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ON THE HISTORIAN'S TASK*

WILHELM VON HUMBOLDT

The historian's task is to present what actually happened. The more purely and completely he achieves this, the more perfectly has he solved his problem. A simple presentation is at the same time the primary, indispensable condition of his work and the highest achievement he will be able to attain. Regarded in this way, he seems to be merely receptive and reproductive, not himself active and creative.

An event, however, is only partially visible in the world of the senses; the rest has to be added by intuition, inference, and guesswork. The manifestations of an event are scattered, disjointed, isolated; what it is that gives

*Editor's Note. In 1821, a year before Hegel delivered his first lectures on the philosophy of history, Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), statesman, scholar, and founder of Berlin University, read to the Prussian Academy the paper here translated for the first time. Über die Aufgabe des Geschichtschreiters has seldom been noted by English-speaking historians of the philosophy of history; but Croce has credited the essay with containing the seminal ideas of what was to become historicism, and German scholarship has identified its importance to the development of idealist philosophy of history, to the reconciliation of idea and experience, art and nature, law-likeness and individuality, science and history.

Humboldt's essay attempts to hold in balance a number of ideas, incompatible on one level, compatible on another. Rejecting early in the essay the "philosophy of history" as the search for final causes, he yet returns to this notion himself at the end. Laying down at the beginning the proposition that historiography is the narration of what has happened, he goes on to claim for the historian a faculty of intuition into ideas of which the turns and changes of events are merely phenomenal appearances. Claiming that there are hidden forces and laws of historical development, he yet acclaims the creative energy of free individual action. Nevertheless, it is such contrasts as these which, less clearly exposed, were to become the problems of succeeding attempts to reconcile scientific and philosophical history.

The text from which the present translation is made is that of the Abhandlungen der Historisch-Philosophischen Klasse der Königlichen Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften aus den Jahren 1820-21 (Berlin, 1822); it appears also in Wilhelm von Humboldts Gesammelte Schriften (Berlin: Königlich Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1903), IV, 35-56. A short bibliography of works dealing with Humboldt's essay and general historical views is in Fritz Wagner, Geschichtswissenschaft (Freiburg i. B., 1951), 431. Other CLASSICS IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY published by this journal are: James Fitzjames Stephen, "The Study of History [1861]," History and Theory, I, 2 (1961), 186-202; Jean Gaulmier, "Volney et ses Leçons d'Histoire [1795]," ibid., II, 1 (1962), 52-65; Craig's Rules of Historical Evidence [1699], ibid., III (1964), Belheft 4; Giovanni Gentile, "Eighteenth-Century Historical Methodology: De Soria's Institutiones [1741]," ibid., IV (1965), 315-327.
unity to this patchwork, puts the isolated fragment into its proper perspective, and gives shape to the whole, remains removed from direct observation. For observation can perceive circumstances which either accompany or follow one another, but not their inner causal nexus, on which, after all, their inner truth is solely dependent. If one is trying to talk about the most significant fact, but at the same time attempting strictly to tell only what actually happened, one soon notices how, unless the greatest care is employed in the choice and evaluation of expressions, minute determinants will creep in beyond the actual happening, and will give rise to falsehood and uncertainty. Language itself contributes to this state of affairs since—growing out of the fullness of the soul as it does—it frequently lacks expressions which are free from all connotations. Nothing is rarer, therefore, than a narrative which is literally true; nothing is better proof of a sound, well-ordered, and critical intelligence and of a free, objective attitude. Thus historical truth is, as it were, rather like the clouds which take shape for the eye only at a distance. For this reason, the facts of history are in their several connecting circumstances little more than the results of tradition and scholarship which one has agreed to accept as true, because they—being most highly probable in themselves—also fit best into the context of the whole.

One has, however, scarcely arrived at the skeleton of an event by a crude sorting out of what actually happened. What is so achieved is the necessary basis of history, its raw material, but not history itself. To stop here would be to sacrifice the actual inner truth, well-founded within the causal nexus, for an outward, literal, and seeming truth; it would mean choosing actual error in order to escape the potential danger of error. The truth of any event is predicated on the addition—mentioned above—of that invisible part of every fact, and it is this part, therefore, which the historian has to add. Regarded in this way, he does become active, even creative—not by bringing forth what does not have existence, but in giving shape by his own powers to that which by mere intuition he could not have perceived as it really was. Differently from the poet, but in a way similar to him, he must work the collected fragments into a whole.

