

# THE PROBLEM OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

## THE THEORY OF CIVILIZATION

### THE METHODS OF EXTENDING CIVILI- ZATION AMONG THE NATIONS<sup>1</sup>

---

#### I

#### THE PROBLEM OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

**I**N all the dominions of science, and especially in those relating to the human subject and dealing with first principles, there are questions—I will not say of eternal standing and controversy (because to say “eternal” is to anticipate an issue of which, in view of the future’s uncertainty, we are not authorized to speak), but indeterminate questions which from the beginning of the known history of scientific thought down to the present have been treated by the different schools of thinkers very differently. Seen thus through the medley of systems and opinions, these questions give the impression of something which is insoluble and by all our processes of knowledge unattainable, something in regard to which it is useless to devote time and energy, since the solution arrived at will not give universal satisfaction, a sign that it is not truly scientific,—and in this, indeed, is explained the position of those individuals (by no means few in number) who, intent on the scientific requirements of precision

<sup>1</sup> Three lectures presented at the inauguration of the Rice Institute, by Professor Rafael Altamira, late Professor of the History of Spanish Law in the University of Oviedo, Director of Elementary Education in the Spanish Ministry of Public Instruction.

and exactitude, exclude such problems from the sphere of science and disdain and abandon their investigation.

In spite of such exclusion, the thinking classes of humanity (which are not limited to the professional scientists) persist in stating these problems and in asking questions relating to them or derived from them. These inquiries demonstrate that the problems themselves are a part of an inherent and natural curiosity within us, and are a necessity inseparable from the human spirit—at least as it has been constituted up to the present. We can say no more than this, for it should not be forgotten that all our observations regarding our own nature are based on what has emanated from a period of human life which may seem long, but which is short when considered in comparison with what that life may be prolonged to in the future. Our hypothesis, given the present nature of our intelligence, can never, however fecund the imagination, exceed the finite number of occurrences which embraces the known reality. As this limitation to actual experience is common to all the orders of our reason, it is clear that we are obliged always to work upon the basis of our mind as it now is and has for some time presumably to continue.

The curiosity which belongs to our minds as to-day constituted, then, inevitably causes at one time or another the same questions to be raised, and impels even the professional scientists to formulate them, notwithstanding the futility of previous efforts. But if all this is certain, it is not less so that some of them, although lacking solutions unanimously accepted, begin to show, amid the medley of opinions in regard to them, a certain general orientation or certain points of common acquiescence which signify their advance toward a more scientific basis, a surer and more satisfactory ground than that hitherto occupied. It is this which is occur-

## 258      Problem of Philosophy of History

ring with the question of the Philosophy of History, and to signalize and determine in regard to this question that general orientation and those points of acquiescence seems to me a service that would be of indisputable utility.

It will be useful, in the first place, as a basis of future investigation, as a basis of real progress on the road to a solution,—on a road which is, properly speaking, scientific,—since progress in the knowledge of things depends on the clarity and security of what has already been established. But it will also be useful for another reason, a consideration of a social character which professionals are in the habit of overlooking. I refer to the influence exerted by their doctrines on the masses among whom these doctrines become translated into lines of opinion and of conduct. For a *scientist* that which alone is of importance and alone is worthy of attention is the truth or the error of a theory, and from this standpoint he may, and does, neglect all theories which appear to him untrue, discarding them from that which merits his attention. Thus, in the Philosophy of History a *providentialist* will reject and disqualify the doctrines of a *rationalist* or those of a *positivist*, and *vice versa*, but neither one nor the other will be able to prevent these conflicting doctrines from influencing large numbers of people and guiding them in not a few questions of their lives. With equal reason the contrary positions of those who admit a Philosophy of History and those who deny such a thing collide with and annul one another, but both are powerless before the fact that many people will accept one position or the other; and as, in the long run, that which matters is that which influences the masses, the conflicting theories which claim the solution of these indecisive questions come to possess for the sociologist, for the practical man, and for the historian himself a value which is at best only equally pro-

portioned to the scope of their diffusion and to the force of the conviction they produce. All, then, which may tend to eliminate divergences, discover points of contact, or, better expressing it, to intensify in the public mind the consciousness of common affirmations in what has arisen from distinct starting-points and systems,—affirmations which have not, perhaps, been realized by the majority,—is preparing the way for an ever greater homogeneity in thought and action.

