

## PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION ON HISTORY

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The expression ‘philosophy of history’ was coined by Voltaire, but in the eighteenth century it referred to a specific project that by no means exhausted the scope of philosophical interest in history during the period. We will do better to speak of a *philosophical reflection on history*, both because it is terminologically more appropriate and because this broader term will remind us that a philosophical interest in history affected almost all spheres of philosophy in the period. Philosophical stances on providential history, the stages of history, and the status of historical knowledge played a crucial but often overlooked role in the debates on the foundation of morals and politics, in efforts to produce a science of human nature, and in central epistemological discussions.

The rise of modern science, the impact of Cartesianism and scepticism, and the progress made by concrete historical research in the seventeenth century all helped to undermine any model of knowledge in which providential history could remain the frame of reference for all moral and empirical sciences. In fact the foundation of the different areas of knowledge was an open question, as was their place in the emerging ‘science of man’, or ‘science of human nature’. In that context, a common problem was how to provide a single account of both the factual and the normative sides of history. The challenge was to produce an account of history that revealed the origins of social life without counterfactual speculations. This was not easy, for the development of historical research (essentially the work of antiquarians and philologists) constantly threatened universal histories that wanted to preserve the normative function of history as a ‘teacher of life’.

The reflection on history by key eighteenth-century philosophers can be understood in the light of two main concerns. The first was to secure the objectivity of historical knowledge both at the level of describing and explaining historical

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facts, the second to secure the possibility of a philosophical reconstruction of universal history. However, a unified ‘philosophy of history’ was not the aim of philosophers puzzling over history. They thought that solutions to these puzzles would improve understanding of the foundations of empirical knowledge and of morals, both of which were preoccupations of the time. On one hand, the epistemological problems proper to history, relating to justification of knowledge derived from human testimony, were also central to other disciplines. Not only geography, but also many other sciences of the period relied on reports by travellers or found in books, so any serious doubt about the reliability of testimony threatened the scientific enterprise as a whole. On the other hand, the improvement of historical research constantly and rapidly eroded the credibility of sacred history, which was still thought by many to be the ultimate source of moral norms. The prospect of reconstructing universal history on philosophical grounds thus became an attractive option for philosophers attempting a secular understanding of the sources of normativity.

## I. HISTORICAL PYRRHONISM AND THE OBJECTIVITY OF HISTORY

The role of early-modern versions of scepticism in informing what we now typically call the modern scientific outlook has been well documented.<sup>1</sup> Much less attention has been given to the role of scepticism about historical knowledge, or historical pyrrhonism. Historical pyrrhonism is difficult to define. Like ‘relativism’ today, ‘historical pyrrhonism’ then was widely used to dismiss someone’s views and no one claimed to be a historical pyrrhonist. The concept may be approached by listing the usual charges against historical pyrrhonism.

The following activities were likely to be described and denounced as ‘historical pyrrhonism’.<sup>2</sup>

1. Undermining the canonical histories, sacred or civil.
2. Denying the possibility of historical knowledge and recommending suspension of judgement about historical facts.
3. Denying *certain* knowledge of history and recommending proportion between our belief in historical facts and available evidence.
4. Claiming that ancient history is unreliable because it confounds historical facts with fables, myths, and oral traditions.
5. Claiming that modern history is unreliable because contemporary historians are biased and do not have the distance required to acquire an impartial point of view.
6. Claiming that the credibility of any history decays as it passes through long chains of testimony.
7. Critical scrutiny of accepted historical facts through rigorous assessment of testimony.

action; for the former is 'less subject to accidents, and less influenced by whim and private fancy, than those which operate on a few only' (*Essays*, 112).

The discussion of national characters was the catalyst for a new approach to historical writing that dispensed with final causes, focused on moral and/or physical causes, and was based on a critical examination of facts, in short, philosophical history. In his *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*, Voltaire summed it up. First, we have to consider history independently of any providential plan and 'follow the human spirit abandoned to itself'.<sup>38</sup> Secondly, the writing of history must be based on critically established facts that are explained according to known causes and relate or illuminate problems that are of political, moral, or philosophical interest. Stressing this approach in the preface to the *Essai sur les mœurs*, Voltaire invites the reader to seek in history 'only what deserves to be known [. . .]: the spirit, the mores [*mœurs*] and the manners of the principal nations supported by facts that one cannot afford to ignore' (15.1: 245). Voltaire thinks that Hume's *History of England* is the paradigmatic combination of traditional humanistic historical narrative and philosophical explanations of manners, opinions, commerce, and learning. Hume's *History* is not only 'the best, perhaps that was ever written in any language', but, most fundamentally, Hume has shown 'that the task of writing history belongs to philosophers' (*Oeuvres*, 41.5: 451).