It may seem questionable to have the field of the historian touch that of the poet at even one point. However, their activities are undeniably related. For if the historian, as has been said, can only reveal the truth of an event by presentation, by filling in and connecting the disjointed fragments of direct observation, he can do so, like the poet, only through his imagination. The crucial difference, which removes all potential dangers, lies in the fact that the historian subordinates his imagination to experience and the investigation of reality. In this subordination, the imagination does not act as pure fantasy and is, therefore, more properly called the intuitive faculty or con-
nective ability. But this by itself would still assign too low a place to history. The striving for the truth of events seems obvious enough. It is, however, the most difficult attainment conceivable. For if truth were ever conquered completely, all that which determines the reality of things, like a chain of necessity, would lie uncovered. The historian must therefore seek the necessity of events; he must not, like the poet, merely impose on his material the appearance of necessity; rather, he must keep constantly in mind the ideas which are the laws of necessity, because only by being steeped in them can he find evidence of them in any pure inquiry into the real in its reality.

The historian has all the strands of temporal activity and all the expressions of eternal ideas as his province. The whole of existence is, more or less directly, the object of his endeavors, and thus he must pursue all the manifestations of the mind. Speculation, experience, and fiction are, therefore, merely different manifestations of the mind, not distinct activities of it, opposed to and limiting one another.

Thus two methods have to be followed simultaneously in the approach to historical truth; the first is the exact, impartial, critical investigation of events; the second is the connecting of the events explored and the intuitive understanding of them which could not be reached by the first means. To follow only the first path is to miss the essence of truth itself; to neglect this path, however, by overemphasizing the second one is to risk falsification of truth in its details. Even a simple depiction of nature cannot be merely an enumeration and depiction of parts or the measuring of sides and angles; there is also the breath of life in the whole and an inner character which speaks through it which can be neither measured nor merely described. Description of nature, too, will be subjected to the second method, which for such description is the representation of the form of both the universal and the individual existence of natural objects. In history there is likewise no intention of finding something isolated by means of that second method, and even less are there to be any imaginative additions to the material. The historian's mind is merely supposed to understand better the genuinely intelligible material by making its own the structure of all occurrences; thus it must learn to perceive more in that material than could be achieved by the mere operation of the intellect. Everything depends on this fusion of the inquiring intellect and the object of the inquiry. The more profoundly the historian understands mankind and its actions through intuition and study, the more humane his disposition is by nature and circumstances, and the more freely he gives rein to his humanity, the more completely will he solve the problems of his profession. The chronicles prove this point. No one can deny that the better ones among them are based on the most genuine historical truth despite the fact that they contain many factual misrepresentations and many an obvious fairy tale. They are closely related to the older type of
so-called memoirs, although in these the close attention paid to the individual already jeopardizes that more general concern with humanity which history requires even when it is dealing with an isolated phenomenon.

Like all other scholarly work history serves many ancillary purposes; but in itself history is no less an art, free and self-contained, than are philosophy and literature. The vast, serried turmoil of the affairs of this world, in part arising out of the nature of the soil, human nature, and the character of nations and individuals, in part springing up out of nowhere as if planted by a miracle, dependent on powers dimly perceived and visibly activated by eternal ideas rooted deeply in the soul of man — all this composes an infinitude which the mind can never press into one single form, but which incites the historian to try just that again and again and gives him the strength to achieve it in part. Just as philosophy seeks the ultimate reason of things, and art the ideal of beauty, so history strives to attain the vision of man's fate in its complete truth, its living abundance and pure clarity — a vision conceived by a soul so fixed upon its object that merely personal opinions, feelings, and standards lose themselves in it and dissolve. To achieve this state of mind and to nourish it is the historian's ultimate goal, but he can reach it only if he has faithfully pursued, as his immediate goal, the simple narration of events.

