

Leopold von Ranke, 'On the Character of Historical Science' and 'The Role of the Particular and the General in the Study of Universal History', in *The Theory and Practice of History*, ed. G. G. Iggers and K. von Moltke, Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1973, pp. 33-46, 57-9.

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## ON THE CHARACTER OF HISTORICAL SCIENCE

(A Manuscript of the 1830s)

History is distinguished from all other sciences in that it is also an art.

History is a science in collecting, finding, penetrating; it is an art because it recreates and portrays that which it has found and recognized. Other sciences are satisfied simply with recording what has been found; history requires the ability to recreate.

As a science, history is related to philosophy, as an art, to poetry. The difference is that, in keeping with their nature, philosophy and poetry move within the realm of the ideal while history has to rely on reality. If one assigned philosophy the task of penetrating the image which has appeared in time, it would be involved in discovering causality and conceptualizing the core of existence: and is philosophy of history not also his-

*"Idee der Universalhistorie,"* edited by Eberhard Kessel in *Historische Zeitschrift*, CLXXVIII (1954), 290-301; translated by Wilma A. Iggers and published with the permission of Professor Kessel and the *Historische Zeitschrift*. Compared with Professor Walther Peter Fuchs's unpublished reading of the manuscript.

tory? If philosophy of history would assign to poetry the task of reproducing past life, then it would be history.

History is distinguished from poetry and philosophy not with regard to its capacity but by its given subject matter, which imposes conditions and is subject to empiricism. History brings both together in a third element peculiar only to itself. History is neither the one nor the other, but demands a union of the intellectual forces active in both philosophy and poetry under the condition that the last two be directed away from their concern with the ideal to the real.

There are nations which do not have the ability to master this element. India had philosophy; she did not have history. ✱

It is strange how, among the Greeks, history developed out of poetry and then emancipated itself from poetry. The Greeks had a theory of history which, while not equal by far to their practice, was nevertheless significant. Some stressed the scientific character more, others the artistic, but nobody denied the necessity of uniting the two. Their theory moves between both elements and cannot decide for either. Quintilian still said: "Historia est proxima poetis et quodammodo carmen solutum."<sup>1</sup>

In modern times one has, in cases of doubt, dealt only with the element of reality or has insisted on science as the sole principle. One has gone so far as to make history disappear as a part of philosophy. However, as has been said, history must be science and art at the same time. History is never the one without the other. But it is possible for the one or the other to be more pronounced. In lectures history can, of course, appear only as a science. For just this reason it is necessary that we undertake presently to deal with the idea of history.

Art rests on itself: its existence proves its validity. On the other hand, science must be totally worked out to its very concept and must be clear to its core.

Therefore, I would like to clarify the idea of world history in

<sup>1</sup> *Institutio Oratoria* X. i. 31: "History is akin to the poets and is, so to speak, a prose poem." *Solutum* in this context means free of metrical restrictions.

some preliminary lectures—by dealing in succession with the historical principle, the scope, and the unity of world history.<sup>2</sup>

### I. Of The Historical Principle

They talk about what it is that justifies the historian's efforts in themselves. Not with regard to life. His effort is recognized as necessary, and it would be useless to speak about its utility since nobody doubts it. Society, the interrelatedness of things, demands it. But we must raise ourselves to a higher level. To justify our science against the claims of philosophy, we seek to relate to the sublime. We search for a principle from which history would receive a unique life of its own. To grasp this principle we shall consider history in its struggle with philosophy. We are speaking of that type of philosophy which has reached its results by way of speculation and which claims to dominate history.

But what are these claims? Fichte, among others, expressed them thus: "If the philosopher is to deduce the phenomena which are possible in experience from the unity of his presupposed concept, then it is clear that he needs no experience at all for his work. Remaining freely within the limits of philosophy without regard for any experience, he must be able *a priori* to describe all of time and all its possible epochs *a priori*" He demands of philosophy:<sup>3</sup> a unified idea of all of life which is divided into various epochs, each of which is comprehensible abstractly or through the others, just as each of these special epochs is again a unified concept of a special age—which manifests itself in manifold phenomena.