The histories produced by the philosophical historians will reveal the fecundity of the approach to historical and social phenomena delineated in the debate on national characters. Hume's *History of England*, Voltaire's *Siècle de Louis XIV* (1751), and William Robertson's *History of Scotland* (1759) and *History of Charles V* (1769) are important milestones in a tradition attaining its peak in Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–1788).

### III. THE EMERGENCE OF PHILOSOPHIES OF HISTORY

Three factors fostered discontinuity between religious and civil history, the critical attitude towards historical facts, the 'experimental' approach to historical explanation, and the political interest in the diversity of human characters. At the same time, philosophers were increasingly aware that the secularisation of history was not without loss. Religious history could account for the origin of basic moral norms and provide an eschatology that facilitated a teleological understanding of human action. These traditional ideas were threatened by the critical and experimental approach to history.

Natural law theory offered a foundation for morals that many saw as neutral with respect to providential history. In the formulation of protestant thinkers such as Grotius, natural law admitted of two foundations, in nature and in the

will of God. The sources of moral norms could be investigated either in 'the internal Principles of Man' or in revealed divine laws reported in sacred history.<sup>39</sup> Although Grotius argued that the two were consistent, the formulation was sufficiently ambiguous to inspire many to avoid revealed religion in the foundation of morals.<sup>40</sup> This had the added attraction that it apparently made moral theory independent of uncertain historical data.<sup>41</sup> For instance, for Hobbes it was possible to know the 'fountain of rights' natural to all human beings by stripping away the 'artificial' ornaments of culture and civilisation and depicting people in a state of nature. Eighteenth-century philosophies of history express dissatisfaction with such ahistorical approaches to the study of human nature.

Beginning in the mid-eighteenth century there is a profusion of philosophical attempts to come to terms with universal history. It is notoriously difficult to classify all the different forms of these early philosophies of history and to understand what motivates this new philosophical genre. Although a general feature of the Enlightenment, the philosophies of history are often studied in their national context.<sup>42</sup> These universal histories may of course be seen in the context of emerging national consciousness, but they do have a common background of philosophical problems and sources to which they respond.<sup>43</sup> From a philosophical point of view, philosophies of history respond to what was seen as failed attempts to account for human nature, the origins of government, and moral norms. If philosophies of history are considered as responses to problems in natural law theory, one can group them according to how they link history and the theory of human nature.

First, there were philosophies of history that held that a theory of human nature can be arrived at independently of history. On this approach philosophy of history is derivative of the theory of human nature. History is the progressive unfolding of innate and uniform natural faculties, a process that also enables individuals to gain consciousness of their own nature. An understanding of history is, thus, *derivative* from the metaphysics of human nature.

Secondly, there was the contrary view that a theory of human nature cannot be arrived at independently of history. On this approach the very nature of human beings is subject to evolution and cannot be understood independently of the exertion of human faculties in history. History is, thus, *constitutive* of the metaphysics of human nature.

### 1. *History derived from human nature*

The first approach to universal history originates in Rousseau's *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1755). In the preface, Rousseau expresses dissatisfaction with the natural law theorists' basic tenets

about the law of nature. Their common mistake is the attempt to derive human nature from humanity's 'artificial', or cultural, existence. Natural law becomes apparent only in 'natural man', not in 'men as they have made themselves'.<sup>44</sup> Philosophy must think human existence prior to any culture. As neither human records nor Scripture permit a reconstruction of this natural state, we must depart from factual history – for facts 'do not affect the question' – and proceed exclusively by conjecture (132).

