German History in Documents and Images

Volume 2. From Absolutism to Napoleon, 1648-1815
Johann Gottfried von Herder, Excerpts from *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (1784-91)

Although Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) was devoted to the Enlightenment ideals of liberty and progress toward peaceable self-government, he emphasized the centrality of ethno-linguistically or religiously defined cultures in his conception of human history. He believed that these cultures alone provided a context for meaningful human action (whether rational or otherwise). He called these cultures "peoples" [*Völker*]. History then appeared as an interaction of cultures rather than a progression (or chaos) of religions, individuals, or states. With this contribution, Herder vitally shaped the discourse of early nationalism in Germany, in which *linguistic-cultural identity* rather than *political subjecthood* loomed largest.

Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind

Johann Gottfried von Herder

BOOK XV

"Thus everything in history is transient: the inscription on her temple is evanescence and decay. We tread on the ashes of our forefathers, and stalk over the entombed ruins of human institutions and kingdoms. Egypt, Persia, Greece, Rome, flit before us like shadows: like ghosts they rise from their graves, and appear to us in the field of history.

"When any political body has outlived its maturity, who would not wish it a quiet dissolution? Who does not shudder, when, in the circle of living active powers, he stumbles over the graves of ancient institutions, which rob the living of light, and narrow their habitations? And when the present race has cleared away these catacombs, how soon will its institutions have a similar appearance to another, and be in like manner leveled with the earth!

"The cause of this transitoriness of all terrestrial things lies in their essence, in the place they inhabit, and in the general laws, to which our nature is subject. Man's body is a fragile, ever-renovating shell, which at length can renew itself no longer: but his mind operates upon Earth only in and with the body. We fancy ourselves independent; yet we depend on all nature: implicated in a chain of incessantly fluctuating things, we must follow the laws of its permutation, which are nothing more than to be born, exist, and die. A slender thread connects the human

race, which is every moment breaking, to be tied anew. The sage, whom time has made wise, sinks into the grave; that his successor may likewise begin his course as a child, perhaps madly destroy the work of his father, and leave to his son the same vain toil, in which he too consumes his days. Thus year runs into year: thus generations and empires are linked together. The Sun sets, that night may succeed, and mankind rejoice at the beams of a new morn.

“Now were any advancement observable in all this, it would be something: but where is it to be found in history? In it we everywhere perceive destruction, without being able to discern, that what rises anew is better, than what was destroyed. Nations flourish and decay: but in a faded nation no new flower, not to say a more beautiful one, ever blooms. Cultivation proceeds; yet becomes not more perfect by progress: in new places new capacities are developed; the ancient of the ancient places irrevocably pass away. Were the Romans wiser, or happier, than the Greeks? Are we more so than either?

“The nature of man remains ever the same: in the ten thousandth year of the World he will be born with passions, as he was born with passions in the two thousandth, and ran through his course of follies to a late, imperfect, useless wisdom. We wander in a labyrinth, in which our lives occupy but a span; so that it is to us nearly a matter of indifference, whether there be any entrance or outlet to the intricate path.

“Melancholy fate of the human race! With all their exertions chained to an Ixion’s wheel, to Sisyphus’s stone, and condemned to the prospect of a Tantalus. We must will; and we must die, without having seen the fruit of our labors ripen, or learned a single result of human endeavors from the whole course of history. If a people stand alone, its characters wear away under the hand of Time: if it come into collision with others, it is thrown into the crucible, where its impression is equally effaced. Thus we hew out blocks of ice; thus we write on the waves of the sea: the wave glides by, the ice melts; our palaces, and our thoughts, are both no more.

“To what purpose then the unblessed labor, to which God has condemned man as a daily task during his short life? To what purpose the burden, under which every one toils on his way to the grave; while no one is asked, whether he will take it up or not, whether he will be born on this spot, at this period, and in this circle, or no? Nay, as most of the evils among mankind arise from themselves, from their defective constitutions and governments, from the arrogance of oppressors, and from the almost inevitable weakness both of the governors and the governed; what fate was it that subjected man to the yoke of his fellows, to the mad or foolish will of his brother? Let a man sum up the periods of the happiness and unhappiness of nations, their good and bad rulers, nay the wisdom and folly, the predominance of reason and of passion, in the best: how vast will be the negative number! Look at the despots of Asia, of Africa, nay of almost the whole Earth: behold those monsters on the throne of Rome, under whom a World groaned for centuries: note the troubles and wars, the oppressions and tumults that took place, and mark the event. A Brutus falls, and an Anthony triumphs: a Germanicus dies, and a Tiberius, a Caligula, a Nero, reign: Aristides is banished: Confucius is a wanderer upon the Earth: Socrates, Phocion, Seneca, are put to death. Everywhere, it must be confessed, is discoverable the

proposition: ‘what is, is; what can be, will be; what is susceptible of dissolution, dissolves:’ a melancholy confession, however, which universally proclaims, that rude Violence, and his sister, malignant Cunning, are everywhere victorious upon Earth.”

Thus man doubts, and redoubts, after much apparent historical experience: nay, this melancholy complaint has to a certain degree the whole superficiality of all earthly occurrences in its favor: hence I have known many, who on the wide ocean of human history imagined they had lost that god, whom on the firm ground of natural knowledge they beheld with their mental eye in every stalk of grass, in every grain of dust, and adored with overflowing heart. In the temple of the earthly creation, everything appeared to them full of omnipotence, and benevolent goodness: in the theater of human actions, on the contrary, for which the periods of our life are calculated, they beheld nothing but a stage of conflicting sensual passions, brutal powers, destructive arts, or evanescent good purposes. To them history is a spider’s web, in a corner of the mundane mansion, the intricate threads of which display abundant traces of destructive rapine, while its melancholy center, the spider by which it was spun, nowhere appears.

Yet, if there be a god in nature, there is in history too: for man is also a part of the creation, and in his wildest extravagances and passions must obey laws, not less beautiful and excellent than those, by which all the celestial bodies move. Now as I am persuaded, that man is capable of knowing, and destined to attain the knowledge of everything, that he ought to know; I step freely and confidently from the tumultuous scenes, through which we have been wandering, to inspect the beautiful and sublime laws of nature, by which they have been governed.

Chapter 1

Humanity is the End of human Nature; and, with this End, God has put their own Fate into the Hands of Mankind

The end of whatever is not merely a dead instrument must be implicated in itself. Were we created, to strive with eternally vain endeavors after a point of perfection external to ourselves, and which we could never reach, as the magnet turns to the north; we might not only pity ourselves as blind machines, but the being likewise, that had condemned us to such a state of tantalism, in forming us for the purpose of such a malignant and diabolical spectacle. Should we say in his exculpation, that some good at least was promoted, and our nature preserved in perpetual activity, by these empty endeavors, incapable of ever attaining their object; it must be an imperfect, ferocious being, that could deserve such an exculpation: for in activity that never attains its end can lie no good; and he has weakly or maliciously deceived us, by placing before our eyes such a dream, from a purpose unworthy of him. But happily we are taught no such doctrine by the nature of things: if we consider mankind as we know them, and according to the laws that are intrinsic to them, we perceive nothing in man superior to humanity; for even if we think of angels, or of gods, we conceive them as ideal, superior men.

We have seen, that our nature is evidently organized to this end: for it our finer senses and instincts, our reason and liberty, our delicate yet durable health, our language, art, and religion, were bestowed. In all states, in all societies, man has had nothing in view, and could aim at nothing else, but humanity, whatever may have been the idea he formed of it. For it, the arrangements of sex, and the different periods of life, were made by nature; that our childhood might be of long continuance, and we might learn a kind of humanity by means of education. For it, all the different modes of life, throughout the wide World, have been established, all the forms of society introduced. Hunter, or fisherman, shepherd, husbandman, or citizen, in every state man has learned to discriminate food, and construct habitations for himself and his family; to clothe and adorn either sex, and regulate his domestic economy. He invented various laws, and forms of government, the object of all which was, that every one might exercise his faculties, and acquire a more pleasing and free enjoyment of life, undisturbed by others. For this purpose, property was secured, and labor, arts, trade, and an extensive intercourse between persons, facilitated: punishments were invented for culprits, rewards for the deserving; and numberless moral practices for people of different classes, in public and private life, and even in religion, were established. For this, wars were carried on, treaties were made; by degrees a sort of law of nations and of war, and various compacts of hospitality and commerce were framed, so that man might meet compassion and respect beyond the confines of his own country. Thus whatever good appears in history to have been accomplished, humanity was the gainer; whatever foolish, vicious, or execrable, was perpetrated, ran counter to humanity: so that in all his earthly institutions man can conceive no other end, than what lies in himself, that is, in the weak or strong, base or noble nature, that God gave him. Now if throughout the whole creation we know nothing, except by what it is, and what it effects, man’s end upon Earth is shown us by his nature and history, as by the clearest demonstration.

