

# THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY AS THE PLAY OF THE HISTORIC REASON

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**T**he different philosophical aspects of historiography have always been considered – in all ages – as the most exciting events of the living cosmos. Is it possible that one can deduce essential messages and relevant contents and draw conclusions based upon different principles from the world that surrounds the individual, about a world with its quantitatively inestimable facts and fragments?

The facts, fragments play a role not only as data referring to the tangible and eventful world surrounding us, but the billions of the inherent psychological, mental-morphological decision-making processes also manifest themselves in such a way that they express the given reality of the present. The path-searching individual, searching for his destiny in this totality of the living cosmos, does escape to the possibilities being presented by the philosophy of history in order to somehow to understand and to explain his own micro-cosmos.

It is not fortuitous that historiography itself and the philosophy of history have been defined by the poet as “the most dangerous by-products of the intellect’s chemistry.” To understand the delicate nuances of this complex web of issues proves to be even more difficult since in our every day value systems – and here the researchers should be included in our listing – history mingles with politics, psychology, philosophy, economics, etc. *That is why it is crucial to investigate the peculiar relationship between history and philosophy, as their relationship can be deduced to such early roots wherefrom these two branches of sciences, together, seem to be enjoying an exclusive priority over others.*

This introductory idea, of course, will reach that level of difficulty only in the vast and unpenetrable jungle of space and time, where one can only find various value judgments of different historical times.

The philosophy of history, as it has been observed numerous times over the past 2,500 years, has followed a very zigzagging and winding path, where, in most cases, the researchers have not been provided with a thread of Ariadne.

The time-traveler historian often marvels at the fact that how many unexpected uncertainties are hidden behind those historical facts he is about to analyze and what he thinks are already in his possession. Years go by and he cannot really decide – despite the methods he owns and that are considered to be scientific – that how much of the dissected facts on the operating table are narration, expanded fiction, or hypothesis, and as to what extent he is overwhelmed by the rhetorics of the past.

Under such circumstances he himself starts to complicate his own situation because he cannot really decide why his belief in empiricism will not provide him with sufficient evidence. The need for verification cannot merely be considered as structural semantics, because the hermeneutical background also becomes a defining factor where, following some logic, the individual statements, value-judgments manifest themselves. *Thus, it is an inevitable precondition that a historian does not create history, but that he writes history.*

The wide range of these issues were extensively dealt with by the different hermeneutical schools of the 19th and 20th centuries. Schleiermacher has worked out the first systematic and comprehensive basis of the philosophy of history where the emphasis is placed on the interpretation – understanding and misunderstanding – of tangible facts, texts, data. That is how the art of understanding is created and what Schleiermacher characterizes as the “art of avoiding misunderstanding.”<sup>1</sup> Moreover, he adds, “misunderstanding is inherent, and understanding must be desired and sought for.”<sup>2</sup> Schleiermacher introduces these principles primarily through the interpretation of the sources of the written text. The thoughts excavated out from the text, according to him, can only be deduced only if we trace them back to their genesis. He emphasizes that “a series of thoughts arising out as elements of life are intertwined with other acts, acts of different nature and, thus, they – these thoughts – should be apprehended in their correlation with these acts and should be interpreted as complex acts in themselves.”<sup>3</sup> This idea already points toward the 20th century since the grammatical interpretation of texts coordinates the psychological interpretation as well, and that notion becomes the central category in Dilthey's philosophical system. Thus, the investigative methods of the turn of the century place a particular emphasis on what the historian experiences in discovering and understanding his own inherent mental processes and his inherent perceptions. The understanding of the historical facts is, thus, nothing but the reproduction and scrutiny of the original historicity. This is the point where philosophy joins with history, when, – as a mental process of secondary in nature – it undertakes the task of interpreting the mental process about history itself.