It turns out that the philosopher, starting from a truth, which has been found elsewhere and in a way peculiar to him as a philosopher, constructs all of history for himself: how it must have taken place according to his concept of mankind. Not satisfied to test whether his idea is right or wrong, without deceiving

<sup>2</sup> The passage beginning "by dealing . . ." is garbled in Kessel's reading and has been translated here from Fuchs's reading.

<sup>3</sup> Fuchs's reading: He demands of the philosopher.

himself, in terms of the course of events which have really occurred, he undertakes to subordinate the very events to his idea. Indeed, he recognizes the truth of history only insofar as it subordinates itself to his idea. This is a mere construct of history.

Were this procedure correct, history would lose all independence. It would be ruled simply by a proposition derived from pure philosophy and would stand and fall with the latter's truth. All that which is peculiarly interesting about history would disappear. Everything worthy of knowledge would seek only to know to what extent the philosophic principle can be demonstrated in history; to what extent the progress (*Fortgang*) of mankind, seen *a priori*, takes place. But it would be of no interest at all to delve into the events which have taken place or even to want to know how men lived and thought at a certain time. Only the totality of the concept which had once been alive<sup>4</sup> in the observable history of man would be of interest. It would never be possible to reach certainty about the course of universal history through the study of history. The only possible variations would lie in splitting concepts, in deducing the lower from the higher. It suffices to say that history would become dependent, without an inherent interest of its own, and that the wellspring of its life would dry up. It would hardly be worthwhile to devote study to history since it would already be implicit in the philosophic concept.

These claims have in earlier times been raised by theology which, too, on the basis of what was unquestionably a misunderstanding, wanted to divide all of human history into a few periods based on sin, salvation, and millenium, or into the four monarchies prophesied by Daniel. It thus sought to capture the totality of phenomena in a few propositions contained in revelation—as theology understood revelation.

In either way, history would lose all scientific footing and character: it would be impossible to speak of a principle of its own from which history would derive its life.

But we notice that history remains in steady opposition to

<sup>4</sup> Fuchs's reading: which had become alive.

these claims. Indeed, even philosophy has never yet been able to exercise its rule. As far as printed works are concerned, I have not found that any philosophy has given even the slightest appearance of having taken control or succeeded in deducing the diversity of phenomena from a speculative concept; for the reality of fact eludes and escapes the concept of speculation in all respects.

Besides, we find that history has always opposed those claims with its full, undiminished strength. Hereby, it proves the unique character of principle inherent in history, opposed to that of philosophy.

Before giving expression to this principle, we ask first through what acts it manifests itself.

First of all, philosophy always reminds us of the claim of the supreme idea. History, on the other hand, reminds us of the conditions of existence. The former lends weight to the universal interest, the latter to the particular interest. The former considers the development (*Fortgang*) essential and sees every particular only as a part of the whole. History turns sympathetically also to the particular. Philosophy is forever rejecting: it places the state of which it would approve into the remote future. By its nature philosophy is prophetic, forward-directed. History sees the good and the beneficent in that which exists. It tries to comprehend them and looks to the past.

Indeed, in this opposition one science directly attacks the other. While, as we have seen, philosophy is intent on subjecting history to itself, history at times makes similar claims. It does not want to consider the results of philosophy as absolute, but only as phenomena in time. It assumes that the most exact philosophy<sup>5</sup> is contained in the history of philosophy, i.e., that the absolute truth recognizable to the human race is inherent in the theories which appear from time to time, no matter how much they contradict each other. History goes still one step further here; it assumes that philosophy, especially when it engages in

<sup>5</sup> Fuchs's reading: It assumes that the true (*wahrhafte*) philosophy.

definitions, is only the manifestation of national knowledge inherent in language. It thus denies philosophy any validity and comprehends it in its other manifestation.<sup>6</sup> In this, even the philosophers side with the historians for, as a rule, they accept all former systems only as steps, only as relative phenomena, and ascribe absolute validity only to their own systems.

I do not mean to say that the historian is right in so viewing philosophy; I only want to show that in the historic view of things there is an active principle which is always opposed to the philosophic view and which constantly expresses itself. The question is what this principle is that lies at the basis of such expression.