Let us take a retrospect of the regions, over which we have been wandering: in all the civil establishments from China to Rome, in all the varieties of their political constitutions, in every one of their inventions, whether of peace or war, and even in all the faults and barbarities that nations have committed, we discern the grand law of nature: let man be man; let him mould his condition according as to himself shall seem best. For this nations took possession of their land, and established themselves in it as they could. Of women and of the state, of slaves, clothing, and habitations, of recreation and food, of science and of art, everything has been made, in the different parts of the Earth, that man thought was capable of being made for his own or for the general good. Thus we everywhere find mankind possessing and exercising the right of forming themselves to a kind of humanity, as soon as they have discerned it. If they have erred, or stopped at the half way of a hereditary tradition; they have suffered the consequences of their error, and done penance for the fault they committed. The deity has in nowise bound their hands, farther than by what they were, by time, place, and their intrinsic powers. When they were guilty of faults, he extricated them not by miracles, but suffered these faults to produce their effects, that man might the better learn to know them.

This law of nature is not more simple, than it is worthy of God, consistent, and fertile in its consequences to mankind. Were man intended to be what he is, and to become what he was

capable of becoming, he must preserve a spontaneity of nature, and be encompassed by a sphere of free actions, disturbed by no preternatural miracle. All inanimate substances, every species of living creature that instinct guides, have remained what they were from the time of the creation: God made man a deity upon Earth; he implanted in him the principle of self-activity, and set this principle in motion from the beginning, by means of the internal and external wants of his nature. Man could not live and support himself, without learning to make use of his reason: no sooner, indeed, did he begin to make use of this, than the door was opened to a thousand errors and mistaken attempts; but at the same time, and even through these very mistakes and errors, the way was cleared to a better use of his reason. The more speedily he discerned his faults, the greater the promptitude and energy with which he applied to correct them: the farther he advanced, the more his humanity was formed; and this must be formed, or he must groan for ages beneath the burden of his mistakes.

We see, too, that Nature has chosen as wide a field for the establishment of this law, as the abode of mankind would allow: she organized man as variously as the human species could be organized on this Earth. She placed the Negro close to the ape; and she offered for solution the grand problem of humanity, to all people, of all times, from the intellect of the Æthiop to the most refined understanding. Scarcely a nation upon Earth is without the necessaries of life, to which want and instinct guide: for the greater refinement of man's condition more genial climates produce a race of finer mould. But as all beauty and perfection of order lie in the midst of two extremes; the most beautiful form of reason and humanity must find its place in the temperate middle region. And this it has abundantly found, according to the natural law of this general fitness. For though scarcely any of the Asiatic nations can be absolved from that indolence, which rested satisfied too early with good institutions, and regarded hereditary forms as sacred and unalterable; yet they must be excused, when the vast extent of their continent is considered, together with the circumstances to which they were exposed, particularly beyond the mountains. Upon the whole, their first attempts at the promotion of humanity, early as they were, considered each in its place and time, deserve praise; and still less can we refrain from acknowledging the progress made by the more active nations on the coasts of the Mediterranean sea. These shook off the despotic yoke of ancient forms of government and traditions, and gave thereby an example of the great and good law of human destiny: that, whatever a nation, or a whole race of men, wills for its own good with firm conviction, and pursues with energy, Nature, who has set up for man's aim neither despots nor traditions, but the best form of humanity, will assuredly grant.

The fundamental principle of this divine law of nature reconciles us wonderfully not only with the appearance of our species all over the Globe, but likewise with its variations through the different periods of time. Everywhere man is what he was capable of rendering himself, what he had the will and the power to become. Were he contented with his condition, or were the means of his improvement not yet ripened in the ample field of time; he remained for ages what he was, and became nothing more. But if he employed the instruments God had given him for his use, his understanding, power, and all the opportunities that a favorable current conveyed to him; he raised himself higher with art, and improved himself with courage. If he did not this, his very

indolence showed, that he was little sensible of his misfortune: for every lively feeling of injustice, accompanied by intelligence and strength, must become an emancipating power. The long submission to despotism, for instance, arose by no means from the overbearing might of the despots: the easy, confiding weakness of their subjects, and latterly their patient indolence, were its great and only supports. For, it must be confessed, it is easier to bear with patience, than to redress ourselves with vigor; and hence so many nations have forborne to assert the right that God has conferred on them in the divine gift of reason.

Still there is no doubt, generally speaking, that what has not yet appeared upon Earth will at some future period appear: for no prescription is a bar to the rights of man, and the powers, that God has implanted in him, are ineradicable. We are astonished, to see how far the Greeks and Romans advanced in a few centuries, in their sphere of objects: for, though the aim of their exertions was not always the most pure, they proved, that they were capable of reaching it. Their image shines in history, and animates every one, who resembles them, to similar and better exertions, under the same and greater assistance of fate. In this view the whole history of nations is to us a school, for instructing us in the course, by which we are to reach the lovely goal of humanity and worth. So many celebrated nations of old attained an inferior aim: why should not we succeed in the pursuit of a purer and nobler object? They were men like us: their call to the best form of humanity was ours, according to the circumstances of the times, to our knowledge, and to our duties. What they could perform without a miracle, we can and ought to perform: the deity assists us only by means of our own industry, our own understanding, our own powers. When he had created the Earth, and all its irrational inhabitants, he formed man, and said to him: “be my image; a god upon Earth; rule and dispose. Whatever of noble and excellent thy nature will permit thee to produce, bring forth: I will assist thee by no miracle; for I have placed thy own fate in thy own hand: but all my sacred, eternal laws of nature will be thy aids.”

Let us consider some of these natural laws, which, according to the testimony of history, have promoted the progress of humanity in our species; and, as truly as they are the natural laws of God, will continue, to promote it.

Chapter 2

All the destructive Powers in Nature must not only yield in the Course of Time to the maintaining Powers, but must ultimately be subservient to the Consummation of the Whole

First example. As the substance of future worlds lay floating in infinite space, the creator of these worlds was pleased, to leave matter to form itself by means of the internal energies imparted to it. Toward the centre of the whole, the Sun, whatever could find no course of its own, or was attracted by the superior power of this orb, bent its way. Whatever found another centre of attraction revolved in like manner around it, and either tended to its great focus in an elliptical orbit, or flew off in a parabola or hyperbola, and returned no more. Thus the ether purified itself: thus from a confused fluctuating chaos arose an harmonious system of worlds, according to

which earths and comets have revolved for ages in regular orbits round their sun: an eternal proof, that *order arose out of confusion by means of divine implanted powers.* As long as this grand and simple law of all powers numbered and balanced against each other endures, the structure of the universe stands firm; for it is founded on a divine rule and quality.

Second example. In like manner as our Earth formed itself from a shapeless mass into a planet, its elements struggled and contended upon it, till each found its place; so that, after much wild confusion, all are now become subservient to the harmoniously regulated orb. Land and water, air and fire, seasons and climates, winds and currents, and all its atmospheric phenomena, obey one great law of its form and density, its motion and distance from the Sun, and are regulated in harmony with these. Those innumerable volcanoes that once flamed on the surface of our Earth flame on it no longer: the ocean no longer boils with those vitriolic effusions, and other matters, that once covered the surface of our land. Millions of creatures have perished, that were fated to perish: whatever could preserve itself abides, and still, after the lapse of thousands of years, remains in great harmonious order. Wild animals and tame, carnivorous and graminivorous insects, birds, fishes, and man, are adapted to each other; and among all these, male and female, birth and death, the term and stages of life, wants and enjoyments, necessities and gratifications. Not, however, at the will of a daily changing, inexplicable order; but according to evident laws of nature, inherent in the structure of the creatures themselves, that is, *in the relation of all the organic powers, which have animated and maintained themselves on our planet.* As long as the natural law of this structure and relation endures, its consequences will likewise endure; namely harmonious order between the animate and inanimate parts of our creation, which, as the interior of our Earth evinces, was producible only by the destruction of millions.