It is the historian who is supposed to awaken and to stimulate a sensibility for reality, and his activity is defined subjectively by the elaboration of that concept as it is defined objectively by the historical narrative. Every intellectual activity which affects man as a whole possesses something which might be called its essential element, its activating power, the secret of its influence on the mind; and it is so different from the objects affected by it that they often serve merely to bring it to the attention of the mind in new and different ways. In mathematics this essential element consists in isolating number and line; in metaphysics it consists in abstracting from all experience; and in art it is the wonderful manipulation of nature, so that everything in the created work appears to be taken from nature although nothing exactly like it actually exists. The element in which history operates is the sense of reality, and it contains the awareness of the transience of existence in time, and of dependence upon past and present causes; at the same time, there is the consciousness of spiritual freedom and the recognition of reason, so that reality, despite its seeming contingency, is nevertheless bound by an inner necessity. If the mind surveys only one single human life, it will be struck by the different ways in which history stimulates and captivates. Hence the historian, in order to perform the task of his profession, has to compose the narrative of events in such a way that the reader's emotions will be stirred by it as if by reality itself.

It is in this way that history is related to active life. History does not
primarily serve us by showing us through specific examples, often misleading and rarely enlightening, what to do and what to avoid. History's true and immeasurable usefulness lies rather in its power to enliven and refine our sense of acting on reality, and this occurs more through the form attached to events than through the events themselves. It prevents the sense of reality from slipping into the realm of pure ideas, and yet subjects it to ideas. And on this narrow middle path it constantly keeps alive in the mind the notion that there is no successful intervention in the flow of events except by clearly recognizing the truth of the predominating trend of ideas at a given time and by adhering to this truth with determination. It is this inner effect that history must always produce, irrespective of the subject matter, whether it be the narration of a continuous pattern of events or of a single event. The historian worthy of his title must show every event as part of a whole, or, what amounts to the same thing, must reveal the form of history per se in every event described.

This brings us to a more precise discussion of the concept of presentation required of the historian. The fabric of events is spread out before him in seeming confusion, merely divided up chronologically and geographically. He must separate the necessary from the accidental, uncover its inner structure, and make visible the truly activating forces in order to give his presentation the form on which depends, not some imaginary or dispensable philosophical value or some poetical charm, but its truth and accuracy, its first and most essential requisite. For events are only half understood or are distorted, if one stops with their superficial appearance; moreover, the common observer constantly imbues this appearance with errors and half-truths. These are dispelled only by the true form of events which reveals itself solely to the historian whose eyesight is naturally keen and has been sharpened by study and practice. What must he do to be thus favored in this undertaking?

An historical presentation, like an artistic presentation, is an imitation of nature. The basis of both is the recognition of the true form, the discovery of the necessary, the elimination of the accidental. We must, therefore, not disdain to apply the more readily recognizable method of the artist to an understanding of the more dubious method employed by the historian.

The imitation of organic form can take place in two ways: either by direct representation of its external shape, as exact as eye and hand will permit, or, from within, based on antecedent study of the way in which the outward shape emerges from the idea and structure of the whole and by abstracting from the proportions of the outward shape. In this process of abstraction the form is first recognized in a way quite different from its perception by the non-artistic eye, and is then reborn through the imagination in such a way that, apart from its literal coincidence with nature, it contains yet another higher truth within itself. For it is the greatest virtue of a work of art to reveal the inner truth of forms which is hidden in their actual appearance. Both of the ways of imita-
tion just mentioned are, for all times and all genres, the criteria of false or true art. There are two peoples, the Egyptians and the Mexicans, far removed from each other in time and place, both of which, nevertheless, represent startings-points of civilization for us, where this difference between false and true art is clearly visible. Several similarities have been shown, and I think correctly, to exist between these two peoples. Both had to overcome that terrible obstacle to all art, the use of pictures as letters; and there is not one single example of the correct perspective of the human figure to be found in the paintings or drawings of the Mexicans, whereas there is style in even the most insignificant hieroglyph of the Egyptians. This is quite natural. There is hardly any evidence of the dim perception of inner form in the Mexican drawings, nor is there any knowledge of organic structure; everything, therefore, tends to become imitative of outward appearance. Inferior art must, however, fail completely in its attempt to trace the outer contours and must consequently lead to distortions; whereas the search for proportion and symmetry shines through even the inadequacies of hand and instruments.

