly, Herder argues, the "*cultivation [culture] of a people is the flower of its existence*" (41); its "*display is pleasing indeed, but transitory*" (40), however. Man, Herder argues, "when he comes into the World, knows nothing, but has all his knowledge to learn; so an uncultivated people acquires knowledge from its own practice, or from intercourse with others" (40-41). However, "every kind of human knowledge' has its particular circle, that is its nature, time, place, and periods of life. The cultivation of Greece, for example, grew with time, place and circumstances, and declined with them" (41). All kinds of human knowledge aim at a "point of perfection, which, when attained by a concatenation of fortunate circumstances" (41) cannot be preserved to "eternity, nor can it instantly return, but a decreasing series commences" (41). In the arts, for example, every "perfect work . . . is the highest of its kind: nothing, therefore, can possibly succeed it, but mere imitations, or unsuccessful attempts to excel. When Homer had sung, no second Homer in the same path could be conceived: he plucked the flower of the epic garland, and all who followed must content themselves with a few leaves" (41). The Greek tragedians "chose another track: they ate . . . at Homer's table, but prepared for their guests a different feast" (41). They too, though, had their day: when the "subjects of tragedy were exhausted" (41), their "successors could do no more than remould the greatest poets" (41). The "essence of time" (41) contradicts any desire to impose an "unnatural eternity" (41) upon things for the "very appearance of the flower is a sign, that it must fade: it has drawn to itself the powers of the plant from the very root; and when it dies, the death of the plant must follow" (41). But out of the demise on one things arises others: "[e]very plant in nature must fade; but the fading plant scatters abroad its seeds, and thus renovates the living creation" (41).

Fourthly, the "*health and duration of a state rest not on the point of its highest cultivation, but on a wise or fortunate equilibrium of its active living powers. The deeper in this living exertion its centre of gravity lies, the more firm and durable it is*" (41-42).