What? and shall not this law, conformable to the internal powers of nature, educing order out of chaos, and converting into regularity the confusion of human affairs, prevail in the life of man? Undoubtedly it does: we bear its principle within us, and it must and will act suitably to its nature. All the errors of man are mists of truth: all the passions of his breast are wild impulses of a power, which yet knows not itself, but, according to its nature, acts only for the best. Even the tempests of the ocean, those frequent engines of ravage and destruction, are the offspring of a harmonious order of things, to which they are not less subservient than the gentle zephyr. It is hoped a few observations may be placed in such a light, as to confirm this pleasing truth.

1. As the storms of the sea occur less frequently than moderate gales, so in the human species nature has benevolently ordered *that fewer destroyers than preservers should be born.*

It is a divine law in the animal kingdom, that not so many lions and tigers are capable of existence, and actually exist, as sheep and doves: in history we find the same beneficent disposition of things; so that we have a much smaller number of Nebuchadnezzars, Cambyses, Alexanders, Syllas, Attilas, and Genghis-Khans, than of less ferocious generals, or quiet peaceful monarchs. To the production of the former either very inordinate passions, and faulty natural dispositions, are requisite, whence they appear to the Earth as fiery meteors instead of

associate planets; or singular circumstances of education, rare occurrences of early habit, or the imperious demands of hostile, political necessity, stir up these scourges of divine wrath, as they are called, against mankind, and keep up their relentless swing. If it be true, therefore, that Nature deviates not from her course on our account, when, among the innumerable varieties of form and temperament she produces, she occasionally exhibits to the World men of unruly passions, spirits of destruction, not of preservation; still it remains in men's own power, not to entrust their flocks to these wolves and tigers, and even to tame them by the laws of humanity. The wild ox no longer appears in Europe, which formerly enjoyed its forest domains in every part of it; and Rome at length found it difficult, to procure the number of African monsters, she required for her amphitheatres. In proportion as lands are cultivated, deserts are diminished, and their wild inhabitants become rarer. In the human species the increasing civilization of man has had a similar effect; his disposition to unruly passions giving way with his decrease of strength, a more delicate creature was formed. With all this, irregularities are possible; and these frequently rage more perniciously, from being founded on infantile weakness, as the examples of many Roman and Eastern despots show: however, as a spoiled child is always more easy to restrain than a bloodthirsty tiger, Nature, with her corrective regulations, has taught us the way to rule the lawless, and tame the insatiable savage, by increasing diligence. If there be no longer regions of dragons, to employ the arms of the giants of antiquity, we require no Herculean destructive powers against men themselves. Heroes of this stamp may pursue their bloody game on Caucasus, or in Africa, and there seek new minotaurs to encounter: the society in which they live possesses the undoubted right itself to destroy all the flame-breathing oxen of a Geryon. It suffers by its own fault, if it tamely yield itself up to them as a prey; as it was the fault of the nations themselves, that they did not unite against desolating Rome with all the force of a common league, to maintain the freedom of the World.

2. *The progress of history shows, that, as true humanity has increased, the destructive demons of the human race have diminished in number; and this from the inherent natural laws of a self-enlightening reason and policy.*

In proportion as reason increases among mankind, man must learn from their infancy to perceive, that there is a nobler greatness, than the inhuman greatness of tyrants; and that it is more laudable, as well as more difficult, to form, than to ravage a nation, to establish cities, than to destroy them. The industrious Egyptians, the ingenious Greeks, the mercantile Phoenicians, not only make a more pleasing figure in history, but enjoyed, during the period of their existence, a more useful and agreeable life, than the destroying Persians, the conquering Romans, the avaricious Carthaginians. The remembrance of the former still lives with fame, and their influence upon Earth will continue eternally with increasing power; while the ravagers, with their demoniacal might, reaped no farther benefit, than that of becoming a wretched, luxurious people, amid the ruins of their plunder, and at last quaffing off the poisoned draught of severe retaliation. Such was the fate of the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Romans: even the Greeks received more injury from their internal dissensions, and from their luxury in many cities and provinces, than from the sword of the enemy. Now as these are fundamental principles of a natural order, which not only shows itself in particular cases of history, or in fortuitous instances; but is

founded on its own intrinsic properties, that is, on the nature of oppression and an overstretched power, or on the consequences of victory, luxury and arrogance, as on the laws of a disturbed equiponderance, and holds on coeternally with the course of things: why must we be compelled to doubt, that this law of Nature is not as generally acknowledged as any other, and does not operate, from the forcibleness with which it is perceived, with the infallible efficacy of a natural truth? What may be brought to mathematical certainty, and political demonstration, must be acknowledged as truth, soon or late; for no one has yet questioned the accuracy of the multiplication table or the propositions of Euclid.

Even our brief history already demonstrates beyond all doubt, that the increased diffusion of true knowledge among people has happily diminished their inhuman, mad destroyers. Since the downfall of Rome there has arisen no other cultivated nation in Europe, which has founded the whole of its constitution on war and conquest; for the military nations of the Middle Ages were rude and savage. In proportion as they advanced in civilization, and learned to have a regard for their property, the more amiable and peaceful spirit of industry, of agriculture, of trade, and of science, forced itself upon them unnoticed, or indeed often against their wills. Men learned to use without destroying, as what was destroyed was no longer capable of being used; and thus in time, from the nature of the case itself, a peaceful balance between nations took place; for, after centuries of wild warring, all began to perceive, that the object of every one's wish was not to be attained, unless they contributed to promote it in common. Even that, which of all things appeared most to require exclusive possession, commerce, could take no other way; as it is a law of nature, against which passions and prejudice are ultimately of no avail. Every commercial nation of Europe now laments, and will hereafter lament still more, what envy or superstition once prompted it foolishly to destroy. As reason increases, the object of navigation will proportionally turn from conquest to trade; which is founded on reciprocal justice and courtesy, on a progressive emulation to excel in arts and industry, in short, on humanity and its eternal laws.

Our minds feel inward satisfaction, when they not only perceive the balm, which flows from the laws of human nature, but see it spread, and make its way among mankind, even against their wills, from its natural force. God himself could not divest man of the capability of error; but he implanted this in the nature of human mistakes, that soon or late they should show themselves to be such, and become evident to the calculating creature. No prudent sovereign of Europe now governs his provinces, as did the kings of Persia, or even the Romans themselves; if not from philanthropic motives, yet from a clearer insight into the business, as with the course of time political calculation has become more certain, easy, and perspicuous. A madman only would build Egyptian pyramids in our days; and any one, that should attempt such useless enterprises, would be deemed insane by all the rational part of the World, if not from his want of love for the people, yet from considerations of economy. The bloody combats of gladiators, and barbarous fights with animals, are no longer suffered among us: the human species has run through these wild tricks of youth, and learned at length to see, that its mad frolics cost more than they are worth. In like manner, we no longer require the poor oppressed slaves of the Romans, or helots of Sparta; because in our constitutions we know how to obtain more easily

from free beings, what they accomplished with more danger, and even expense, by means of human animals: nay the time must come, when we shall look back with as much compassion on our inhuman traffic in Negroes, as on the ancient Roman Slaves, or Spartan helots; if not from humanity, yet from calculation. In short, we have to thank God, for having given us, with our weak fallible nature, reason, that immortal beam from his sun, the essence of which it is to dispel night, and show things in their real forms.

3. *The progress of arts and inventions puts into the hands of man increasing means of restraining or rendering innocuous, what Nature herself cannot eradicate.*

The surface of the sea must be ruffled by storms, and the mother of all things could not dispense with them for man's advantage. But what did she bestow on him, to compensate these? The art of navigation. These very storms excited man, to invent the elaborate structure of his complicated ship, which enables him not merely to escape the storm, but to profit by its rage, and sail on its wings.

The wandering mariner, tossed on the ocean, could not call the sons of Tyndarus to appear and direct him on his course; accordingly he himself invented his guide the compass, and fought in the skies his Dioscuri, the Sun, the Moon, and the stars. Thus equipped with art he launched out on the boundless ocean, and braved it from the equator to the Arctic Circle.

Nature could not take from man the destructive element of fire, without depriving him of manhood itself: but then, what did she bestow on him by means of fire? Multifarious art: art not only to set bounds to the devouring poison, and render it innocent, but even to employ it for a thousand beneficial purposes.