The psychological and philosophical analysis of facts are very often mixed up, though, from the point of view of psychology it is very simple to set up the bound-

aries; as psychology could be considered such a first-rate mental process where we do not deal with the relationship between the thinking process and its object, but, rather, it focuses primarily upon the thinking process itself. *Whereas the primary target of the philosophy of history is the relationship itself that exists between the thinking process and its concrete object it aims at.*

It is vital to clarify the differences between philosophy and psychology with respect to their approach to history, because their approach and their divergent attitudes towards historical facts represent an essential deviation in their methods regarding to the overall cognition. This fact has to be pointed out, because a particular historical system of belief might even feed itself from a fantasy world, and might search for some justification in its fabricated or self-interest driven presentation of historical facts. For example, the historian scrutinizing the natural history of dictatorships in the history of mankind might, consciously or unconsciously, incorporate his own personal and emotional relationships, with his parents, for example, into a certain historical epoch. True historiography (and history) can thus simply become a pretext.

Can we really get to know the real history? Or are we trying to muster the past to help us to understand our present? Can a philosopher help a historian? Robin G. Collingwood's standpoint is based on the interpretation of the relationship between subject and object: "The object that draws the philosopher's attention to is not simply the past, as it is in the case of a historian, but the mutually existing relationship of the two. Thinking, in relation to its object, is not merely thinking, but it is cognition, so what appears in psychology as being the theory of plain thinking is a mental event unrelated to every object, whereas, in philosophy, the same manifests itself as the theory of cognition. The psychologist is primarily concerned with the followings: How do historians think? – and the philosopher poses the question like this: How do historians discern? How do they get to know the past? However, it is not the philosopher's, but rather that of the historian's task to seize the past in itself, for example, to tell us that this and that event indeed took place many years ago. The philosopher is not interested in these events as matters per se, but as matters that have been discerned by the historian, and the philosopher does not pose the question as to how these matters look like, but rather, what it is that allows the historian to discern them as they are.

The philosopher has to contemplate about the historian's conscious itself without doubling the efforts being undertaken by the psychologist; for the philosopher the historian's mind-set is not an aggregate phenomenon but a system of knowledge. He contemplates about the past, too, but not so as to double the historian's work: for him the past is not a series of events, but a system of perceived matters. In other words, the philosopher, thinking about the subjective side of historiography, is an epistemologist, if he contemplates from an objective side, then he becomes a metaphysician.<sup>4</sup>

This opinion may also prove to be false, because it creates the impression that the epistemological and metaphysical aspects of the philosopher's work can be

separated. Philosophy does not separate the analysis of perception from the analysis of what we discern, only that in order to reach a better cognition it temporarily may investigate the comparable processes individually. That is how the particular philosophy of history has defined itself and thus differs from other philosophies as such. The philosophy of history has always separated itself from epistemology and phenomenology as the European philosophical thought has always been somehow defined by the interpretation of historical projections. The notion to escape to history as the teacher of life is always typical of an individual thinker or school of thought when some challenge – even at the level of everyday politics- being presented by the given epoch – requires rational explanation. “If, at any historical time, we take into consideration a nation's outstanding philosophical topics, we find we can identify those particular problems about which they felt they would demand their full spiritual energy. Peripheral or miscellaneous topics are the ones that do not present any particular difficulties.”<sup>5</sup>

In the 6 century B.C. the Hellenic philosophical traditions aimed at establishing the foundations of mathematics. The attention of the theories was focused on the mathematical cognition. The philosophical aspect of the Medieval Ages was closely tied to theology, the main direction of the speculation delved into the relationship between God and man. From the Renaissance on the search for the scientific thought in the natural sciences became the main objective. Needless to say people all the time contemplated on historical terms but their historical notions and theories were not adequate and they lacked the well-established methods of criticism. The 18th century represents the big turning point, when Montesquieu, Voltaire, and later Kant and Hegel interpret the historical cognition using critical methodical tools, and thus they can challenge the previously absolute authority of mathematics, theology and natural sciences. Historical speculation can now repossess its own object. “The mathematical speculation cannot grasp the past which presents particulars of space and time and is comprised of strange events no longer relevant, because this sort of speculation deals exactly with those matters where the characteristic space and time factors are not present; that is what makes it possible for the mathematical thought to discern these matters.” The theological speculation is also inadequate to grasp this subject, because this system of thought has only one object; and the events of history are finite and numerous. Lastly, the natural sciences are also inadequate to discern them, because the truths discovered by natural sciences are recognized as truth exactly by having been obtained by observation and experimentation, obtained by how we perceive them, whereas the past is gone, and the thoughts about it can never be verified the same way as hypotheses of the natural sciences.”<sup>6</sup>