While the philosopher, viewing history from his vantage point, seeks infinity merely in progression, development, and totality, history recognizes something infinite in every existence: in every condition, in every being, something eternal, coming from God; and this is its vital principle.

How could anything be without the divine basis of its existence?

Therefore, as we have said, history turns with sympathy to the individual;<sup>7</sup> therefore it insists on the validity of the particular interest. It recognizes the beneficent, the existing, and opposes change which negates the existing. It recognizes even in error its share in truth. For this reason, it sees in the former rejected philosophies a part of eternal knowledge.

It is not necessary for us to prove at length that the eternal dwells in the individual. This is the religious foundation on which our efforts rest. We believe that there is nothing without God, and nothing lives except through God. By freeing ourselves from the claims of a certain narrow theology, we do, nevertheless profess that all our efforts stem from a higher, religious source.

The idea that even historical efforts are directed solely toward the search for that higher principle in phenomena must be re-

<sup>6</sup> *begreift sie unter der anderen Erscheinung*—meaning not clear.

<sup>7</sup> Fuchs inserts a phrase here: therefore it likes to attach itself to the conditions of appearance (*Erscheinung*).

jected. History would thereby come too close to philosophy, since it would presuppose rather than contemplate the principle. History elevates, gives significance to, and hallows the phenomenal world, in and by itself, because of what it contains. It devotes its efforts to the concrete, not only to the abstract which might be contained therein.

Now that we have vindicated our supreme principle, we have to consider what demands result from it for historical practice.

1. The first demand is pure love of truth. By recognizing something sublime in the event, the condition, or the person we want to know about, we acquire a certain esteem for that which has transpired, passed, or appeared. The first purpose is to recognize this. If we wanted to preempt this recognition with our imagination, we would counter our very purpose and would investigate only the reflection of our subjective notions and theories. By this, however, we do not mean that one should simply remain attached to the appearance, to its when, where, or how. For then we would take hold of only something external, although our own principle directs us inward.

2. Therefore, a documentary, penetrating, profound study is necessary. First of all, this study must be devoted to the phenomenon itself, to its condition, its surrounding, chiefly for the reason that we would otherwise be incapable of knowing it; then, to its essence, its content, for as in the last analysis every unity is a spiritual one, it can only be grasped through spiritual apperception. This apperception rests on the agreement of the laws in accordance with which the observing mind proceeds with those which determine the emergence of the object under observation. Here, it is already possible to be more or less gifted. All genius rests on the congruence of the individual and the species. The productive principle which formed and created nature confronts itself in the individual who recognizes her and through him becomes clear to itself and attains self-understanding.

This gift is possible to a greater or lesser degree, but to a certain extent everybody has it. Intelligence, courage, and honesty in telling the truth are sufficient. Everyone may hope to find out, to penetrate, that to which he has devoted his efforts if in

his studies he remains free of prejudice and retains his humility. But what is lack of prejudice? This question leads us to the third demand issuing from our principle.

3. A universal interest. There are those who are interested only in civic institutions, in constitutions, in scientific progress, in artistic creations, or only in political entanglements. Most of history<sup>8</sup> thus far has dealt with war and peace. But since these aspects of society are never present separately but always together—indeed, determining each other—and since, for instance, the attitudes of science<sup>9</sup> often influence foreign policy and especially domestic politics, equal interest must be devoted to all of these factors. Otherwise we would render ourselves incapable of comprehending the one aspect without the other, and would work counter to the purpose of cognition. Herein lies the freedom from prejudice which we mean. It is not a lack of interest, but rather an interest in pure cognition undulled by preconceived notions. But how? Will this penetrating truth-searching effort not merely dissect the whole field into individual parts, will we not occupy ourselves merely with a series of fragments?

4. Penetration of the causal nexus. Basically, we should be satisfied with simple information—satisfied that it merely corresponds to the object. Our original demand would have been satisfied if there were only a sequence among the various events. But there is a connection among them. Events which are simultaneous touch and affect each other; what precedes determines what follows; there is an inner connection of cause and effect. Although this causal nexus is not designated by dates, it exists nevertheless. It exists, and because it exists we must try to recognize it. This kind of observation of history, which derives effects from causes, is called pragmatic; but we would like to understand it not in the usual manner, but according to our concepts.