It is the same with the raging passions of man, as with these storms on the ocean, with this raging element of fire. By and in these the human species has sharpened its reason, and invented a thousand means, regulations, and arts, not only to restrain them, but even to turn them to advantage, as all history shows. A race of men without passions would never have cultivated their understanding; they would have still lain as troglodytes in some cave.

Man-devouring war, for example, was during ages the trade of robbery rudely exercised. It was long the practice of men swayed by turbulent passions; for while personal strength, cunning, and address, were its requisites, it could cherish only the dangerous virtues of robbers and murderers, even in those who possessed the most laudable qualities; as the wars of ancient times, of the Middle Ages, and even some of modern date, abundantly testify. But in the midst of this depraving trade the art of war was invented, perhaps involuntarily; for the inventors of this art perceived not, that it would sap the foundations of war itself. In proportion as the art of fighting became a profound study, and various mechanical inventions were introduced into it, the passions and brute strength of individuals became useless. Soldiers were converted into mere machines, moved by the mind of a single general, and at the order of a few commanders; till at length sovereigns alone were permitted to play this dangerous and costly game, while in

ancient times almost all warlike nations were continually in arms. We have seen proofs of this in several Asiatic nations, and not less in the Greeks and Romans. The latter were for centuries almost constantly in the field: the Volscian war continued 106 years; the Samnite, 71: the city of Veii was besieged ten years, like a second Troy: and the destructive Peloponnesian war of 28 years among the Greeks is sufficiently known. But as in all wars, to fall in battle is the least of evils, while the diseases and devastation, that attend the motions of an army, or the siege of a town, with the lawless spirit of plunder, that then pervades all ranks and conditions, are much greater evils, which passion-stirring war calls forth in a thousand frightful forms; we may thank the Greeks and Romans, and still more the inventors of gunpowder and firearms, for having reduced the most savage trade to an art, and latterly indeed the most honorable art of crowned heads. Since kings have personally engaged in this game of honor, with armies as devoid of passion as numerous, we are secured from sieges of ten years duration, or wars of seventy, carried on merely for the honor of the commander; for the very magnitude of an army is sufficient to prevent the continuance of war. Thus, conformably to an unalterable law of nature, the evil itself has produced some good; the art of war having suppressed in a certain degree the practice of warfare. This art has likewise diminished plunder and devastation, if not from philanthropy, yet for the honor of the general. The laws of war, and the treatment of prisoners, are become incomparably milder, than they were even among the Greeks; not to mention the public security, which first existed merely in warlike states. The whole Roman Empire, for instance, enjoyed security in its highways, as they were covered by the wings of its eagles; while travelling was dangerous to a foreigner in Asia and Africa, and even in Greece, because in these countries a general spirit of security was wanting. Thus the poison was converted into a medicine, as soon as it came into the hands of art: generations indeed were swept away, but the immortal whole outlived the sufferings of the parts that disappeared, and learned good even from evil.

If this be true of the art of war, it must still more of the science of politics; the study of which, however, is more intricate, as in it centers the welfare of a whole nation. Even the savages of America have their politics; yet in how confined a state! being of advantage indeed to a few particular families, but by no means securing the whole people from ruin. Several little nations have exterminated one another; others are so thinned, that a similar fate probably awaits many of them, from their unequal contest with the smallpox, spirituous liquors, and the avarice of Europeans. The more the political system of a state became an art, both in Asia and Europe, the more stable it was in itself, and the more closely it was connected with others, so that one could not fall without the rest. Thus stands China, thus Japan; ancient edifices, the foundations of which lie deep beneath their walls. The constitution of Greece, the principal republics of which contended centuries for the balance of power, was still more elaborate. Common dangers united them: and had the union been perfect, these active people would have withstood Philip and the Romans with no less glory, than they once gained against Xerxes and Darius. The defective politics of the neighboring nations alone gave Rome her advantage: separately they were attacked; separately they were conquered. Rome experienced a similar fate, when she declined in the arts of war and politics: so did Judea; and so did Egypt. No people, whose state

is well regulated, can perish, even supposing them to be conquered, as China shows even with all its faults.

The utility of an art profoundly understood is more evident, when we speak of the internal economy of a country, its trade, its administration of justice, its sciences, and its manufactures. In all these it is obvious, the greater the art, the more the advantage. A true merchant employs no deception, because deceit never leads to wealth: as the man of real learning never makes a parade of false science; as the judge, who deserves the name, is never knowingly unjust; for this would be to confess themselves tyros, not masters of their arts. As certainly must the time come, when the irrational politician will be ashamed of his ignorance; and when it will be as absurd and ridiculous, to be a tyrannical despot, as it has ever been detestable. It will then be clear as day, that every irrational politician reckons with an erroneous multiplication table, and that, however great the sums he calculates, no real advantage is obtained from them. For this history is written; and in the course of it the proofs of this proposition will become evident. All the faults of government must precede, and exhaust themselves as it were; that, after all their disorders, man may at length perceive the happiness of his species to depend not on anything arbitrary, but on an essential law of nature, on reason and equity. To the development of this law we now proceed; and may the internal force of truth stamp light and conviction on the proposition.

Chapter 3

The human Race is destined to proceed through various Degrees of Civilization, in various Mutations; but the Permanency of its Welfare is founded solely and essentially on Reason and Justice

First natural law. It is demonstrated in physical mathematics, that *to the permanent condition of a thing a sort of perfection is requisite, a maximum or minimum, arising out of the mode of action of the powers of that thing.* Thus, for example, our Earth could not possess durability, if its centre of gravity did not lie deep within it, and all its powers act to and from this, in equiponderating harmony. Every stable being, therefore, bears in itself, according to this beautiful law of nature, its physical truth, goodness, and necessity, as the grounds of its stability.

Second natural law. It is in like manner demonstrated, *that all perfection and beauty of compound, limited things, or systems of them, rest on such a maximum.* Thus similitude and difference, simplicity in means and diversity in effects, the slightest application of power to attain the most certain or profitable end, form a kind of symmetry and harmonious proportion, universally observed by Nature, in her laws of motion, in the form of her creatures, in the greatest things and in the least; and imitated by the art of man, as far as his powers extend. In this, many rules limit each other, so that what would be greater according to one is diminished by another, till the compound whole attains the most beautiful form, with the greatest economy, and at the same time internal consistency, goodness, and truth. An excellent law, which

banishes from Nature everything arbitrary, and all disorder, and displays to us, even in every variable and limited part of the creation, a rule of the highest beauty.

Third natural law. It is equally proved, that, *if a being, or system of beings, be forced out of this permanent condition of its truth, goodness, and beauty, it will again approach it by its internal powers, either in vibrations, or in an asymptote; as out of this state it finds no stability.* The more active and multifarious the powers, the less is the imperceptible straight course of the asymptote possible, and the more violent the vibrations and oscillations, till the disturbed subject attain an equilibrium of its powers, or harmony in their movements, and therewith the permanent condition essential to it.

Now as mankind, both taken as a whole, and in its particular individuals, societies, and nations, is a permanent natural system of the most multifarious living powers; let us examine, wherein its stability consists; in what point its highest beauty, truth, and goodness, unite; and what course it takes, in order to reapproach its permanent condition, on every aberration from it, of which many are exhibited to us by history and experience.

1. The human species is such a copious scheme of energies and capacities, that, as everything in nature rests on the most determinate individuality, its great and numerous capacities could not appear on our planet otherwise than *divided among millions.* Everything has been born, that could be born upon it; and everything has maintained itself, that could acquire a state of permanence according to the laws of Nature. Thus every individual bears within himself that symmetry, for which he is made, and to which he must mould himself, both in his bodily figure, and mental capacities. Human existence appears in every shape and kind, from the sickliest deformity that can scarcely support life, to the superhuman form of a Grecian demigod; from the passionate ardor of the Negro brain, to the capacity for consummate wisdom. Through faults and errors, through education, necessity, and exercise, every mortal seeks the symmetry of his powers; as in this alone the most complete enjoyment of his existence lies: yet few are sufficiently fortunate, to attain it in the purest, happiest manner.