Herder takes consciously upon himself the peculiar speculation of the philosophy of history in the modern age.<sup>7</sup> According to him, human existence is closely intertwined with the organic natural world. The cosmos is there to create a higher order of worlds. Herder's views are teleological ones. Every step of the evolution functionally

serves the purpose of preparing the next one. None is an end in itself. It is the man that presents the final goal of the evolution, he is the climax. Nature is thus justified by human rationalism and morality. Herder has quite rigidly applied his teleological views and that is one of the reasons why his anthropological notions have been exploited by several politically racist theories. His most important merit relating to the philosophy of history is his notion that human nature is not an inherent core, but an existing and prevalent one. His significance is invaluable, because it was Herder who – the first one in the modern age – defined the clear boundaries between nature and man, and who explained the practicability and management of laws that were blindly followed up until his time. He introduces the thought that will be elaborated on later by Kant, namely, processes are governed not by laws but by the reason of the laws. Hegel also relies on Herder's thoughts when he discusses the problems of human and historic existence, and when he describes the relationship between intellectual existence and the mind. Kant places Herder's romanticism on rational and critical foundations, as man (in his mental world) is now consciously dissatisfied with his place and his restlessness drives him to advance human existence. It is not some high goals that direct man, but the selfish dissatisfaction that may provide a faint hope for the historic man to break out from his particular and stagnant life. "Man strives for agreement, but nature knows it much better what is good for the human race (make note that here he does not refer to man as an individual, nor to individuals comprising of a society or as a historical totality, but he vaguely refers to man as a universal race or biological abstraction) who wants to create friction. Man wants to live comfortably and wants to be content, but what nature wants is to force man out of his recklessness and idle satisfaction into work and fatigue that would enable him to create those tools that would help him to wisely dispose of the same."<sup>8</sup>

Kant presents his philosophy of history in a comprehensive program. According to his philosophical system an ideal universal history can be established, but it is inevitable to unite the thought systems of history and philosophy. He puts emphasis not only on the narrated facts but on the perceived ones as well. It is an integral element of his philosophy of history that human history progresses in an organized manner characterized by rational thinking, intellect, and man's dissolution in ethical freedom, shortly, characterized by morality. According to Kant, the major driving force behind all that is irrationality, an existence dominated by passion combined with selfish egotism and lack of knowledge. Kant's notions about the philosophy of history – compared with Hegel's – may seem to be too uncompromising. His arguments relating to the progress of history carry rather mitological argumentations, and it could also be debated whether history progresses towards the future or ends up in the present.

Hegel, compared to Kant, can claim several revolutionary notions relating to the philosophy of history. He critically separates the notions of history and nature. He considers them as an aggregate of processes, and he categorically declares that nature does not have its own history. The time and space aspects of nature manifest them-