Since the development of contemporary historiography, the pragmatic school of thought, as applied to actions, has introduced

<sup>8</sup> Fuchs's reading: Most histories.

<sup>9</sup> *die wissenschaftlichen Richtungen*—meaning not quite clear in this context.



a system according to which selfishness and lust for power are the mainsprings of all affairs. What is usually required is to explain the observable actions of individuals as the result of passions which we derive deductively from our concept of man. The resulting point of view is tinged with an aridity, irreligiosity, and lack of sensitivity which drive us to despair. I do not deny that selfishness and lust for power can be very powerful motives and have had a great influence, but I deny that they are the only ones. First and foremost, we have to investigate the genuine information as precisely as possible to determine whether we can discover the real motives. Doing so will be possible more frequently than one might think. Only when this path leads us no further are we permitted to conjecture. Let no one believe that this limitation would restrict freedom of observation; no, the more documentary, the more exact, and the more fruitful the research is, the more freely can our art unfold, which only flourishes in the element of immediate, undeniable truth! Only invented motives are dry. The true ones, derived from fresh observation, are diverse and profound. Thus, like knowledge in general, even our pragmatism is documentary.<sup>10</sup> It can even be very reticent and yet very essential. Where the events themselves speak, where the pure composition manifests the connection, it is not necessary to talk of this connection at length.

5. Impartiality. As a rule, two contending parties appear in world history. The struggles in which these parties are engaged, are, to be sure, very different, but closely related. We always see one develop out of the other.

Let no one believe that they will be so easily forgotten in the course of time. There is in man a happy trust in the judgment of history and of posterity which is appealed to a thousand times. But rarely is this judgment passed objectively. There is not alive within us<sup>11</sup> an interest similar to that of the past. We judge

<sup>10</sup> Fuchs's reading: even our pragmatism is only (*nur*) documentary.

<sup>11</sup> Fuchs's reading reverses the meaning: There is also alive within us.

the past too often by the present situation. Perhaps this trait was never worse than at present, when a few interests which permeate all of world history occupy general opinion more than ever and split it into a great pro and con.

This may be the way of proceeding in politics, but it is not truly historical. We, who search for truth, even in error, who view every existence as permeated with original life, must above all avoid this error. Where there is any similar struggle, both parties must be viewed on their own ground, in their own environment, so to speak, in their own particular inner state. We must understand them before we judge them.

The objection will be raised that the writer, too, the one who describes, must have his opinion, his religion, from which he cannot separate himself.

This objection would be justified if we would presume to say who is right in every dispute. It is easily possible that, even in the midst of a dispute, we already know clearly which side we would support, in favor of which opinion we would decide. It is also possible that that impartiality which, in a conflict between two divergent opinions, often sees<sup>12</sup> the truth in the middle, becomes impossible for the historian since he is very definitely devoted to his opinion. But this is not all that matters. We can see the error, but where is there no error? This will not lead us to deny the realities of the existence. Next to the good we recognize evil, but this is an evil which is inherent in the situation.

It is not opinions which we examine. We are dealing with existence which has often the most decisive influence in political and religious disputes. Here we rise to contemplate the essential character of the opposing, conflicting elements, and see how complex and entangled they are. It is not up to us to judge about error and truth as such. We merely observe one figure (*Gestalt*) arising side by side with another figure; life, side by side with life; effect, side by side with countereffect. Our task is to penetrate them to the bottom of their existence and to portray them with complete objectivity.

<sup>12</sup> Fuchs's reading: often seeks.