2. As an individual man can subsist of himself but very imperfectly, *a superior maximum of cooperating powers* is formed with every society. These powers contend together in wild confusion, till, agreeably to the unfailing laws of nature, opposing regulations limit each other, and a kind of equilibrium and harmony of movement takes place. Thus nations modify themselves, according to time, place, and their internal character: each bears in itself the standard of its perfection, totally independent of all comparison with that of others. Now the more pure and fine the maximum on which a people hit, the more useful the objects to which it applied the exertions of its nobler powers, and, lastly, the more firm and exact the bond of union, which most intimately connected all the members of the state, and guided them to this good end; the more stable was the nation itself, and the more brilliant the figure it made in history. The course that we have hitherto taken through certain nations shows how different, according to place, time, and circumstances, was the object for which they strove. With the Chinese it was refined political morality; with the Hindus, a kind of retired purity, quiet assiduity in labor, and

endurance; with the Phoenicians, the spirit of navigation, and commercial industry. The culture of the Greeks, particularly at Athens, proceeded on the maximum of sensible beauty, both in arts and manners, in science and in political institutions. In Sparta, and in Rome, men emulated the virtues of the patriot and hero; in each, however, in a very different mode. Now as in all these most depended on time and place, the ancients will scarcely admit of being compared with each other in the most distinguished features of national fame.

3. In all, however, we see the operation of *one principle,* namely *human reason,* which endeavors to produce unity out of multiplicity, order out of disorder, and out of variety of powers and designs one symmetrical and durably beautiful whole. From the shapeless artificial rocks, with which the Chinese ornaments his garden, to the Egyptian pyramid, or the ideal beauty of Greece, the plan and design of a reflecting understanding is everywhere observable, though in very different degrees. The more refined the reflections of this understanding were, and the nearer it came to the point, which is the highest in its kind, and admits no deviation to the right or to the left; the more were its performances to be considered as models, for they contain eternal rules for the human understanding in all ages. Thus nothing of the kind can be conceived superior to an Egyptian pyramid, or to several Greek and Roman works of art. They are simple solutions of certain problems of the understanding, which admit no arbitrary supposition that the problems are perhaps not yet solved, or might be solved in a better way; for in them the simple idea of what they ought to be is displayed in the easiest, fullest, and most beautiful manner. Every deviation from them would be a fault; and were they to be repeated and diversified in a thousand modes, we must still return to that single point, which is the highest of its kind.

4. Thus through all the polished nations, that we have hitherto considered, or shall hereafter consider, *a chain of cultivation* may be drawn, flying off in extremely divergent curves. In each it designates increasing and decreasing greatness, and has maximums of every kind. Many of these exclude or limit one another, till at length a certain symmetry takes place in the whole; so that were we to reason from one perfection of any nation concerning another, we should form very treacherous conclusions. Thus, because Athens had exquisite orators, it does not follow, that its form of government must likewise have been the best possible; or that, because the Chinese moralize so excellently, their state must be a pattern for all others. Forms of government refer to a very different maximum, from that of beautiful morals, or a pathetic oration; notwithstanding, at bottom, all things in any nation have a certain connection, if it be only that of exclusion and limitation. No other maximum, but that of the most perfect bond of union, produces the most happy states; even supposing the people are in consequence obliged to dispense with many shining qualities.

5. But in one and the same nation every maximum of its commendable endeavors ought not and cannot endure for ever; since it is but one point in the progress of time. This incessantly moves on; and the more numerous the circumstances, on which the beautiful effect depends, the sooner is it liable to pass away. Happy if its master pieces remain as rules for future ages; since those that immediately succeed approach them too near, and will probably obliterate by

attempting to excel them. Even the most active people frequently sink most speedily from the boiling to the freezing point.

The history of particular sciences and nations has to calculate these maxima, and I wish we had such a history only of the most celebrated nations during the periods best known. At present we speak only of human history in general, and of its state of permanence in every form and climate. This is nothing else than *humanity,* that is, *reason and equity in all conditions, and in all occupations of men.* And this indeed it is, not through the will of a sovereign, or the persuasive power of tradition, but through natural laws, on which the essence of man reposes. Even his most corrupt institutions cry aloud: “had not a glimmering of equity and reason been retained in us, we should long have ceased to be, nay we never should have existed.” As the whole tissue of human history proceeds from this point, to it we must carefully bend our view.

First. What it is we esteem, and after which we inquire, in all human works? Reason, plan, and purpose. If these be wanting, nothing human is accomplished, a blind power is displayed. Wherever our understanding roams throughout the wide field of history, it seeks only itself, it finds only itself. The nearer it approaches pure truth, and the good of mankind, in all its undertakings; the more durable, useful, and beautiful are its works, and the more their rules meet the hearts and minds of all people, in all ages. Socrates and Confucius, Plato, Cicero, and Zoroaster, agree unanimously in what constitutes clear understanding, and just morals: in spite of their various differences, they have all labored to one point, on which our whole species rests. As the wanderer enjoys no greater delight, than when he everywhere discovers, even unexpectedly, the traces of a thinking, feeling mind, like his own; so are we delighted when in the history of our species the echo of all ages and nations reverberates nothing from the noblest minds, but truth and benevolence towards man. As my reason seeks the connection of things, and my heart rejoices when it perceives it; so has every honest man fought it: though, probably, from the point of view which his situation afforded, he saw it differently, and differently described it. Where he erred, he erred both for himself and me, as he warned me against similar errors. Where he guides me truly, instructs, solaces, animates me, he is my brother; a sharer in the same soul of the World, the one human reason, the one human truth.

Secondly. As there is not a more pleasing sight in all history, than that of a man of goodness and understanding, who, in spite of all the changes of fortune, remains the same in every period of his life, and in everything he does; so our pity is excited in a thousand ways, when we perceive even in great and good men errors of the understanding, which, according to the laws of nature, cannot fail to bring upon them necessary pains. We too frequently meet with these fallen angels in history, and have to lament the weakness of the moulds, that human reason employs for her instruments. How little can a mortal bear, without bending underneath the load! how little that is extraordinary can come in his way, without turning him from it! A slight honor, a glimpse of good fortune, or an unexpected occurrence in life, is a sufficient ignis fatuus, to mislead one into quagmires, or over precipices: another is ignorant of his own powers, attempts what is above his strength, and faints under the enterprise. We are seized with sentiments of compassion, when we perceive such, unfortunately fortunate, on the point of deviating from the

path of reason, justice, and happiness, which they feel the want of strength any longer to pursue. Behind them stands the grasping fury, and impels them against their will to overstep the line of moderation: they are now in her hand, and probably will suffer during the remainder of their lives the consequences of a slight folly, and dereliction of reason. Or if Fortune have raised them too high, and they feel themselves on her highest pinnacle, what presents itself to their foreboding minds, but the inconstancy of this fickle goddess, and misfortune bursting from the very seeds of their success? In vain, compassionate Caesar, didst thou turn aside thy face, when the head of thy defeated enemy Pompey was brought to thee, and build a temple to Nemesis. Already thou hadst passed the confines of Fortune, as well as the banks of the Rubicon; the goddess was now behind thee, and thy bloody corpse was doomed, to fall at the feet of the statue of that very Pompey. The constitutions of countries experience a similar fate, as they depend on the reason or folly of a few, who are their rulers, or by whom their rulers are swayed. The most beautiful institutions, which promised mankind the most profitable fruits for ages, have often been torn to pieces by the folly of an individual, who has felled the tree, instead of lopping a few of its branches. Success is most difficult to be borne by whole realms, as well as by individuals; whether they be governed by monarchs and despots, or by senates and the people. The people and the despot are the least capable of perceiving the warning nod of the goddess of fate: dazzled by the splendor of vainglory, or made giddy by the sound of a name, they rush beyond the bounds of prudence and humanity, and perceive the consequences of their folly too late. This was the fate of Rome, of Athens, and of many nations; as well as of Alexander, and most of the conquerors, that have disturbed the peace of the World: for Injustice is the ruin of every country, as Folly of every human undertaking. These are the furies of Fate: Misfortune is no more than their younger sister, the third member of the fearful confederacy.

Great father of mankind, what an easy yet difficult lesson hast thou given thy family upon Earth for the whole of their task! They have nothing to learn, but reason and justice alone: if they practice these, light gradually enters their minds, goodness their hearts, perfection their states, happiness their lives. Endowed with these gifts, and making proper application of them, the Negro may form his society as well as the Greek, the troglodyte as well as the Chinese. Experience will lead each farther; and Reason, united with Equity, will give consistence, beauty, and symmetry, to his undertakings. But if he desert these, the essential guides of his life, what can give stability to his good-fortune, and save him from the furies of Inhumanity?