selves in the cycle theories, and that during these cycles the fundamental laws never change. Nature originates from the relationships of organisms of different nature, but Hegel does not postulate time in nature, only logic. It is imperative to clarify that we should not confuse the consecutive nature of time factors with the consecutive nature of factors relating to logic. *While scrutinizing the aspects of the philosophy of history it is vital to remind ourselves of Hegel's thoughts, namely, that all events and histories are postulated as the history of the thinking intellect.* The most important driving force behind the historic events – as Kant, following the footsteps of Hume, has already summed it up – is the guiding role of the human reason. Hegel has adapted this thought attaching it to the role of the human will and has modernized it in such a way that he elaborates on the human mind that manifests itself in the outer deeds. It is also very important that Hegel – describing the historic events – places a special emphasis on such notions as passion, ambition; in this way he is able to bring the sterilized rationalism of Kant into close contact with life. The postulation of the self-development of reason might perhaps be the most exciting issue of the post-enlightenment era, because this is where Hegel can define the particular system of logic in history. This notion becomes the concept of what we call in the philosophical consciousness as the machination of the reason. Passion existing in the wild turmoil is hoaxed in by the cunning reason and becomes its agent so that the historical logic of reason can materialize. Hegel's philosophy of history is fundamentally rational, but it naturally reflects irrational elements as well. What Hegel attempted to illustrate for his own age was that the previous, abstract and static picture of the living cosmos was necessary in order to be replaced by a dynamic notion of human perception that would point towards the 20th century." The process during which the spirit creates the form of its own knowledge is the work that is undertaken as historical reality. The religious community, if it is the first manifestation of the substance of the absolute mind, is that raw consciousness which, the more barbaric, tougher in its existence, the deeper in its inherent spirit becomes; and its own obscure self has a more difficult task to with its own substance, with the substance that is so alien to its consciousness.

Only after consciousness has given up hope to eliminate this alien mode and the outer characteristics, when it will turn to – the elimination of the alien mode paves the way for returning to its own consciousness – itself, to its own world and to its own present; it discovers them as its own properties and in this way it makes the first step to descend from the intellectual world, or rather to merge its own abstract spirit with a real individual ego. On the other hand, it finds its own existence through the observation of the thought and thus it can perceive this existence; or the other way round, it finds its existence in the thinking process."<sup>9</sup> This Hegelian thought postulates an internally transforming recollection preserved by experience, the real form of which is a substance, where the incessantly learning and developing spirit – due to its own mobility – will create the yearning for an absolute knowledge that would, in return, give birth to the individual ego through absolute notions and the spacial expansion

of the mind. "The realm of the spirit that has been established to exist in this way is the one in which one replaces the other and each inherits from the previous one so as being able to possess the global empire. Its purpose is to explore the depth, and that in itself is an absolute notion; this exploration, consequently, results in the elimination of the depth of the spirit, in other words, it results in the physical expansion of the mind and in the negativity of this self-existing ego, that is its manifestation, that is its substance and that is also its time; this manifests itself in a such a manner that this extrinsic aspect becomes extrinsic in itself, and when a body is in a motion of expansion, it exists in depth and in an individual ego."<sup>10</sup> This quotation is very important, because Hegel's views relating to the philosophy of history are closely connected to the history of politics. According to Kant, history is nothing but the history of politics. What Hegel has introduced as a revolutionary innovation is that he studies the universal history of the postulated absolute spirit – arts, religion and philosophy – , and disconnects himself from the thought (which has become a fixed practice) introduced by Bacon, namely, that the historian would simply investigate the developmental processes of the objective mind. "...history, from the point of view of its organizational perception, is the science of the prevailing knowledge" "history perceived provides the foundation for the absolute mind."<sup>11</sup> *With this thought Hegel has created the background for the philosophy of history to present the dynamic perception of man in the modern age.* The post-Hegelian historians – parallel to the gradual dissolution and polarization of the Hegelian philosophy – have been unable to avoid his influence and have all expressed some sort of attachment to Hegel in their historiography. This influence can well be observed in the theories of Bradley, Bury, Oakeshott, Windelband, Rickert, Simmel, Dilthey and Spengler. In the beginning of the 20th century Simmel's and Spengler's theories dominated. Simmel's logic could also be considered as anti-Hegelian: he declares that a historian can never really discern facts provided that knowledge is empirical, since the historian's object is the past that is not at our disposal and cannot be observed. A historian can only reconstruct based upon documentation, sources and memoirs, but he cannot really opine about history unless his personality possesses an intensive intellect. Simmel's major area of investigation in the philosophy of history covers the realm where he explores how the subjective historical reconstruction reflects objective truths. By the turn of the century, however, this notion has been mixed with the positivist legacy, and thus Simmel's attempt could be considered as a failure. Spengler's theory of cultural history, as a matter of fact, is the re-introduction of the so-called cyclical life theory established in the ancient times. The early barbarism has been replaced by modern-age barbarism, and, consequently, culture is dead being unable to orbit around new cultural cycles. Spengler's interpretation of history and morphology is also placed upon positivism which undertakes primarily the external analysis of historical facts, creates generalized laws, employs often non-historic mentality base, moreover, it allows itself to practice the art of prophesy. *However, his influence has been enormous*