If you want to understand the contour of form from within, you must go back to form per se and to the essence of the organism, i.e. to mathematics and natural science. The latter provides the definition, the former the idea of the form. To both must be added, as a third linking element, the expression of the soul, of spiritual life. Pure form, however, as seen in the symmetry of parts and the equilibrium of proportions, is the most essential thing, as it is the first thing accessible to the mind, which, when still fresh and youthful, is more attracted by pure scientific knowledge and can more easily penetrate it than the practical knowledge which requires all kinds of preparation. This becomes apparent in works of Egyptian and Greek visual art. From all of them there first emerges a purity and rigor of form which is not afraid of severity; there emerge the regularity of circles and semi-circles, the acuteness of angles, and definiteness of lines; it is on this sure ground that the remaining outer contour rests. All this is already lucidly in evidence even where an exact

1. My intention here was merely to support with an example the remarks about art; I am, therefore, far from making a definite pronouncement about the Mexicans. There are sculptures by them, like the head in the local Royal Museum [in Berlin — Ed.] that my brother [Alexander von Humboldt — Ed.] brought back with him, which allow a more favorable judgment about their ability to produce art. Considering that our knowledge of the Mexicans does not date back very far and that the pictures we know are comparatively recent, it would be very risky to judge their art by objects which may very well have originated during a period of extreme decadence. That monstrosities of art may exist side by side with its highest achievements was vividly brought home to me by the bronze figurines found in Sardinia, which obviously originated with the Greeks or Romans, although they yield nothing to Mexican art in their lack of proportion. There is a collection of such figurines at the Collegium Romanum in Rome. There are also other reasons to believe that the Mexicans had achieved a much higher cultural level at an earlier time and in another region; this is also indicated by the traces of their migrations, the evidence for which is carefully collected and compared in my brother's works.
knowledge of organic structure is still missing. And, when the artist had come to achieve mastery of structure and knew how to create gracefulness and to breathe divine expression into his work, he would never have dreamed of enchanting by appearances without having taken care for the underlying form. That which is essential remained for him at once of first and highest importance.

The complexity and beauty of life is, therefore, no help to the artist if it is not balanced in the solitude of his imagination by the inspiring love of pure form. One can thus understand how art would originate with a people whose life was hardly distinguished by flexibility and charm or beauty, but whose thought turned to mathematics and mechanics at an early time, a people who had a liking for gigantic buildings, very simple but sternly regular, and who also applied the architectonics of proportions to the imitation of the human figure, battling with a resistant medium for each inch of line they carved in it. The situation of the Greeks was different in every respect. They were surrounded by exciting beauty, life which was highly and at times extravagantly versatile, and a complex and rich mythology. Their tools easily fashioned every shape from the sculpted marble, as from wood in the earliest days. All the more admirable is the profundity and seriousness of their artistic sensibility which made them even elevate Egyptian austerity by a more thorough knowledge of organic structure, without succumbing to any of the enticements of superficial charm.

It may seem strange to base art not exclusively on the richness of life but also upon the dryness of mathematical abstractions. It remains true, nevertheless; and the artist would not need the inspiration of genius if it were not his task to transform the profound seriousness of strictly determining ideas into the appearance of free play. There is, moreover, a captivating spell in the pure apperception of mathematical truths, of the eternal relationships of time and space, whether manifested in sounds, numbers, or lines. Their contemplation also offers a continually renewed satisfaction in itself, by the discovery of always new relationships and of problems which can always be completely solved. It is only the premature and multifarious application of pure science that weakens in us the sensitivity to the beauty of its form. Artistic imitation, therefore, has its origin in ideas, and truth of form appears to the artist only through these ideas. The same process must occur in historical imitation, because in both cases it is nature that has to be imitated. There remains only the question whether there are ideas capable of guiding the historian and, if so, of what kind.