In the state of nature, Rousseau sees isolated individuals who meet only to satisfy basic needs, such as reproduction, whose intellectual capacities are reduced to perception and feeling, and who are motivated only by primitive desires. These individuals differ from other animals by the fact that, beyond the basic instinct of self-preservation, they also have a capacity of free choice, a faculty of perfectibility, and a natural sentiment of pity towards fellow human creatures (24–5). If human beings, unlike animals, can evolve as a species (Rousseau of course could not be a Darwinian), it is due to a faculty of perfectibility that is triggered in situations of necessity when people supply their natural weakness with artifices that solve basic problems (25–6). Such artifices toll the bell for the state of nature. The skills developed to overcome threats to survival elicited the exertion of even more complex intellectual functions, and these in turn accelerated the progress of arts and learning (47). Up to this point, the 'savages' lived in small groups and rude dwellings. They lived free, in health, and in a generally happy, childlike state until the development of arts created a situation in which the surplus provisions of some could entice others into the bondage of work for them. In that situation both inequality and property entered the species and gave birth to civil society. Thus began the real misfortunes of humankind because inequality and the accumulation of riches by a minority gave rise to the domination which pervades human societies and destroys the felicity experienced in the state of nature. Although Rousseau in this conjectural approach makes use of historical data and interestingly brings the economic analysis of property to the fore, it remains a highly speculative reconstruction of history.

The passage from childhood to maturity was also the central theme of Lessing's *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* (1780). Mainly of theological concern, Lessing's little book rests on an analogy between education and revelation: 'What education is for the individual, revelation is for the whole human race'.<sup>45</sup> We can see each of the several books of the Judeo-Christian tradition as a school-book (*Elementarbuch*) with a 'pedagogy' adapted to the capacities of each age of humanity. Thus the Old Testament presents moral teachings in the form of 'allusions and hints' (§43; 18) to impress a rude and uncultivated people who can be made to act morally only through rewards and punishments. When humankind is no longer a child and becomes a boy, it is capable of a more rational

understanding of moral motivation, namely the teachings of Christ and the New Testament (§55; 47–8). These inculcate the immortality of the soul, a doctrine that presents morality not as the result of fear, but as a desire for a better life. The pedagogy of the first ‘schoolbook’ was revelation; that of the New Testament is ‘preaching’ in which reason plays a much more important role – namely, giving Christianity a theological form – and, thus it can be foreseen that a third age is to come in which we will dispense with the New Testament as we did with the Old (§§71–2; 50–1). Against Rousseau’s pessimism, Lessing sees in history a long education that, despite reversals, aims at moral perfection in an enlightened society in which human beings will act morally for the sake of the good and not because they fear punishment or expect to be rewarded in a future life. For Lessing as for Kant the end of history is the realisation of the ideal of moral autonomy.

Kant, too, saw history as the unresolved conflict between nature and culture and recognised the necessity of reconciling moral and political life with nature. Only a conjectural approach to universal history could bring about the philosophical *mise en scène* of the historical struggle between nature and culture. While writing *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Kant devoted important portions of his lectures on logic to the problems of testimony and historical knowledge, defending the former against unmitigated scepticism. Not only did he grant historical testimony the status of ‘knowledge’ but he also contended that the entire historical discipline can be given scientific status.<sup>46</sup> Historical facts, like natural facts, admit of systematic presentation: ‘a system can be given for historical things, too, namely, by my setting up an idea, in accordance with which the manifold in history is to be ordered’ (Ak 24: 891).

Kant was, however, more cautious than Rousseau about the theoretical status of conjectures regarding universal history. In his *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht* (1784)<sup>47</sup> he proposed that a philosophical reconstruction of history was a regulative principle of reason – that is, an ‘idea’ in Kant’s technical sense – and that this could be achieved by the a priori supposition of a purpose in human history. Outlining arguments later developed in the *Kritik der Urtheilskraft* (1790), Kant said that we are justified in using the notion of purpose where we have good reason to believe that events follow regular laws and yet available experience is insufficient to make these laws known to us. This is the case with history; patterns can be observed in past events and causal explanations could be expected because we know that human actions can be rationally motivated. A teleological account not only seems possible, it is also preferable to a representation of history as a purposeless aggregate of events and actions. In postulating a purposive rational order in history we can gain clarity about human affairs, we can answer anxious questions about the future, and we

can guide human affairs rationally. This *idea* of history contributes actively to substantiate the very end it postulates and conjectural history can therefore play the normative role which providential history once had. In fact, in an argument similar to Lessing's, Kant in 'Muthmaßlicher Anfang der Menschengeschichte' (1786) suggested that a rational reconstruction of history coincides almost exactly with sacred history as told in *Genesis*.<sup>48</sup>

Reason and free choice entail the insufficiency of a purely naturalistic account of human nature. Whereas the end of the natural faculties of animals is achieved in the life span of the individual, the end of human faculties can be achieved only in the species, not in the individual. The possession of reason and freedom marks a departure from a purely instinctual existence and the necessity of learning by practice and experience.<sup>49</sup> While natural 'norms' – instincts – are sufficient for other species, humans need a social environment in which reason and freedom can find expression. Whereas animals respond to 'norms' that are simply given, human beings need to elaborate and give themselves the norms under which they can fully develop their own faculties. Accordingly, the *end* of history is a social and political environment adapted to the flourishing of human rational faculties.