Now, of late years, in the sphere of the Philosophy of History, owing to the discussions which the actual statement and formulation of the question has produced, there has been a fairly concrete determination of factors and a clarification of ideas relating to the subject. Neither movement has descended to the great sphere of those who are non-specialist but cultured sufficiently to produce in it a favorable change of the same character; but this same lack of correspondence between the scientific position up to date and the sediment of antiquated and already scientifically rectified ideas which have passed down into the masses as accepted knowledge renders all the more necessary that labor of diffusion whose first effect has to be the clear determining and sizing up of fundamental opinions and authorities. The necessity is all the greater in so far as one may consider included in the masses the large number of persons whom, at first sight, we should qualify as cultured, persons who have obtained university degrees and who undoubtedly possess wide information and clear intelligence. Thus, I have heard my book "The History of Spain and the Spanish Civilization" described as a work of historical philosophy, although it is simple and unmistakable narrative, simply because it contains, with the usual chapters on political history, others on what has been called *Kulturgeschichte*, or internal history.

## 260      Problem of Philosophy of History

This very common error signifies not just a vagueness in the conception of the Philosophy of History (vagueness there is as well, and in due course we shall examine it), but an absolute disorientation in which it is impossible to form any argument whatever or even make one's self intelligible to those laboring in the fallacy, for the simple reason that while employing the same name, they imply something wholly different. Let us begin, then, by rectifying this error, that it may once and for all be deleted from the public mind. Every history-book is pure narrative if it limits itself to relating facts. Although it may embrace in entirety every sphere in the whole life of a state, including the history of its thought in the various orders of the sciences and in those treating of human questions, it is not a book of Philosophy of History. It may be the work of an historian who does not believe that science possible or regards it as dissevered from his professional mission: his ideas in this respect will not in the least have been invalidated.

Equally common with this error, and perhaps more so, there is another one more difficult of eradication and of graver consequences for the reason that it comes near, apparently, to the actual field of philosophy itself instead of being plainly and at a glance outside of it. This is the error in which, in the name of philosophy, is inferred every generalization regarding historical facts. To those laboring in this error everything of a general character that may be gleaned from an individual history of concrete facts—the character of an institution in a given epoch, the dominant and central current in a series of events, the distinctive feature of the history of a state, the trajectory and orientation of an order of ideas—is Philosophy of History. But as, apart from such works of erudition as are purely concrete and monographic, every historian must generalize without de-

parting from his own material of facts, it may be deduced, according to this criterion, that there will scarcely be a history-book which is not philosophical. A book which summarizes in a great compendium, a great "synthesis," as it is commonly but erroneously expressed, the facts of a period, of an age, or of a state, and popular lectures which epitomize the great results of detailed investigation, would be Philosophy of History when, in general, they are rigorously limited to the field of what is narrative—that is to say, purely historical. The celebrated lectures, for example, on the "History of Civilization in Europe," by Guizot, do not in any way possess the philosophical character, although their eloquent expression and the reflections and opinions often to be found in them which do not cover a ground that is, properly speaking, historical, added, moreover, to the lax and careless criticism of contemporaries to whom all this justly came as something new, led to the lectures being designated by many as philosophical. Generally speaking, one may affirm, on the contrary, that every generalization about facts, while it remains a generalization, and however abstract be its character, is not philosophical. What always result from it are facts, very general, very comprehensive, but, in the end and in the long run, facts. Laws themselves, or the course they follow in a more or less extended period, are likewise facts, although of an abstract character. They express what is the line and orientation of individual happenings; they do not explain them *philosophically* or, to be more precise, *metaphysically*.

