Herder’s Another Philosophy of History (1774)

“Nature brings forth families; the most natural state therefore is also one people, with a national character of its own. For thousands of years this character preserves itself within the people and, if the native princes concern themselves with it, it can be cultivated in the most natural way: for a people is as much a plant of nature as is a family, except that it has more branches. Nothing therefore seems more contradictory to the true end of governments than the endless expansion of states, the wild confusion of races and nations under one scepter. An empire made up of a hundred peoples and 120 provinces which have been forced together is a monstrosity, not a state-body.”—Materials for a Philosophy of History (1884)

Historicism

While sometimes, the term historicism has been used to refer to what is more commonly called metahistory, that is the belief and therefore study of historical developmental laws that are observable and predictable, historicism more generally refers to the approach to historical thought that arose in nineteenth-century Germany. The historicist school, which owed its origins to Jean Bodin, Vico and Herder, argued that people groups (i.e. cultures, nations, ethnoi) are shaped by their histories. For historicists, nations are people-units who share a common language and worldview. Yet this national shaping of ourselves does not make communication across cultures incommensurable because we share a common human intuition (Verstehen) that makes it possible for us to grasp other understandings. Historicists in general also insisted that history is not progressive, linear, or predictable. Only God can know what course history will take. Historicism in some strands tended toward either historical relativism or racial doctrines of purity and superiority, though it is arguable whether either should have followed from the historicist school itself.

Exploratory Questions

- Is there a common nature that all humans share?
- How much are we shaped by our cultures?
- Can one discover a predictable pattern for the course of history?
- Are there universal principles of reason that apply to all human civilizations?
- Are historical periods real entities? Or are they convenient tools for analysis?

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>The People</th>
<th>Its Age</th>
<th>Virtues</th>
<th>Vices</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Orient</td>
<td>Infancy</td>
<td>Esteem, Example, Authority, Submission</td>
<td>Despotism</td>
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<td>Egypt</td>
<td>Childhood</td>
<td>Security, Ownership, Law, Civility, Artisanship</td>
<td>Heaviness, Religion, Fear</td>
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<td>Phoenicia</td>
<td>Twin of Childhood</td>
<td>Commercial spirit, Liveliness, Internationalism</td>
<td>(Crass commercialism)</td>
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<td>Greece</td>
<td>Youth</td>
<td>Friendship, Humanness, Friendship, Poetry</td>
<td>Pederasty, Weakness</td>
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<td>Rome</td>
<td>Adulthood</td>
<td>Courage, Virtue, Pride, Heroism, Justice, Completeness</td>
<td>Cruelty</td>
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<td>Arabia</td>
<td>transition</td>
<td>brought classical culture to the West</td>
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<td>The Gothic North</td>
<td>Renewal</td>
<td>Courageous, Honest, Pious</td>
<td>Wild, Savage</td>
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Discussion Questions

First Section
1. How does Herder regard Adam, our first progenitor? The Golden Age?
2. Why does he insist that the ages of the past can be seen in a positive light?
3. Why does Herder pull back from being too sure of generalizations about the past?
4. Why does he place happiness at the center of cultural purpose?
5. Why does he argue that comparisons between nations are ultimately useless?

Second Section
1. Why does Herder argue that the pagan culture was fading and needed Christianity?
2. What benefits did the Church bring to the pagan world and the post-pagan world?
3. Why does Herder insist that a period of history must be judged by end and means?
4. How much does Herder insist upon context to understand past actions?
5. What is Herder’s view of mechanical invention? Of the Enlightenment?
6. How does Herder see the relationship between education and a period’s character?
7. How does Herder connect the Enlightenment and colonial abuses?
8. Why does he charge the Enlightenment with disrupting local communities?

Third Section
1. What is the combined effect of Herder’s sarcasm in section three?
2. Why does he charge that the Enlightenment has lost the capacity to discern?
3. Why does he insist that we cannot know the divine plan for history or that our own era is the goal?
4. Likewise, why does he stress that we can’t repeat the past?
5. Why does Herder hold that we can only have an universal impact by local involvement? Do you agree?
6. Why does he further charge that the Enlightenment is an age of atrocities?
7. What is Herder’s concluding advice?