It follows that Kant cannot share Rousseau's nostalgia for the state of nature. Remaining in that state would be a hindrance to the development of human freedom. Although Kant saw in culture the birth of inequality and oppression, he also thought that the antagonism inherent in culture is essential to achieve the natural ends of humankind. Antagonism, the 'unsocial sociability of men' (*ungesellige Geselligkeit der Menschen*), is the result of two different drives (Ak 8: 20/15). The drive to society explains how individuals gather in groups to overcome their merely natural existence. The selfish drive puts the individual in opposition to the individuals he chooses to live with. Without this unsocial sociability, humankind would never have departed from the Arcadian golden age and embarked on the toilsome path of culture. Thus, the end of human nature can be attained only when the social environment allows individuals the maximum of freedom while preventing them from encroaching on the rights of others. Morals will cease to conflict with nature when 'art will be strong and perfect enough to become second nature' (Ak 8: 117–18/62–3). The central problem of human history is that of achieving a self-governed international community – a League of Nations – assuring equilibrium between freedom and justice for both states and individuals.<sup>50</sup>

The thinkers so far considered show that a 'theory of progress' should not be attributed to Enlightenment philosophies of history without important qualifications. Rousseau considered that technical progress implies moral regress. Lessing saw the education of humankind as an uneven process in which failures

occur just as in individual education. Kant considered the prospect of moral perfection in a stable and just League of Nations as a regulative idea, not a factual prediction; furthermore, he suspected that perfect morality may not be entirely reconcilable with human nature. The theory of progress that is often presented appears largely in the work of a few French Enlightenment philosophers.

The leitmotif of the historical theory of progress is set in Turgot's *Plan de deux discours sur l'histoire universelle* (1751).<sup>51</sup> In his first *Discours*, Turgot presented the view of a relentless improvement of humanity. History's apparently anarchic succession of governments and revolutions, of 'upheavals and ravages', was a process in which 'no change took place without bringing about some gain . . .'. Overall, 'the human race as a whole has advanced ceaselessly towards its perfection' (1: 285/72). Condorcet developed this view in his *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (1795). An understanding of the faculties of human nature, of the 'general facts and constant laws exhibited by the development of these faculties', is the business of metaphysics, and this may be conducted independently of historical considerations.<sup>52</sup> However, when the development of the faculties is considered empirically, in groups of real, historical individuals, we obtain not a metaphysics of human nature but an historical 'picture' (*tableau*) of the actual development of these faculties. Given a metaphysics of human nature – basically a description of the human faculties conjoined with the claim of their perfectibility – it is possible to project human nature into history and thus conjecture about primitive history, give form to the available historical data, and foresee the future course of human affairs. The metaphysics of human nature provides laws that would enable us to make perfect predictions in history, were it not for the fact that we have imperfect knowledge of objects that are independent of human nature. Prediction at this stage can never go beyond probability. But as technical and cultural progress socialises the human environment, the objects of the historical and social sciences become increasingly artificial, or man-made, and their cognition, aided by the development of a universal language, will eventually be as certain as that of the demonstrative sciences (199). Condorcet believes that the perfectibility of human nature coupled with the available historical data authorise belief in an ineluctable progress of human society (4–5). Making humanity aware of its historical progress by giving it a 'picture' of history could only accelerate this evolution.

## 2. Human nature derived from history

Philosophies of history belonging to the second strand sketched earlier claim that human nature cannot be investigated independently of an understanding of human history. Such histories stress how human faculties develop in different



fields of activity and contend that the specific cultural and economic activities in different countries and times provide a nuanced and complex account of what constitutes human nature. Philosophy of history thus becomes a central component, not a mere by-product, of metaphysics.

The earliest example of this reconstruction of universal history is the work of the Italian philosopher and jurist Giambattista Vico (1668–1744). Little known during his own time, Vico was rediscovered in the nineteenth century by Jules Michelet who, to his surprise, found in Vico most of the central tenets of nineteenth-century historicism. The reading of Vico as a forerunner of Hegelian idealism was reinforced by Benedetto Croce<sup>53</sup> and remained for long the dominant interpretation until scholars began to consider Vico's philosophy in its own historical context.