Thirdly. It follows likewise, that, whenever the equilibrium of reason and humanity is disturbed among men, a return to it seldom occurs, except by violent oscillations from one extreme to the other. One passion kicks up the scale of reason, another drives it down, and thus history goes on for years and ages, before the period of tranquility returns. Thus Alexander destroyed the equilibrium of an extensive region of the World; and it was long after his death before the storm subsided. Thus Rome disturbed the peace of the Globe for more than a thousand years; and half a World of savage nations was requisite for the slow restoration of its quiet. The peaceable progress of an asymptote could by no means be expected, in these convulsions of countries and nations. The channel of cultivation on our Earth, with its abrupt corners, its salient and reentering angles, scarcely ever exhibits a gentle stream, but rather the rushing of a torrent from

the mountains. Such are the effects of human passions. It is evident, too, that the general composition of our species is calculated and established on such alternating vibrations. As our walk is a continual falling to the right and to the left, and yet we advance at every step, so is the progress of cultivation in races of men, and in whole nations. Individually we often try both extremes, before we hit the point of rest, as the pendulum oscillates from side to side. Generations are renewed in continual change; and in spite of all the direct precepts of tradition, the son advances in his own way. Aristotle was assiduous to distinguish himself from Plato, Epicurus from Zeno, till more tranquil posterity could at last impartially profit by both extremes. Thus, as in the machine of our body, the work of time proceeds to the good of the human race by necessary opposition, and acquires from it permanent health. But through whatever turnings and angles the stream of human reason may wind and break, it arose from the eternal fountain of truth, and by virtue of its nature can never be lost in its course. Whoever draws from it, draws life and duration.

For the rest, both reason and justice hinge *on one and the same law of nature,* from which the stability of our being likewise flows. Reason weighs and compares the relations of things, that she may dispose them in durable symmetry. Justice is nothing else than a moral symmetry of reason, the formula of the equilibrium of contending powers, on the harmony of which the whole creation reposes. Thus one and the same law reaches from the Sun, and from all the suns in the universe, to the most insignificant human action: one law upholds all beings, and their systems; *the relation of their powers to periodical rest and order.*

Chapter 4

From the Laws of their internal Nature, Reason and Justice must gain more Footing among Men in the Course of Time, and promote a more durable Humanity

All the doubts and complaints of men, respecting the uncertainty and little observable progress of good in history, arise from this, that the melancholy wanderer sees too little on his way. If he extended his view, and impartially compared with each other the times, that we most accurately know from history; farther, if he dived into the nature of man, and weighed what truth and reason are; he would doubt as little of their progress, as of the most indisputable physical truth. For thousands of years our sun and all the fixed stars were supposed to be immovable: a fortunate telescope now permits us no longer to doubt of their movement. So in some future age, a more accurate comparison of the periods exhibited in the history of our species will not merely give us a superficial view of this exhilarating truth, but, in spite of all apparent disorder, will enable us to calculate the laws, according to which this progress is effected by the power of human nature. Standing on the verge of ancient history, as on a central point, I shall do no more than cursorily note a few general principles, which will serve as leading stars, to guide us on our future way.

First. *Times connect themselves together, in virtue of their nature; and with them the child of Time, the race of mankind, with all its operations and productions.*

No sophistical argument can lead us to deny, that our Earth has grown older in the course of some thousands of years; and that this wanderer round the Sun is greatly altered since its origin. In its bowels we perceive how it once was constituted; and we need but look around us, to see its present constitution. The ocean foams no longer; it is subsided peaceably into its bed: the wandering streams have found their shores; and plants and animals have run through a progressive series of years in their different races. As not a sunbeam has been lost upon our Earth since its creation; so no falling leaf, no wasted seed, no carcass of a decaying animal, and still less an action of any living being, has been without effect. Vegetation, for example, has increased, and extended itself as far as it could: every living race has spread within the limits nature assigned it, through the means of others: and even the senseless devastations of man, as well as his industry, have been active implements in the hand of Time. Fresh harvests have waved over the ruins of the cities he has destroyed: the elements have strewed the dust of oblivion upon them; and soon new generations have arisen, who have erected new buildings upon the old, and even with their ancient remains. Omnipotence itself cannot ordain that effects shall not be effects: it cannot restore the Earth to what it was thousands of years ago, so that these thousands of years, with all their consequences, shall not have been.

Already therefore a certain progress of the human species is inseparable from the progress of Time, as far as man is included in the family of Time and Earth. Were the progenitor of mankind now to appear, and view his descendants, how would he be astonished! His body was formed for a youthful Earth; his frame, his ideas, and his way of life, must have been adapted to that constitution of the elements, which then prevailed; and considerable alteration in this must have taken place, in the course of six thousand years or upwards. In many parts America is no longer what it was when discovered: two thousand years hence, its ancient history will have the air of romance. Thus we read the history of the siege of Troy, and seek in vain the spot where it stood; in vain the grave of Achilles, or the godlike hero himself. Were a collection of all the accounts, that have been given of the size and figure of the ancients, of the kind and quantity of their food, of their daily occupations and amusements, and of their notions of love and marriage, the virtues and the passions, the purpose of life and a future existence, made with discriminating accuracy, and with regard to time and place, it would be of no small advantage toward a history of man. Even in this short period, an advancement of the species would be sufficiently conspicuous to evince both the consistency of ever-youthful Nature, and the progressive changes of our old mother Earth. Earth nurses not man alone: she presses all her children to one bosom, embraces all in the same maternal arms: and, when one changes, all must undergo change.

It is undeniable, too, that this progress of time has influenced the mode of thinking of the human species. Bid a man now invent, now sing an Iliad; bid him write like Æschylus, like Sophocles, like Plato: it is impossible. The childish simplicity, the unprejudiced mode of seeing things, in short the youthful period of the Greeks, is gone by. It is the same with the Hebrews, and the Romans; while on the other hand we are acquainted with a number of things, of which both the Romans and the Hebrews were ignorant. One day teaches another, one century instructs

another century: tradition is enriched: the muse of Time, History, herself sings with a hundred voices, speaks with a hundred tongues. Be there as much filth, as much confusion, as there will, in the vast snowball rolled up by Time; yet this very confusion is the offspring of ages, which could have arisen only from the unwearied rolling on of one and the same thing. Thus every return to the ancient times, even the celebrated year of Plato, is a fiction, is, from the ideas of the World and of Time, an impossibility. We float onward: but the stream that has once flowed, returns no more to its source.

Secondly. *The habitations of mankind render the progress of the human species still more evident.*

Where are the times when people dwelled as troglodytes, dispersed about in caves, behind their walls, and every stranger was an enemy? Merely from the course of time no cave, no wall, afforded security: men must learn to know one another; for collectively they are but one family, on one planet of no great extent. It is a melancholy reflection, that every where they first learned to know one another as enemies, and beheld each other with astonishment as so many wolves: but such was the order of nature. The weak feared the strong; the deceived, the deceiver; he who had been expelled, him who could again expel him; the inexperienced child, every stranger. This infantile fear, however, and all its abuses, could not alter the course of nature: the bond of union between nations was knit, though, from the rude state of man, in a rough manner. Growing reason may burst the knots, but cannot untwist the band, and still less undo the discoveries, that have once been made. What are the geologies of Moses and Orpheus, Homer and Herodotus, Strabo and Pliny, compared with ours? What was the commerce of the Phenicians, Greeks, and Romans, to the trade of Europe? Thus with what has hitherto been effected the clew to the labyrinth of what is to be done is given us. Man, while he continues man, will not cease from wandering over his planet, till it is completely known to him: from this neither storms nor shipwreck, nor those vast mountains of ice, nor all the perils of either pole, will deter him; no more than they have deterred him from the first most difficult attempts, even when navigation was very defective. The incentive to all these enterprises lies in his own breast, lies in man’s nature. Curiosity, and the insatiable desire of wealth, fame, discovery, and increase of strength, and even new wants and discontents, inseparable from the present course of things, will impel him; and they by whom dangers have been surmounted in former times, his celebrated and successful predecessors, will animate him. Thus the will of providence will be promoted both by good and bad incentives, till man knows and acts upon the whole of his species. To him the Earth is given; and he will not desist, till it is wholly his own, at least as far as regards knowledge and use. Are we not already ashamed, that one hemisphere of our planet remained for so long a time as unknown to us, as if had been the other side of the Moon?