I have now just enunciated what, in my opinion, is a basal quality in the Philosophy of History; but, to avoid confusion, it will be necessary to define it. Every *explanation* of facts is not a philosophic explanation. Naturally it is not so when it treats of causes which are directly or indirectly his-

## 262      Problem of Philosophy of History

torical—that is to say, determines temporal origins and precedents, the factors behind an appearance and effect, the necessity of a phenomenon in a given moment. No one will describe as philosophical the explanation of the collapse of the Invincible Armada, an explanation which is entirely confined to the most concrete facts and as historical as any in the world; nevertheless many other analogous explanations of greater or less significance than the above are still described with manifest equivocation as philosophical. The explanation of the Hellenic genius and culture as a consequence of oriental origins, of such and such influences derived from the geographical situation of that people, is equally not of a philosophic character. All such explanation moves entirely amid temporal causes and on a ground which is purely historical, however vast and general its embrace of the concrete facts and data. For the explanation to assume a philosophic character it must treat not of temporal but of permanent causes and must inclose facts in a metaphysical impulsion and causality outside of the field of history. It is not without purpose that the science under consideration is called Philosophy of History (of human history, it is clear), which means that it is a philosophic science and ought to be treated according to its nature and not on historical lines. The antagonism between the Philosophy of History and the History of Philosophy, which has been shown and explained by certain schools of thinkers, defines thoroughly the distinctive character of each of these sciences, notwithstanding that the terms employed in them are identical: the different relative position of both terms in each of the two cases signalizes plainly the opposition in question.

It is necessary, then, to abandon all false conceptions of the science concerned with these reflections in order to place ourselves in the actual field with which it corresponds. Once

settled there, the discussion of the problems belonging to this science becomes disentangled because we know now the value of the words employed and are no longer in the plight of discussing indefinitely and without understanding one another two things which have nothing else in common but the name we give them, a name which is applicable only to one.

With this point settled, it is now possible to propound the first question of the Philosophy of History, which is precisely that now most under discussion in our times—to wit, the possibility of the science in question. In any case this would have to be the first question to be discussed and to be solved; for, what would be the use of fantastically pursuing the principles of a science devoid of all reality—that is to say, impossible? We should be involved in a labor that is not only useless but pernicious, through the false ideas that would be disseminated.

Before examining this question and expressing in regard to it, if necessary, a personal opinion, it is important to separate it from another which is often confounded with it, the one prejudging the other with its own solution. It is one thing to question the possibility of a Philosophy of History, be what it may the field of science in which it is established, and it is another thing to inquire if historians as such are capable of creating it, or even merely if its existence concerns or ought to concern them. The distinction between these two questions is all the more necessary in so far as many treatises have dealt only with the second of the two, and presumed, in the solution of it, to have solved the first and fundamental question. In reality, the second question, as it is commonly propounded, is beside the point. If the Philosophy of History, given that it is possible, is a philosophic and not an historical science, it clearly follows that it devolves not on the historian but on the philosopher to for-

## 264 Problem of Philosophy of History

multate and clarify it. It is legitimate and comprehensible on the part of the historian to declare himself as such incompetent; to refuse to employ his energies in the investigation of an aspect of human history which does not concern him; and to demand the requisite time and energy for what does. For this reason it is a strong position which has been adopted by those who, under the title of historians, refuse to busy themselves with that problem, and even regard it as pernicious that it should be mixed with those peculiar to history; basing their opinion either on the supposition that the character of historical knowledge fundamentally prohibits a philosophical explanation, or on the supposition that the actual position of historical science does not as yet authorize it.<sup>1</sup> Observe, however, that the majority of those of this opinion admit that outside the sphere of history, in the field of other science, the problem is legitimate and is one that may be formulated and considered. If he wishes to abide in his own sphere, it is not the professional historian who will study it, but of the results of the investigations which others have accomplished he will be able to take advantage.