Here we have to proceed with great caution lest the mere mention of ideas already impair historical accuracy in its pure form. For although both artist and historian imitate and represent, their aims are quite different. The artist merely takes away from reality its ephemeral appearance, merely touches
reality in order to fly away from it; the historian is searching for reality alone and has to plunge deeply into it. It is precisely for this reason, and because the historian cannot be satisfied merely with the loose external relationships of the individual events, that he has to proceed to the center of things from which their true nexus can be understood. He has to seek the truth of an event in a way similar to the artist's seeking the truth of form. Events in history are even less obviously perceptible than appearances in the world of the senses and cannot be simply read off. An understanding of them is the combined product of their constitution and the sensibility supplied by the beholder. Here, as in art, not everything can be derived logically, one thing from another, by mere operation of the intellect, and dissected into concepts. One can only grasp that which is right, subtle, and hidden, because the mind is properly attuned to grasping it. The historian, like the draftsman, will produce only caricatures if he merely depicts the specific circumstances of an event by connecting them with each other as they seemingly present themselves. He must render strict account of their inner nexus, must establish for himself a picture of the active forces, must recognize their trends at a given moment, must inquire into the relationship of both forces and trends to the existing state of affairs and to the changes that have preceded it. To do this, however, the historian must be familiar in the first place with the conditions, the operation and interdependence of these forces, as a complete understanding of the specific always presupposes a knowledge of the general, under which it is comprehended. It is in this sense that the understanding of events must be guided by ideas. It is, of course, self-evident that these ideas emerge from the mass of events themselves, or, to be more precise, originate in the mind through contemplation of these events undertaken in a truly historical spirit: the ideas are not borrowed by history like an alien addition, a mistake so easily made by so-called philosophical history. Historical truth is, generally speaking, much more threatened by philosophical than by artistic handling, since the latter is at least accustomed to granting freedom to its subject matter. Philosophy dictates a goal to events. This search for final causes, even though it may be deduced from the essence of man and nature itself, distorts and falsifies every independent judgment of the characteristic working of forces. Teleological history, therefore, never attains the living truth of universal destiny because the individual always has to reach the pinnacle of his own development within the span of his fleeting existence; teleological history can, for that reason, never properly locate the ultimate goal of events in living things but has to seek it, as it were, in dead institutions and in the concept of an ideal totality — whether it be in the growing universality of the cultivation and population of the earth, the increasing civilization of the people and their increasing sociability, the eventual achievement of some state of perfection of human society, or some other idea of this kind. The activities and happiness of the individual may depend directly
on all this; yet, whatever any generation receives of these achievements of its predecessors is no proof of its vitality and not even always immediately material for the intellectual exercise of this vitality. For even those things which are the fruit of the mind and of temperament — scholarship, art, moral institutions — lose their spirituality and become materialistic unless the mind constantly revives them. All these things partake in the nature of thought, which can only be sustained by being thought. It is to the active and productive forces, therefore, that the historian must turn. Here he stays within his proper domain. What the historian can do in order to bring, engraved on his soul, that form to the observation of the labyrinthine events of world history through which alone true connections will emerge, is to abstract that form from the events themselves. The contradiction seemingly contained in this statement disappears on closer consideration. All understanding presupposes in the person who understands, as a condition of its possibility, an analogue of that which will actually be understood later: an original, antecedent congruity between subject and object. Understanding is not merely an extension of the subject, nor is it merely a borrowing from the object; it is, rather, both simultaneously. Understanding always is the application of a pre-existent general idea to something new and specific. When two beings are completely separated by a chasm, there is no bridge of communication between them; and in order to understand each other, they must, in some other sense, have already understood each other. In the case of history that antecedent of understanding is quite obvious, since everything which is active in world history is also moving within the human heart. The more deeply, therefore, the soul of a nation feels everything human, and the more tenderly, purely, and diversely it is moved by this, the greater will be its chances to produce historians in the true sense of the word. To this condition one must add the critical practice which tests and corrects preconceived ideas against the object until both clarity and certainty emerge through this repeated interaction.