Vico's philosophy of history is mainly expounded in his *Principi di una scienza nuova* (1725, substantially revised 1744) but other works are also important, particularly *De antiquissima italorum sapientia* (1710) and *De universi iuris* (1720–21).<sup>54</sup> Vico's new science of the 'common nature of nations' responded to a failure he found in the natural law theories of Grotius, Pufendorf, and Selden. Once the providential foundation of natural law is disregarded, only two avenues are open: claims about human nature rest on either experience, such as reports about the customs of native American peoples, or on philosophical conjectures. The former, taken by the natural lawyers, makes natural law merely 'probable and verisimilar' (*Iuris*, 9). This leaves the door open for endless controversy about the original nature of human beings and for the moral scepticism manifest in Hobbes, Spinoza, and Bayle, among others (*Iuris*, 9; see also *Scienza*, §135). The second avenue was equally flawed; philosophical conjectures about the origins of humankind are at odds with obvious facts of human history.<sup>55</sup> Vico criticizes philosophical accounts of history that represent it as the progressive development of human faculties. This is an implausible picture of the first human beings as concerned only with survival, limited in their intellectual capacities to sense perception and the apprehension of particular things, and only later evolving to comfort and pleasure in practical life and to the thinking and abstraction typical of intellectual life. These accounts conflict with the fact that primitive peoples indulged in 'poetry' (mythological narratives), that they had religious beliefs about nonsensuous beings, and that they could think and take decisions about their commonwealths, activities that give evidence of relatively abstract thinking (*Iuris*, lxiv).

Vico thought that the nature of things (*cose*) is exhausted by an account of their coming into being or birth (*nascimento*) and that also human nature needs a genetic explanation.<sup>56</sup> However, to produce the history of mankind – of the birth of the human 'things' – a methodological problem has to be solved. On

the one hand, a regressive approach, deducing the birth from the present state, would be unsatisfactory as such conjectures are often at odds with available historical data. On the other hand, the attempt to reach the origins of mankind seems to be jeopardised by the lack of reliable evidence about remote history. At this point Vico advanced one of his most original contributions: we do have access to primitive history provided we take seriously the first mythologies and pay attention to the sediments of ancient institutions still present in our language and culture and regularly unearthed by the work of philologists.

Extant mythologies make plain that 'the world of peoples began everywhere with religion'<sup>57</sup>. Philosophical conjectures also ignore this and fail to understand what the proper social and symbolic function of religions is. Poetry and religious mythology emerge from the need to preserve laws, customs, and institutions in social memory. For that reason it is licit to take mythologies as conveying civil truths and as being the first civil histories, however obscured by fable they may have been, a line taken also by thinkers such as Fontenelle and Fréret.<sup>58</sup> The philosophical reconstruction of history becomes a problem of how to give 'scientific' respectability to the vagaries of ancient histories. To see how 'poetry' (which at best gives us probable knowledge based on authority) can play a role in a science of history, one has to understand how such a science would emerge from the interplay of what Vico calls 'poetical sentences' and 'philosophical sentences'.

For Vico, the difference between poetry and philosophy lies in their respective languages, which reflect different mental abilities. In early times imagination, which is a function of memory, and poetical allegories were prevalent. Allegories do not involve the use of full-fledged concepts, as they do not depart from the particularity of the objects or class of objects represented. Allegories get embedded in the 'poetical sentences' by which people in the infancy of humanity try to articulate their proto-concepts into proto-thoughts. Poetic sentences 'are formed by feeling passion and emotion' whereas 'philosophical sentences', that is, full-fledged thoughts using universal concepts, 'are formed by reflection and reasoning' (*Scienza*, §§218–19). Poetic sentences seek to apprehend particulars and when they succeed they can claim to be certain. Philosophical sentences seek to apprehend universals and when they succeed they can claim to be true. Vico's point is that philosophical speculation applied to primitive history, when divorced from any factual evidence, produces 'true', although empty, accounts. An idea of history must arise as a philosophical reflection on what has previously been thought 'poetically'. By reflecting on the 'poetical' sediments in our culture we can reconstitute the history of our origins and achieve a true presentation of human nature. Philosophical sentences without poetical sentences are empty, and poetry without philosophical reflection is blind.