At present two great parties are engaged in a struggle for which the words movement and resistance have become a watchword. History marks itself off from the party who desires eternal preservation as well as from the one who favors continual movement onward. Some consider preservation to be the legitimate principle. They find a legality in the preservation of a recognized *status quo*, of a definite law. They do not want to notice that what exists is derived from reform by struggles which destroyed what existed before. But then history would cease. It would somewhere reach its goal. There would be, so to speak, no illegal condition, none which reason could attack—an impossible conclusion. But history can just as little approve of the overthrow of the old, as if it were something completely dead and unusable, without regard to locality and particular interests. If history shuns violence in observation, how much more will it shun violence in execution. This demolishing and changing and again demolishing is not the way of nature. It is a state of inner ruin which manifests itself in this way. It is an organism which has come into conflict with itself, certainly curious to observe but not pleasing. History, of course, recognizes the principle of movement, but as evolution and not as revolution. This is the very reason why it recognizes the principle of resistance. Only where movement and resistance balance each other without getting into these violent, all-devouring battles can mankind prosper. Only because history recognizes both can history be just toward both. It is not up to history even to pass judgment in theory on the struggle which the past teaches it. History knows very well that the struggle will be decided according to God's will.

6. Conception of the totality. Just as there exists the particular, the connection of the one to the other, so there finally exists totality. If it is a life, we grasp its appearance. We perceive the sequence by which one factor follows another. But that is not enough. There is also something total in each life; it becomes, it exerts an effect, it acquires influence, it passes away. This totality is as certain at each moment as every expression. We must devote all our attention to it. If we are dealing with a people, we are not interested only in the individual moments of its living expres-

sions. Rather, from the totality of its development, its deeds, its institutions, and its literature, the idea speaks to us so that we simply cannot deny our attention. The farther we go, the harder it is, of course, to get at the idea—for here, too, we can accomplish something only through exact research, through step-by-step understanding,<sup>13</sup> and through the study of documents. If this process proceeds through induction from the well-known, it is intuitive knowledge (*Divination*); if it proceeds from the little-known, it takes the form of abstract philosophic propositions. One sees how infinitely difficult things become with universal history. What an infinite amount of material! What diverse efforts! How difficult it is only to grasp the particular. Since, moreover, there is much that we do not know, how are we to understand the causal nexus everywhere, not to mention getting to the bottom of the essence of totality? I consider it impossible to solve this problem entirely. God alone knows world history. We recognize the contradictions—"the harmonies," as an Indian poet says, "known to the Gods, but unknown to men"; we can only divine, only approach from a distance. But there exists clearly for us a unity, a progression, a development.

So by way of history we arrive at a definition of philosophy's task. If philosophy were what it ought to be, if history were perfectly clear and complete, then they would fully coincide with each other. Historical science would permeate its subject matter with the spirit of philosophy. If historical art would then succeed in giving life to this subject matter and in reproducing it with that part of poetic power which does not think up new things but mirrors in its true character that which has been grasped and comprehended, it would, as we said in the beginning, unite in its own peculiar manner science and art at the same time.

<sup>13</sup> Kessel's reading: understanding (*Apprehendiren*); Fuchs's reading: approximation (*Approximieren*).



## II. Of The Scope Of World History

In three ways—with regard to (1) sequence, (2) simultaneity, and (3) individual developments.<sup>14</sup>

1. Sequence—In the abstract, history would embrace all of the life of mankind appearing in time. But too much of it is lost and unknown. The first period of its existence as well as the connecting links are lost without any hope of ever finding them again.

We can note what significance history has. If authors of another kind are lost, one misses the expression of one single individual. In a historical book, however, not only the existence and the view of an author is expressed; the historical book rather interests us because of the lives of others it contains. Much that was described has been lost; some has never been described. All this is threatened by death. Only those whom history remembers have not entirely died; their character and their existence continue to exist insofar as they remain in the consciousness of men. Only with the extinction of memory does actual death set in.

We are fortunate where documentary traces remain. At least these can be grasped. But what happens where there are none, for instance in prehistory? I am in favor of excluding this period from history because it contradicts the historical principle, which is documentary research.

One should exclude entirely that which usually is taken over in world history from geological deduction and from the results of natural history about the first creation of the world, the solar system, and the earth. By our method we find out nothing about these topics; it is permissible to confess our ignorance.

As for myths, I do not want to deny categorically that they contain perhaps an occasional historical element. But the most important thing is that they express the view of a people of itself, its attitude toward the world, etc. They are important insofar as

<sup>14</sup> This is an incomplete sentence in the German original.

the subjective character of a people or its thoughts may have been expressed in them, not because of any objective facts they may contain. In the former respect they possess a firm foundation and are very reliable for historical research, but not in the latter.