In this way, through a study of the creative forces of world history, the historian conceives for himself a general picture of the form of the connection of all events, and it is within this realm that the ideas discussed above are contained. They are not being projected into history, but are the essence of history itself. For every force, living or dead, acts according to the laws of its nature, and all occurrences are inseparably linked in space and time.

Within this context history appears like a dead clockwork moved by mechanical forces and governed by inexorable laws, no matter how variedly and vitally it moves before our eyes. For one event causes another, the extent and character of every effect are determined by its causes, and even the will of man, seemingly free, is determined by circumstances which were inexorably established long before his birth or even before the growth of the nation to which he belongs. To chart the course of the past, or even the future, on the
basis of each single event seems impossible not in itself but rather because there is insufficient knowledge about a mass of connective links. Yet it has long been recognized that the exclusive pursuit of this method would lead directly away from an insight into the truly creative forces, that the central element in every activity containing something of life is precisely what defies calculation, and that seemingly mechanical determination is nevertheless fundamentally subject to free and active impulses.

In addition to the mechanical determination of one event by another, therefore, the distinctive nature of forces must receive more of our attention, and here the first level to be considered is that of physiological activity. All living forces, men as well as plants, nations as well as individuals, mankind as well as individual peoples, have in common certain qualities, kinds of development, and natural laws. This is even true for products of the mind, such as literature, art, morals, or the outward form of human society, insofar as they are based on continuous activity with a specific tradition. The same truth is evident in the step by step ascension to a peak and the gradual decline from it, or in the transition from a certain perfection to certain types of degeneracy, and so forth. There are undoubtably many historical insights contained in such studies, yet they do not make visible the creative principle itself, but merely recognize a form to which that principle must submit unless it finds in that form a vehicle for its own upward flight.

The psychological forces of multiple, intermeshing human abilities, emotions, inclinations, and passions are even harder to chart in their course. They are little subject to discernible laws and can be captured only by certain analogies. Above all other things, they concern the historian as the most direct mainsprings of action and the most immediate causes of the events resulting from action; and they are most frequently appealed to in the explanation of events. It is precisely this point of view, however, which requires the greatest care. It is farthest from having world-historic dimensions; it diminishes the tragedy of world history to a banal drama of mediocrity, tempts one all too easily to tear individual occurrences out of their total context, and puts petty commotions of personal motives in the place of universal destiny. This viewpoint — and the line of inquiry proceeding from it — locates everything in the individual, and yet fails to recognize the uniqueness and depth, the essential nature of the individual. For the individual cannot be thus split up, analyzed and judged according to experiences which, having been derived from the multitude, are supposed to be applicable to the multitude. The unique force of the individual runs the gamut of all human emotions and passions; it also imprints upon them its own stamp and character.

One could now attempt to classify historians according to the three views indicated above. None of them by itself, not even a combination of all of them
taken together, would exhaust the characterization of the truly original historian. These views do not, after all, exhaust the causes of the relationship of events, and the basic idea, which alone makes possible the understanding of all events in their complete truth, does not lie within their purview. They encompass only these intelligible phenomena of inorganic, organic, and spiritual nature which reproduce themselves in repetitive order, but not the free and independent impulse of an original force. Consequently, these occurrences bear witness only to regularly recurrent developments unfolding according to recognized laws and verifiable experience. That, however, which arises like a miracle and which may be accompanied by mechanical, physiological, and psychological explanations, though not deducible from any one of them, remains not only unexplained but unrecognized in this framework.

However one proceeds, the realm of appearances can only be understood from a point outside of it, and the circumspect stepping outside of it is as free from danger as error is certain, if one blindly locks oneself up in it. Universal history cannot be understood without world governance.

Adherence to this point of view brings with it the considerable advantage that we do not believe the understanding of events to be completely achieved by explanations taken from the realm of nature. This does little, incidentally, to make the final, most difficult, and most important part of the historian's work any easier. For he has no special faculty for inquiring directly into the plans of world governance, and every attempt to do so is only likely to lead him into errors like the search for final causes. The laws governing events, although situated outside of the process of nature, reveal themselves nevertheless in those events. They do so by means which are not themselves phenomenal objects but are attached to them and can be perceived in them, like non-corporeal beings which one never perceives unless one leaves the realm of phenomena and enters mentally into that realm where they originate. The ultimate condition for the solution of the historian's problem, then, is tied to the investigation of these laws which govern events.