Comparing different mythologies we learn that three basic institutions (*cose*) are common to all nations at all times: religion, marriage, and burials. In all nations religion represents divinities as endowed with freedom. Marriage celebrates and consecrates the social link by securing the role of the family in obliging the members to mutual protection and to transmit religion, language, and customs. Finally, burials reflect belief in transcendence – the immortality of the soul – and constitute, so to speak, a ‘compact’ between the living and the dead by which the dead will ‘clear the way’ for the living, rather than rot in cities and fields or wander about haunting them (*Scienza*, §§333–7). Burials serve also to ‘socialize’ the realm of death by assigning it a fixed place in human space and by structuring this space according to social hierarchy and lineage (*Iuris*, lxix). Vico also finds from a survey of the histories and mythologies of the gentile nations (he excludes the Hebrews because they have been helped by Providence) that these nations all evolve in three stages:

1. An age of gods marked by belief that laws are given by the gods and have to be obeyed blindly. This is the age of theocratic government, which reserves knowledge of law to an elite initiated into a hermetic language (hieroglyphs) based on a physical resemblance to the things signified.
2. An age of heroes characterized by aristocratic government in which law and knowledge are transmitted in a symbolic language with allegoric reference.
3. An age of men in which ‘all men recognized themselves as equal in human nature’ and governed themselves in popular commonwealths through laws that use a conventional language (*Scienza*, §§31–2).

For Vico, this stadial view of human history suggests that the natural equity ascribed by natural law theorists to primitive societies is something that can be understood only by individuals already endowed with philosophical capacities and living in popular governments. Natural equity is a hard-won result of political and social struggles as well as of the late capacity for philosophical reflection. Although natural equity is implicit in every society, it can be made explicit only in societies that have attained a certain degree of political and intellectual development, particularly ones that can make philosophy perform the tasks hitherto performed by ‘poetry’.

Vico’s ‘new science’ will ‘describe at the same time an ideal eternal history traversed in time by the history of every nation in its rise, development, maturity, decline, and fall’ (*Scienza*, §331). But how can the amalgam of myths and obscure histories unearthed by philology yield a ‘science’, at least in the Baconian sense which Vico seems to intend? How can merely probable ‘poetical sentences’ build a ‘true’ science? The answer lies in Vico’s understanding of the nature of facts. Giving a personal twist to the Latin usage of the words *verum* and *factum*, Vico

asserts, 'the true is precisely what is made (*verum esse ipsum factum*)', meaning that only that can be perfectly known of which we are the makers (*Sapientia*, 46). The rationale of history can be discovered and given demonstrative force because human beings are the makers of history; for 'the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and . . . its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own mind' (*Scienza*, §331). History proceeds like geometry, by construction, 'but with a reality greater by just so much as the institutions having to do with human affairs are more real than points, surfaces, and figures are' (§349). For this very reason, Vico also believes that the science of history and human institutions must be given priority over natural science, for whoever reflects on the kind of apodictic certainty obtained in history

cannot but marvel that the philosophers should have bent their energies to the study of the world of nature, which, since God made it, He alone knows; and that they should have neglected the study of the world of nations . . . which, since men had made it, men could come to know. (§331)

For Vico, reflective consciousness of the universality of right could be achieved only at the end of a historical development beginning with the specific attempt of each nation or culture to conceive the moral bond of the community. Attention was to be given to the cultural specificity of each nation in order to find the common substratum on which natural law theory is to be based. This line of thinking was also predominant in early German historicism which developed particularly in Göttingen. Because of the links between the House of Hanover and the English Crown, Göttingen was at the crossroads of German interest in jurisprudence and theology and English and Scottish inclination towards the natural and the emerging social sciences.<sup>59</sup> German scholars such as Justus Möser, Johann Christoph Gatterer, and August Ludwig von Schlözer were interested in the way legal norms connect with national history. Attention was given to 'customary law' (*Gewohnheitsrecht*) and to the specifics of the German past and national character. This formed the culture-centred approach to history characteristic of German 'cultural history' (*Kulturgeschichte*).<sup>60</sup> This German interest in the implicit normativity of the national past and its customs was the context of Herder's philosophy of history. But Herder bent his interest in national customs and culture to make it conflict with the Enlightenment project of a universal history on a philosophical basis. His *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte* (1774) saw in the philosophical reconstructions of history as a 'general and progressive improvement of the world' nothing but incredible novels (*Romane*) unlikely to convince any serious student of history.<sup>61</sup> The price of a philosophical picture (*Bild*) of universal history is pure abstraction which misses the rich concrete

forms that nations take in history. Only God is able to see at once the unity of the historical plan and the diversity of historical forms (505). But consideration of an individual historical form, of a nation, is enough for the human perspective. Human nature is not dispersed in the totality of history, but self-contained in the individual national forms (509). So, instead of investigating human nature through total history, Herder invites us to focus on the individuality of each nation's character. This national specificity accounts for the moral boundaries between people.