It is clear of course that this does not exclude a historian from studying the Philosophy of History, just as he may be interested in astronomy or any other science, nor can it be denied that in the fact of his being a historian his preparation in the study of the problem is the more adequate for a deep penetration into a given one of its aspects.<sup>2</sup> The natu-

<sup>1</sup> An exposition of the situation of that question to date is to be found in my book "Questions of Modern History" (Madrid, 1904), Introduction and Chapter III.

<sup>2</sup> One of the scientific weaknesses in many authorities on the Philosophy of History who would be styled classical—and even of not a few modern philosophers—consists in their not being or not having been sufficiently *historians*; that they do not see the problem in its essential historical perspective; and that they have failed to fulfil that exigency which Dilthey ("Ermelung ni de Gentenvissenschaften") formulated, saying: "The thinker who takes as his object the historical world, ought to be intimately acquainted with the immediate material of history and should be entirely the master of his medium."

ral supposition, in fact, is that it will be the historian who will be interested in that problem because the constant vision of the historical material will continually produce in him a desire for an explanation transcending the mere facts themselves; and, in any case, as a man of intelligence he will be brought up against the problem, though he may not embark on the solution of it. Nor, moreover, in the preceding affirmations relative to the independence of position between the scientific sphere and the philosophical is there any denial of the intimate bond which unites them, and in virtue of which not only does the philosopher require, as was said, to be master of historical matter, but the historian will find in philosophy a force which, although it is not his business to create it, will help him in the handling of his data.

Now, it is quite another thing to state the objection in regard to a Philosophy of History to the philosophers themselves, basing one's position on the present status of our knowledge of the history of mankind. Such an objection—distinct from that embodied in this argument against the possibility merely of the "historians" creating a Philosophy of History—may be based on an affirmation of that strict interdependence in which, we affirm, both terms are to be found. Kohlen has expressed it in a decisive manner with reference to the Philosophy of Law: "Without a universal history of law a true juridic philosophy is as impossible as is a philosophy of humanity without a similar history of mankind and a philosophy of language without linguistics." This, then, denies for all men the possibility of a Philosophy of History, although only so long as it fails to fulfil that fundamental requisite of previous acquaintance with the facts in all the amplitude necessary that it may be possible to philosophize about them; and, to my mind, this is the strongest objection

## 266      Problem of Philosophy of History

that can be opposed to the present possibility of a Philosophy of History.

As a matter of fact, it is only by the force of habit and the suggestion exerted by those books (that is to say, the doctrines elaborated in them and the systems formulated, which give the false appearance of something perfect and conclusive) that we say and even believe that we are acquainted with the History of Humanity. Certain it is that considerable in range as is our historical information, and although that information has augmented so vastly in one century in regard to the above branch of history in particular, and become perfected in certitude and thoroughness, there still remains much for us to learn, still many points of obscurity and vagueness, many facts and theories in suspense; and that on a basis so imperfect any philosophic structure will be flimsy, collapsing at the least pressure. For, if we do not possess our facts securely and in entirety, how can we build upon them anything stable or secure? To the immense force embodied in this argument is due the most useful and fruitful of the results which modern criticism has produced in the discussion of the problem now before us. By dint of this argument has been demonstrated the inconsistency between systems relating to the Philosophy of History constructed *a priori* by writers who, in not a few cases, are ranked among the great. This failure was merited, as merited is the smile with which, to-day, we regard, for example, that infantile endeavor to inwrap the history of mankind in periods or ages of development which limited the future and closed up the eternity of life. In drawing up a clear table of all in these systems which was warrantable and final, the criticism of the professional historians has constituted a service to science of immense value, clearing the road so that it should be unobstructed by pseudo-scientific—though some of them

colossal—structures which would render it difficult to make the labor of the future step by step and in certainty. It is true, however, that it has produced also a pernicious skepticism in many people who, with the precipitancy so natural and difficult to check in human nature when a definite conclusion is arrived at and a judgment passed, have confused the breakdown of the Philosophy of History as interpreted by certain authors with the total collapse of the whole science. To convince the public of the error of assuming the second issue as a consequence of the first is in fact one of the duties of men of science in the social aspect of their labor.