The number of creative forces in history is not limited to those directly evident in events. Even after the historian has investigated them all, separately and in their inter-relationships — the nature and changes of the soil, the variations of climate, the intellectual capacity and character of nations, the even more particular characters of individuals, the influences of the arts and sciences, and the profoundly incisive and widespread influences of social institutions — there still remains an even more powerfully active principle which, though not directly visible, imparts to these forces themselves their impetus and direction: that is, ideas which by their very nature lie outside the compass of the finite, and yet pervade and dominate every part of world history.

It is beyond doubt that such ideas reveal themselves, and that certain
phenomena, which cannot be explained merely as operating according to the laws of nature, owe their existence exclusively to the power of these ideas. It is equally beyond doubt that there is a point at which the historian is directed to a realm beyond the world of events in order to perceive their true configuration.

Such an idea manifests itself in two ways: on the one hand as a trend which affects many particulars, in different places and under different circumstances, and which is initially barely perceptible, but gradually becomes visible and finally irresistible; on the other hand as a creation of energies which cannot be deduced in all their scope and majesty from their attendant circumstances.

One can find examples of the former without difficulty; there has hardly been a time when they have not been recognized. It is, however, highly probable that a number of events, which at the moment are still being explained in more material and mechanical terms, will have to be viewed in this way.

Examples of the creation of energies, of phenomena for the explanation of which attendant circumstances are insufficient, are the eruption of art in its pure form in Egypt, as mentioned above, and, perhaps even more so, the sudden development of a free and yet mutually limiting individualism in Greece, in conjunction with which language, literature, and the arts suddenly confront us in a perfection the gradual growth of which we seek in vain. It has always seemed to me the most admirable aspect of Greek culture, and also the key to understanding it, that the Greeks remained free from the tyranny of castes, although everything important which they used had come to them from nations divided into caste systems. They always retained something analogous to castes, but transformed the harsh concept of caste into the milder ones of education and free associations; they brought the differences of individuality to active co-operation through a division, more complex than that experienced by any other nation, of the original national spirit, descending into tribes, nations, and separate cities and ascending again to reunification. In this way Greece established an idea of national individuality which existed neither before it nor since; and as the secret of all existence lies in individuality, so all world-historic progress of mankind is based on the degree of freedom and on the nature of its reciprocal effects.

It is true that an idea can only appear in conjunction with nature, and thus, even in such cases, we can show a whole series of favorable causes and a transition from a lesser to a higher state of perfection; all this can justifiably be assumed despite the vast lacunae of our knowledge. But that does not lessen the miraculous element in the taking of the first step, the first flashing of the spark. Without this, favorable circumstances could not become operative, and no amount of practice or of gradual improvement, even for centuries, would lead to any fulfillment. The idea can entrust itself only to an
individual spiritual force, but the fact that the seed which the idea implants in the force develops in its own way, that this way remains the same whatever other individual it is transferred to, and that the plant issuing forth from it reaches its bloom and fruition of itself and then withers and disappears no matter how the circumstances and individuals involved may develop: all this shows that it is the independent nature of the idea which completes its course in the realm of phenomena. Forms achieve actuality in this way in all the different types of existence and of mental creativity, in which some aspect of eternity is reflected and whose incursion into life brings forth new appearances. In the physical world — and it is always a safeguarding device to trace the analogies in the physical world when investigating that of the spiritual — we must not expect the creation of such important new forms. The differences of organization have already assumed their permanent shapes, and although these differences never exhaust their organic individuality within such forms, their finer nuances are not perceptible directly and are hardly visible at all in their effects on the realm of ideas. The creation of the physical world takes place in one moment in space, that of the world of ideas gradually in time, or at least the former finds its point of rest at an earlier moment where creation is superseded by uniform reproduction. Organic life is much closer to the life of the mind than is physical form or structure, and the laws governing both are more readily and mutually applicable. This is not so obvious in a state of vigorous health, although quite probably even in this state there are changes of circumstance and direction taking place which follow hidden causes and determine and re-determine, epoch by epoch, organic life. But in the abnormal states of life, as in types of disease, there is doubtless an analogy to trends, which arise suddenly or gradually without explicable causes, seem to follow their own laws, and refer to a hidden connection of all things. All of this is substantiated by many observations, but it may take a very long time before they can be made useful for history.