The second important trend in this type of universal history was Scottish *conjectural history* represented by Lord Kames, John Millar, Adam Ferguson, and John Logan and significantly influenced by David Hume's *Natural History of Religion* and Adam Smith's teaching at the University of Glasgow.<sup>62</sup> The expression 'conjectural history' was coined by Dugald Stewart, who claimed that in 'examining the history of mankind, as well as in examining the phenomena of the material world, when we cannot trace the process by which an event has been produced, it is often of importance to be able to shew how it may have been produced by natural causes.' This approach Stewart proposed to call '*Theoretical or Conjectural History*, an expression which coincides pretty nearly in its meaning with that of *Natural History*, as employed by Mr Hume, and with what some French writers have called *Histoire Raisonnée*'.<sup>63</sup> However, the expression fails to capture the specificity of the Scottish project. Unlike other uses of conjecture to complete a philosophical history, such as those of Rousseau, Lessing, or Kant, in the Scottish histories, 'conjecture' signifies naturalistic explanatory hypothesis rather than rational or theological speculation.<sup>64</sup> Ferguson denied that his approach is conjectural at all and saw himself as simply applying the method of natural history to the moral domain. A distinguishing feature of conjectural histories is their stress on the structural link between economic relations, such as modes of production and relations of property, and forms of government.<sup>65</sup> Accordingly, they tended to view universal history as divided into three or four stages. A typical four-stages view of history, as found in Adam Smith's *Lectures on Jurisprudence* or in Millar's *Origin of the Distinction of Ranks*, divides history into ages of hunters, herders, farmers, and commerce.

Perhaps the most important of the Scottish conjectural histories was Ferguson's *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), not least because it was extremely influential with Kant, Hegel, and Marx. Ferguson criticised the old philosophical enterprise that human nature can be understood by purely philosophical means without empirical investigation. This leads to 'wild suppositions' in the selection of human characteristics which suit the philosophers' own agenda and which they hypostatise as an imaginary 'state of nature'. Ferguson has in mind

Rousseau's procedure of stripping his contemporaries of all the attributes of civilisation in order to discover the natural substratum. Ferguson thinks that in deriving human nature from a conjectural state of nature, 'we overlook what . . . has always appeared within the reach of our own observation, and in the records of history'.<sup>66</sup>

Ferguson believed that the proper method for investigating human nature is that of the natural historian who proceeds not by conjectures but by collecting and assembling facts. Inquiry into the principles of human nature entails an investigation of the human faculties and their development; no *a priori* access is possible, for human faculties can only be known when they are exerted (30). Furthermore, an investigation of individual minds is insufficient; the proper objects of study are groups and societies, because 'the history of the individual is but a detail of the sentiments and thoughts he has entertained in the view of his species' (10). This entails that the only proper method for understanding human nature is historical: 'If the question be put, What the mind of man could perform, when left to itself, and without the aid of any foreign direction? we are to look for our answer in the history of mankind' (9).

Historical observation shows that human beings have 'always' – as far as historical records reach – been endowed with those qualities that distinguish them from animals. The idea of a 'state of nature' imposes a distinction between nature and culture that cannot be observed at any point in history. The natural history of the species shows humans to be industrious and imaginative beings always embedded in social groups. Art, or the faculty of producing artefacts, is natural to man and so is culture. For that reason, human beings are everywhere and at every time in the 'state of nature'.<sup>67</sup>

Although Ferguson believed that human beings tend to perfect their natural faculties, he did not conclude that we should think of universal history as a narrative of human 'progress'. People in the 'savage state' are by no means thought to be imperfect, childish, or amoral. On the contrary, communities of hunters and fishers, as described by travellers to Canada and Central America, have a communal life with a strong sense of equality because there is among them no private property. Their attachment to equality is not the product of ignorance; for in these 'savage' societies, 'Men are conscious of their equality, and are tenacious of its rights' (83). The 'savages' are not to be considered as infants either; they exert and even excel in the application of their faculties to the extent that they satisfy their needs, those based on a subsistence economy. Their 'rationality' is thus adapted to the pursuit of the relevant goals in such society, goals which do not require the formation of general principles (88). They do not think beyond the immediate necessities and practical needs of everyday life and they 'seem incapable of attending to any distant consequences, beyond

those they have experienced in hunting or war' (88). Ferguson adds that all the qualities required for civilisation, viz. love of society, friendship, penetration, eloquence, and courage, can be found in the savage state (93).