Finally, we can devote but scant attention to those peoples who still remain today in a kind of state of nature and who lead us to assume that they have been in this state from the beginning—that the prehistoric condition has been preserved in them. India and China claim an old age and have a lengthy chronology. But even the cleverest chronologists cannot understand it. Their antiquity is legendary, but their condition is rather a matter for natural history.

THE ROLE  
OF THE PARTICULAR  
AND THE GENERAL  
IN THE STUDY  
OF UNIVERSAL HISTORY

*(A Manuscript of the 1860s)*

History admittedly can never have the unity of a philosophical system; but history is not without inner connection. We see before us a series of events which follow and condition each other. To say condition does not, of course, denote absolute necessity. Rather, the important point is that human freedom is everywhere brought into play. Historical writing traces the scenes of freedom; this is the source of its greatest attraction. Freedom, however, is accompanied by force—that is to say, by original force. Without this force freedom would cease in the events of the world as well as in the realm of ideas. At any moment something new can begin again which can be traced back only to the first and common source of all human activity. Nothing exists entirely for the sake of the other. Nothing is absorbed entirely in the reality of the other. But still a deep inner relationship exists from which nobody is entirely free and which enters into everything. Freedom and necessity exist side by side. Necessity lies in

*From Alfred Dove's Vorwort to Weltgeschichte, Theil IX, Abt. 2, pp. xiii-xvi; translated by Wilma A. Iggers.*

that which has already been formed and cannot be overturned again, which is the basis of all newly emerging activity. What has developed in the past constitutes the connection with what is in the process of becoming. But even this connection is not to be assumed arbitrarily; it exists in a certain way and in no other. It, too, is an object of cognition. A longer series of successive and concurrent events, connected in this way with each other, forms a century, an epoch. The varied character of the epochs rests on the fact that different times and different circumstances result from the struggle of the conflicting principles of freedom and necessity. If, with this in mind, we visualize the sequence of the centuries, each with its own original character, all linked to one another, we have before us universal history from the beginning to the present day. Universal history encompasses the past life of the human race in its fullness and totality, not in its individual relationships and directions.

The science of universal history is distinguished from specialized research in this way: that universal history in investigating the particular remains always aware of the great whole on which it is working. The investigation of the particular, even of a single point, is of value if it is done well. If devoted to things human, it will always reveal something worth knowing in itself. It is instructive even when applied to petty detail, for the human is always worth knowing; But the investigation of the particular is always related to a larger context. Local history is related to that of a country; a biography is related to a larger event in state and church, to an epoch of national or general history. But all these epochs themselves are, as we have said, again part of the great totality which we call universal history. The greater scope of its investigation has correspondingly greater value. The ultimate goal, yet unattained, will always remain the conception and composition of a history of mankind. Given the course which historical studies have taken in our time—and which they must continue to take if they are to portray thoroughly investigated and exactly known things—we are exposed to the danger of losing sight of the general knowledge everyone desires. For one does not study history only for school: the knowledge of the history



of mankind ought to be the common property of mankind and, above all, should benefit the nation to which we belong and without which our studies would not even exist.

We need not fear to end up with the vague generalities with which an earlier age contented itself. The diligent and energetic studies which have been undertaken everywhere have been so productive and influential that such generalities can no longer be advanced today. We are also not likely to return to the systematic categories with which people occupied themselves at various times. A collection of historical notes with a superficial judgment about character and morality is just as unlikely to lead to thorough and satisfactory knowledge. In my opinion we must work in two directions: the investigation of the effective forces behind events and the perception of their general connection.

Comprehending the whole and yet doing justice to the requirements of research will, of course, always remain an ideal. It would presuppose an understanding on a firm foundation of the totality of human history. Even the investigation of the one or the other detail requires deep and extremely thorough study. Nowadays we are all agreed that criticism, objective conception, and a broad synthesis can and must go together. Relating the particular to the general cannot harm research. Without a general view, research would become sterile; without exact research, the general view would deteriorate into fantasy.