Every human individuality is an idea rooted in actuality, and this idea shines forth so brilliantly from some individuals that it seems to have assumed the form of an individual merely to use it as a vehicle for expressing itself. When one traces human activity, after all its determining causes have been subtracted there remains something original which transforms these influences instead of being suffocated by them; in this very element there is an incessantly active drive to give outward shape to its inner, unique nature. It is the same with the individuality of nations, and in many areas of history the inner drive is more easily recognizable in them than in individuals, since man in certain periods and under certain circumstances develops, as it were, in groups. The spiritual principle of individuality therefore remains active in the midst of the history of nations guided by needs, passions, and apparent accidents, and it is more powerful than those elements. This principle seeks
to express its innate idea, and it succeeds as the most fragile plant, by the
organic expansion of its cells, will succeed in splitting walls which had other-
wise withstood the wear of centuries. In addition to the directions which
nations and individuals impart to mankind by their actions, they leave behind
them forms of spiritual individuality which are more enduring and effective
than deeds or events.

There are, however, also ideal forms which, although they do not constitute
human individuality, are related to it, if only indirectly. Language is one of
them. For although every language reflects the spirit of its people, it also
has an earlier, more independent base, and its uniqueness and internal cohe-
sion are so powerful and determining that its independence is more influential
than influenced, so that every important language appears as a unique vehicle
for the creation and communication of ideas.

The original and eternal ideas of everything that can be thought achieve
existence and power in a manner even more pure and complete: they achieve
beauty in all spiritual and corporeal shapes, truth in the ineluctable working
of every force according to its innate law, and justice in the inexorable process
of events which eternally judge and punish themselves.

Human judgment cannot perceive the plans of the governance of the world
directly but can only divine them in the ideas through which they manifest
themselves, and therefore all history is the realization of an idea. In the idea
resides both its motivating force and its goal. And thus, merely by steeping
oneself in the contemplation of the creative forces one travels along a more
correct route to those final causes to which the intellect naturally aspires. The
goal of history can only be the actualization of the idea which is to be realized
by mankind in every way and in all shapes in which the finite form may enter
into a union with the idea. The course of events can end only at the point
where both are no longer capable of further mutual integration.

Thus we have arrived at the ideas which must guide the historian, and we
can now return to the comparison undertaken above between the historian
and the artist. What knowledge of nature and the study of organic structures
are to the latter, research into the forces appearing in life as active and guid-
ing is to the former; what to the latter are proportion, symmetry, and the
concept of pure form, to the former are the ideas which unfold themselves
serenely and majestically in the nexus of world events without, however, being
part of them. In its final, yet simplest solution the historian's task is the
presentation of the struggle of an idea to realize itself in actuality. For the
idea will not always be successful in its first attempt; not infrequently will
it become perverted because it is unable to master completely the actively
resisting matter.

There are two things which the course of this inquiry has attempted to
keep firmly in mind: that there is an idea, not itself directly perceptible, in
everything that happens, but that this idea can be recognized only in the events themselves. The historian must, therefore, not exclude the power of the idea from his presentation by seeking everything exclusively in his material sources; he must at least leave room for the activity of the idea. Going beyond that, moreover, he must be spiritually receptive to the idea and actively open to perceiving and appropriating it. Above all, he must take great care not to attribute to reality arbitrarily created ideas of his own, and not to sacrifice any of the living richness of the parts in his search for the coherent pattern of the whole. This freedom and subtlety of approach must become so much a part of his nature that he will bring them to bear on the investigation of every event. For no event is separated completely from the general nexus of things, and part of every occurrence lies beyond the pale of direct perception, as we have shown above. If the historian lacks this freedom of approach, he cannot perceive events in their scope and depth; if he lacks subtlety and tact, he will destroy their simple and living truth.