*over the evolution of the theories of the philosophy of history during the 20th century because he has drawn the attention to the unique interpretation of the internal structure of the individual cultures, and at the same time, he has broken away from the traditionally Europe-centered mentality.*

This journey, covering the philosophy of history, has intentionally pointed out to the particular role these two disciplines have played in history and has made it apprehensible that what we have here is an extremely malleable (that can be separated from other components of social sciences) and singular segment of human history that is completely independent. The concept of the post-modern philosophy of history cannot be defined so crystal-clearly, because, from the turn of the century on the exponentially increased volume of transient artistic forms prevent us from conducting a thoroughful metaphysical investigation of the 20th century philosophy of history. *The different explosions in the arts, anthropology, the religious-mystical, and the information sciences can relay their messages about the philosophy of history only in an encrypted manner.* This is, for example, what Richard Rorty's works reflect, namely, that the adequate manifestation of individual social periods appear in the existing forms of human attitudes and expressions. "The metaphysician tries to rise above the multitude of images hoping that from above he can perceive the adequate but unexpected totality, as a sign that he may have glanced at something real, something that creates and is behind the images. The ironical Canon, however, I am about to talk about, consists of a series of such sort of experimentations that aim at looking at the metaphysical attempts rising up to the peaks; and that we can glance at the totality that hides behind the multitudinous nature of experimentations. Because of the vertical overview the ironic theoretician does not trust the metaphysician's metaphor. He replaces it with the historic metaphor that requires us to look back into the past along a horizontal axis. But what he looks back at is not a generalized notion, but a very concrete person who writes a very concrete type of book. The topic of the ironic theory is the theory of the metaphysician. For the ironic theoretician the wisdom beyond history or the love of such wisdom is nothing but a story about those ongoing experimentations that aim at finding such a final dictionary that is not simply a final dictionary of a certain philosopher, but a final dictionary in a comprehensive sense and which is not only a unique historical product, but represents the final word towards which research and history approach, and thus it in itself eliminates research and history themselves."<sup>12</sup>

Rorty's ironical and tongue-sticking punning supports the fact that nowadays the explorations of the philosophy of history, differing from the classical ages, reproduce, more and more often, metaphorical and visual images that also clearly signal what Heidegger has already prognosticated in the early '60s: *leave metaphysics alone!* Otherwise, quoting Schiller:

*Out of the chalice of the vast spiritual world  
the Infinite simmers forward.*<sup>13</sup>

## Quotations

<sup>1</sup> Schleiermacher: *Hermeneutics*, WERKE, p., 1. 7. 29., 15., 16.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Parag. 30.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter, III., 3, Parag., 390

<sup>4</sup> Robin G. Collingwood: *The Spirit of History*, Gondolat Publishing House, Budapest., 1987., p. 50.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>7</sup> Johann G. Herder: *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man (1784–1791)*

<sup>8</sup> Immanuel Kant: *Idea of the Universal History of Mankind*; "Religion within the Boundary of Pure Reason", Gondolat Publishing House, Budapest., 1980, pp. 63–64.

<sup>9</sup> Georg W. Friedrich Hegel: *Phenomenology of Mind*, Akademia Publishing House, Budapest., 1961., p. 411

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 414–415.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 415

<sup>12</sup> Richard Rorty: *Casuality, Irony and Solidarity*, Jelenkor Publishing House, Pecs, 1994., pp. 113–114

<sup>13</sup> Friedrich von Schiller: *The Friendship*. Translated by István Holló.