The crucial step that makes some societies depart from the savage state is property. Communities of herders are, according to Ferguson, more likely to introduce property and, then, to accept an unequal share in its distribution. When there is an unequal distribution of property Ferguson calls it a 'barbarous state', one characterised by primitive relationships of subordination. Such social subordination is not based on moral obligation but follows mainly from the tribute paid to a chieftain based on admiration of his riches, birth, and military skills, and it can easily be overturned. The basic activity of barbarous nations is rapine; when prosperous they give rise to despotic government. A 'polished' nation is the result of various factors, none of which is entirely intentional or the result of a rational design:

Like the winds, that come we know not whence, and blow whithersoever they list, the forms of society are derived from an obscure and distant origin; they arise, long before the date of philosophy, from the instincts, not from the speculations, of men. The croud of mankind, are directed in their establishments and measures, by the circumstances in which they are placed; and seldom are turned from their way, to follow the plan of any single projector. (119)

Ferguson singles out three types of causes to explain the passage from the savage to the polished state. First, he contends that climate has an influence on the character of peoples; for both extreme heat and extreme cold – the former because it renders people too 'feverish' and the latter because it makes them 'dull and slow' – hinder the development of mankind's industrious capacities (110). Secondly, nations with greater and more concentrated city-populations are also, and most significantly, driven by the contagion of passions that are easily communicated. As a result, moral and political causes also play an important role in the evolution of 'polished nations'. Thirdly, the progress in mechanical arts, motivated by the love of property, produces a social division of labour ('Separation of Arts and Professions') and a progressive specialisation of the social functions and this, in turn, generates the need for specific social institutions. The general explanation for the passage to more polished social forms consists in a set of related claims. Owing to climatic factors or to the lack of untransformed economical resources, some peoples are more inclined to develop industry and thus to specialise the social functions and generate the need for social institutions. The specialisation of social functions and general prosperity produce significant alterations in the moral life of the nation depending both on physical (climate) and moral (contagion of passions) causes.

The impression that there is progress in history derives from an appreciation of the specialisation of occupations in the commercial states, which is responsible for the improvement of the national capacity. However, Ferguson contends that the latter is not necessarily associated with advance in learning. In fact, he argues, the specialisation of the workers is necessary to the progress of industry and industry works better when people are ignorant (174). Ferguson's phrasing is close to Marx's theory of alienation, although he draws substantially different conclusions. For the Scotsman, progress in manufacture necessarily entails that part of the population becomes so specialised that their ability to share in the rights and duties of citizenship is dramatically diminished. For that reason, he thinks that popular democracies only mask the real inequality of the social relationships and admit into political deliberation sectors of the population that cannot, in fact, exert their political rights with discernment (178).

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The richness of the philosophical reflection on history reveals its importance for philosophers in the eighteenth century. In the traditional quest for the origins and destiny of the human kind, they asked about the validity of human testimony, the status of mythology as an historical source, the nature of historical explanation, the importance of economic and political factors in the shaping of different historical forms, the status of national characters, and whether there is progress in history. These issues were in general not treated as problems specific to 'philosophy of history'. They were considered as problems of the most central philosophical concern. The nature and reliability of testimony – which was a central component of any empirical science in the period – was crucial in discussions of the foundations of empirical knowledge. The debate about the importance of natural and physical causes in social explanation influenced new conceptions of causality and explanation. The reconstruction of universal history on philosophical grounds was a critique of contractarianism and part of the debate on the foundation of morals. Although insufficiently noticed, reflection on history is a pervasive feature in the work of almost all the major philosophers of the eighteenth century and it sheds new light on many of the central philosophical projects of the period.

#### NOTES

- 1 See Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley, CA, 1979).
- 2 For general surveys of historical pyrrhonism see Carlo Borghero, *La certezza e la storia: Cartesianesimo, pirronismo e conoscenza storica* (Milan, 1983); Arnaldo Momigliano, 'Ancient History and the Antiquarian', in *Studies in Historiography* (New York, NY, 1966), 1–39;