Thirdly. *In consequence of the internal nature of the human mind, its activity has hitherto been employed solely on means of grounding more deeply the humanity and cultivation of our species, and extending them farther.*

How vast the progress from the first raft that floated on the water to an European ship! Neither the inventor of the former, nor the many inventors of the various arts and sciences that contribute to navigation, ever formed the least conception of what would arise from the combination of their discoveries: each obeyed his particular impulse of want or curiosity: but it is inherent in the nature of the human intellect, and of the general connection of all things, that no attempt, no discovery, can be made in vain. Those islanders, who had never seen a European vessel, beheld the monster with astonishment, as some prodigy of another World; and were still more astonished when they found, that men like themselves could guide it at pleasure over the trackless ocean. Could their astonishment have been converted into rational reflection on every great purpose, and every little mean, of this floating world of art, how much higher would their admiration of the human mind have arisen? Whither do not the hands of Europeans at present reach, by means of this single implement? Whither may they not reach thereafter?

Beside this art, others innumerable have been invented within the space of a few years by mankind, that extend their sway over air and water, over Earth and Heaven. And when we reflect, that but few nations were engaged in this contest of mental activity, while the greater part of the rest slumbered in the lap of ancient custom; when we reflect, that almost all our inventions were made at very early periods, and scarcely any trace, scarcely any ruin, of an ancient structure, or an ancient institution, exists, that is not connected with our early history; what a prospect does this historically demonstrated activity of the human mind give us for the infinity of future ages! In the few centuries during which Greece flourished, in the few centuries of modern improvement, how much has been conceived, invented, done, reduced to order, and preserved for future ages, in Europe, the least quarter of the Globe, and almost in its smallest parts! How prolific the seeds, that art and science have copiously shed, while one nourishes, one animates and excites the other! As when a string is touched, not only everything that has music resounds to it, but all its harmonious tones reecho the sound, till it becomes imperceptible; so the human mind has invented and created, when an harmonious point of its interior has been hit. When a new concord was struck, in a creation where everything is connected, innumerable new concatenations followed of course.

But, it may be asked, how have all these arts and inventions been applied? Have practical reason and justice, and consequently the true improvement and happiness of the human species, been promoted by them? In reply I refer to what has recently been urged respecting the progress of disorder throughout the whole creation: that, according to an intrinsic law of nature, nothing can attain durability, which is the essential aim of all things, without order. A keen knife in the hand of a child may wound it: yet the art that invented and sharpened the knife is one of the most indispensable of arts. All that use such a knife are not children; and even the child will be taught by pain, to use it better. Artificial power in the hand of a despot, foreign luxury in a nation without controlling laws, are such pernicious implements: but the very mischief they do will render men wiser; and, soon or late, the art, that created luxury as well as despotism, will first confine both within due bounds, and then convert them into real benefits. The heavy ploughshare wears itself out by long use: the slight teeth of new watchwork gain merely by their revolution the more suitable and artful form of the epicycloid. Thus in human

powers abuses carried to excess wear themselves down to good practices: extreme oscillations from side to side necessarily settle in the desirable mean of lasting fitness in a regular movement. Whatever is to take place among mankind will be effected by men: we suffer under our faults, till we learn of ourselves the better use of our faculties, without the assistance of miracles from Heaven.

We have not the least reason, therefore, to doubt, that every good employment of the human understanding necessarily must and will, at some time or other, promote humanity. Since agriculture has prevailed, men and acorns have ceased to be food. Man found, that he could live better, more decently, and more humanely, on the pleasing gifts of Ceres, than on the flesh of his fellows, or the fruits of the oak; and was compelled so to live by the laws of men wiser than himself. After men had learned to build houses and towns, they ceased to dwell in caves: under the laws of a commonweal, the poor stranger was no longer liable to death. Thus trade brought nations together: and the more its advantages were generally understood; the less murders, oppressions, and deceptions, which are always signs of ignorance in commerce, would necessarily be practiced. Every addition to the useful arts secures men's property, diminishes their labor, extends their sphere of activity, and necessarily lays therewith the foundations of farther cultivation and humanity. What labor was saved, for example, by the single invention of printing! What an extensive circulation of men's ideas, arts, and sciences, did it promote? Were an European Kang-Ti now to attempt, to eradicate the literature of this quarter of the Globe, he would find it impossible. Had the Phoenicians and Carthaginians, the Greeks and Romans, possessed this art; the destruction of their literature would not have been so easy to their spoilers, if it could by any means have been accomplished. Let savage nations burst in upon Europe, they could not withstand our tactics; and no Attila will again extend his march from the shores of the Black Sea and the Caspian to the plains of Catalonia. Let monks, sybarites, fanatics, and tyrants, arise, as they will; it is no longer in their power, to bring back the night of the Middle Ages. Now as no greater benefit can be conceived to arise from any art, divine or human, than not merely to bestow on us light and order, but from its very nature to extend and secure them; let us thank the Creator, that he conferred *understanding* on mankind, and made *art* essential to it. In them we possess the secret and the means of securing order in the World.

Neither need we any way repine, that many excellently conceived theories, morals not excepted, have remained so long without being carried into practice among mankind. The child learns much, which the man alone can apply; but he has not therefore learned in vain. The youth heedlessly forgets, what at some future period he must take pains to recollect, or learn a second time. So no truth that is treasured up, nay no truth that is discovered, among a race continually renovating, is wholly in vain: future circumstances will render necessary what is now despised; and in the infinity of things every case must occur, that can in any way exercise the human species. As in the creation we first conceive the *power,* that formed Chaos, and then disposing *wisdom,* and harmonious *goodness;* so the natural order of mankind first develops rude powers: disorder itself must guide them into the path of understanding; and the farther the understanding pursues its work, the more it perceives, that goodness alone can bestow on it durability, perfection, and beauty.

Chapter 5

A wise Goodness disposes the Fate of Mankind; therefore there is no nobler Merit, no purer and more durable Happiness, than to cooperate in its Designs

The sensual contemplator of history, who in it has lost sight of God, and begun to doubt of Providence, has fallen into this misfortune, from having taken too superficial a view of his subject, or from having had no just conception of Providence. If he have considered Providence as an apparition, that was to meet him at every turn, and continually interrupt the course of human actions, to accomplish this or that particular object of his will and fancy; I confess history is the grave of such a Providence, but certainly to the advantage of truth. For what kind of a Providence must it be, that everyone could employ as a hobgoblin in the order of things, as the agent of his narrow designs, as the ally of his pitiful follies; so that the whole would ultimately remain without a master! The God, whom I seek in history, must be the same as in nature: for a man is but a small part of the whole; and his history, like that of the grub, is intimately interwoven with that of the web he inhabits. In it, therefore, natural laws must prevail, that are inherent in the essence of things; and with which the deity is so far from being able to dispense, that he reveals himself in his supreme power, with invariable wisdom, goodness, and beauty, even in those which himself has founded. Everything, that can take place upon Earth, must take place upon it, provided it happens according to rules that carry their perfection within themselves. Let us repeat these rules, which we have already developed, as far as they regard the history of mankind: they all bear in themselves the stamp of wise goodness, of exalted beauty, and even of intrinsic necessity.

1. Everything that can live on our Earth lives upon it: for every organization carries in its essence a union of various powers, which limit each other, and thus limited are capable of attaining in themselves a maximum of durability. Could they not attain this, the powers would separate, and form unions of a different kind.

2. Among these organized bodies man arose, the crown of the terrestrial creation. Innumerable powers united in him, and attained a maximum, the understanding; as their material parts, the human body, did also, in the center of gravity, according to laws of the most beautiful symmetry and order. Thus in the character of man were given the basis of his duration and happiness, the stamp of his destination, and the whole course of his earthly fate.

3. This character of man is termed intelligence: for it understands the language of God in the creation, that is, it seeks the rule of order, according to which things are founded connectedly on their essences. Thus its intrinsic law is the perception of existence and truth; the connection of creatures according to their relations and qualities. It is an image of the deity: for it investigates the laws of nature, the ideas in conformity to which the Creator connected them, and which he

made essential to them. Reason, therefore, can no more act arbitrarily, than God himself has thought at random.

4. Man began to perceive and to examine the powers of nature from his immediate wants. His aim extended no farther than to his well being, that is, to the due employment of his own powers in exercise and rest. He became connected with other beings; and still his own state of existence was the measure of his connections. The rule of equity pressed itself upon him; for this is nothing more than practical reason, the measure of the actions and reactions of similar beings for the general security.

5. Human nature is constructed on this principle; so that no individual can suppose himself to exist for the sake of another, or of posterity. If the lowest in the rank of men follow the law of reason and justice, that is within him; he possesses consistency; that is, he enjoys durability and well being; he is rational, just, and happy. These he is not by the will of another creature, or of the creator, but by the laws of a general order of nature, founded on that order itself. If he deviate from the rule of equity, his avenging faults themselves must show him the disorder, and induce him to return to reason and justice, as the laws of his existence and his happiness.

6. As his nature is composed of very different elements, this he seldom does in the shortest way; he vibrates between two extremes, till he accommodates himself to his state of existence, and reaches the temperate mean in which he imagines his well being to consist. If he err in this, he must be secretly conscious of it, and suffer the consequences of his fault. These, however, he suffers but to a certain degree; for either fate corrects them by means of his own endeavors, or his being no longer finds an internal capacity of subsistence. Supreme wisdom could not impart more beneficial uses to physical pain and moral evil, for nothing superior can be conceived.

7. Had one single man alone trodden the Earth, the object of human existence would have been accomplished in him; as we must consider it to be accomplished, in so many individuals and nations, whom circumstances of time and place separated from the general chain of the species. But as everything that can live upon the Earth endures as long as it can remain in its state of permanency; so the human species, like every other kind of living beings, possesses such intrinsic transmissive powers, as could find, and have found, proportion and order suitable to the whole. Thus reason, the essence of man, and its organ, tradition, have been inherited through a series of successive generations. The Earth was gradually filled, and man became everything, that, in such a period and no other, he could become upon Earth.

8. Thus the propagation of families and traditions, connected human reason: not as if it were in each individual no more than a fragment of the whole, a whole existing nowhere in one subject, and therefore by no means the end of the Creator; but because the disposition and concatenation of the whole species led to this. As men are propagated, so are animals; yet no general animal reason arises from their generations: but as reason alone gives permanency to mankind, it must be propagated, as the characteristic of the species; for without it the species would cease to be.

9. In the species, as a whole, reason has experienced the same fate, as in its individual members; for of individual members the whole consists. It has often been disturbed by the wild passions of men, acting with still more violence from conjunction, turned out of its way for centuries, and lain as if dormant beneath its ashes. To all these disorders Providence has applied no other remedy, than what she administers to individuals; namely, that each fault should be followed by its correspondent evil, and every act of indolence, folly, malice, rashness, and injustice, be its own punishment. But as the species appears in collective bodies in such circumstances, children must suffer for the faults of their parents, the people for the folly of their rulers, and posterity for the indolence of their ancestors; and if they will not, or cannot, correct the evil, they may suffer under it for ages.

10. Thus the weal of the whole is the greatest good of each individual: for it is the inherent right and duty of every one, who suffers under its evils, to ward off these evils from himself, and diminish them for his fellows. Nature has not calculated for sovereigns and states, but for the welfare of men. The former suffer not so speedily for their vices and follies as individuals, because they always reckon only with the whole, in which the miseries of the poor are long suppressed; but the state ultimately suffers, and with so much more violent a concussion. In all these things the laws of retaliation display themselves, as do the laws of motion on the shock of the slightest physical substance; and the greatest sovereign of Europe is not less subject to the natural laws of the human species, than the least of his people. This condition merely binds him, to be an economist of these natural laws; and, by that power, which he enjoys only through the means of other men, to be for other men a wise and good terrestrial divinity.

11. In general history, too, as in the lives of careless individuals, all the follies and vices of mankind are exhausted; till at length they are compelled by necessity, to learn reason and justice. Whatever can happen, happens; and produces, what from its nature it can produce. This law of nature hinders not even the most eccentric power in its operation; but it confines all by the rule, that one opposing effect destroys another, and what is useful alone ultimately remains. The evil, that destroys another, must submit to order, or destroy itself. The rational and virtuous are uniformly happy in the kingdom of God; for virtue requires external reward, no more than reason covets it. If their works are not accompanied by external success, not to them, but to their age will be the loss: yet neither the discord nor folly of man can for ever counteract them; they will succeed, when their time arrives.

12. Still human Reason pursues her course in the species in general: she invents, before she can apply; she discovers, though evil hands may long abuse her discoveries. Abuse will correct itself; and, through the unwearied zeal of ever-growing Reason, disorder will in time become order. By contending against passions, she strengthens and enlightens herself: from being oppressed in this place, she will fly to that, and extend the sphere of her sway over the Earth. There is nothing enthusiastical in the hope, that, wherever men dwell, at some future period will dwell men rational, just, and happy: happy, not through the means of their own reason alone, but of the common reason of their whole fraternal race.

I bend before this lofty sketch of the general wisdom of Nature with regard to the whole of my fellow creatures the more willingly, as I perceive that it is Nature's universal plan. The law that sustained the mundane system, and formed each crystal, each worm, each flake of snow, formed and sustained also the human species: it made its own nature the basis of its continuance, and progressive action, as long as men shall exist. All the works of God have their stability in themselves, and in their beautiful consistency: for they all repose, within their determinate limits, on the equilibrium of contending powers, by their intrinsic energy, which reduces these to order. Guided by this clew, I wander through the labyrinth of history, and every where perceive divine harmonious order: for what can any where occur, does occur; what can operate, operates. But reason and justice alone endure: madness and folly destroy the Earth and themselves.

Thus when I hear a Brutus at Philippi, with the dagger in his hand, looking up to the starry sky, say, according to the fabled story. "O Virtue, I believed thee something; but now I perceive that thou art a dream!" I cannot discover the calm philosopher in the latter part of the complaint. Had he possessed true virtue, this, as well as his reason, would ever have found its own reward, and must have rewarded him even at that moment. But if his virtue were mere Roman patriotism, is it to be wondered, that the weaker yielded to the more strong, that the indolent sunk before the more alert? Thus the victory of Antony, with all its consequences, belonged to the order of things, and to the natural fate of Rome.

In like manner when among us the virtuous man so often complains, that his labors miscarry; that brutal force and oppression prevail upon Earth; and that mankind seem to be given merely as a prey to the passions, and to folly: let the genius of his understanding appear to him, and interrogate him friendly, whether his virtue be of the right kind, and connected with that intelligence, that activity, which alone deserve the name of virtue. Every labor, it must be confessed, does not succeed on all occasions; but do thy best, that it may succeed, and promote its time, its place, and that internal stability, in which real good alone subsists. Rude powers can be regulated only by reason: but they require an actual counterpoise that is prudence, zeal, and the whole force of goodness, to reduce them to order, and maintain them in it with salutary control.

It is a beautiful dream of future life, that we shall there enjoy friendly intercourse with all the wise and good, who have ever acted for the benefit of mankind, and gone to the regions above with the sweet reward of accomplished labors: but history in a certain degree unlocks to us this arbor of pleasing conversation and intimacy with the intelligent and just of all ages. Here Plato stands before me: there I listen to the friendly interrogations of Socrates, and participate in his last fate. When Marcus Antonius confers in secret with his own heart, he confers also with mine; and the poor Epictetus issues commands more powerful than those of a king. The afflicted Tully, the unfortunate Boethius, confidentially disclose to me the circumstances of their lives, their sorrows, and their consolations. How ample, yet how narrow, is the human heart! How individual, yet how recurrent, are all its passions and desires, its faults and foibles, its hope and its enjoyment! The

problem of humanity has been solved a thousand ways around me, yet every where the result of man's endeavors is the same: "the essence, the object, and the fate of our species, rest on understanding and justice." There is no nobler use of history than this: it unfolds to us as it were the counsels of Fate, and teaches us, insignificant as we are, to act according to God's eternal laws. By teaching us the faults and consequences of every species of irrationality, it assigns us our short and tranquil scene on that great theatre, where Reason and Goodness, contending indeed with wild powers, still, from their nature, create order, and hold on in the path of victory.

Hitherto we have been wandering through the obscure field of ancient nations: we now joyfully advance to approaching day, and view the harvest, that the seed of antiquity has produced for succeeding ages. Rome destroyed the balance of nations; and under her a World bled to death: what new state will arise from this balance destroyed? what new creature will spring from the ashes of so many nations?

Source of English translation: Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind.* Abridged and with an Introduction by Frank E. Manuel. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1968, pp. 79-118.

Source of original German text: Johann Gottfried Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* [*Writings on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*]. Darmstadt: Joseph Melzer Verlag, 1966, pp. 395-420.