Let us return now to the starting-point of these considerations. To deny the present possibility of a Philosophy of History because we do not as yet know enough of the history of mankind is not to deny its possibility absolutely and forever; agreed, however, on this point, the affirmation which has led us to it reappears and confronts us. We are still at grips with the fundamental problem. In short, if it is proved that it is definitely impossible for us to arrive at that initial historical knowledge which has to be the basis of a scientific philosophy regarding it, or if it is true, as many believe, that historical knowledge is incapable of scientific qualities and even of precision and of certitude, then to philosophize about it will be eternally impossible. The problem, therefore, is transferred to another ground and obliges us to discuss previously all those questions alluded to, and which in our days cover, as is known, an extensive literature. From the discussion as to the degree of generalization which is possible in regard to facts about humanity (a discussion maintained on the extreme wing by Xenopol, who denied that there could be any generalization), to the transference of history wholly and solely into the field of science, the series of minor problems presented in the different opinions upheld by the

## 268      Problem of Philosophy of History

specialists to-day require to be tackled and cleared up in order that we may either be free of all incubus in the affirmation of a Philosophy of History or else abandon the dream of its possibility. It would be long and wearisome here and now to enter on this task which I have already elsewhere accomplished.<sup>1</sup> I will refer only to the conclusion I there arrived at, and take my stand upon it under the plea of a personal opinion. The doctrine may be thus epitomized: In the present situation of our knowledge relating to these questions, and of the opinion of men of science respecting them, there is a decided weakness to be observed in the arguments employed to deny the scientific character (the possibility of such) in history, either because the general conception of science renders it possible to-day to state the problem with a different meaning to that of Aristotle, or because it is not so certain as is commonly believed that history is confined purely to the observation of individual facts, forming itself into a narrative without any generalization (of a more or less abstract character, that is, as all generalizations are), in which each fact conserves its unique and differential characteristic and only on the strength of it is mentioned. For myself, personally, however, the crux of the problem is not in whether historical knowledge conforms or not to the Aristotelian definition of science, and whether it is susceptible to abstractions of greater or less amplitude, but in whether it can attain those qualities of truth, clearness and certainty which distinguish scientific from vulgar knowledge. If to the scheme and elaboration of true, evident and certain knowledge which has as its objective the facts about humanity in time and space (and derives from that objective its own internal coherence) is begrudged the denomination

<sup>1</sup> In the book mentioned previously, "Questions of Modern History," Chapter III, No. 3.

“scientific,” the question at issue is solely the question of a name. What matters is that our knowledge of man and of the manifestations of society in past ages shall arrive, by means of a rigorous employment of the critical methods of investigation, at being as certain as our knowledge about Nature and the facts concerning her, though neither one nor the other, either to the observer or to the experimentalist, delivers the totality of its abundant and (from day to day at least) mysterious contents.

The objection, then, which, if valid, would make it impossible forever, through lack of a foundation, to philosophize about the history of mankind, possesses no scientific authority for opposing an insuperable barrier to this philosophic aspiration; but it does serve most effectively to moderate impatience and to check precipitancy in the task of solving the main problem, showing the connection between this problem and many questions of importance still under discussion, revealing also its complexity and suggesting that even on the strong basis of a personal conviction rooted in the feeling that a right solution is arrived at, we are to preserve the judicious cautiousness which is characteristic of the truly scientific mind, and which safeguards against the possibility of error and makes us respectful toward contrary opinions. All that may avoid that suspicious simplification of a problem in easy terms—only subjectively arrived at while the problem itself is divested of many elements inherent in its complexity and which we fancifully qualify as incidental—and that provides us with the maximum quantity of proofs in support of our opinions by probing them and developing them with every kind of verification and analysis, will become a guarantee in support of our conclusion and of the doctrinal fabric we erect on it. It is for this reason that I have been explaining and examining the principal

## 270      Problem of Philosophy of History

objections to a Philosophy of History and the errors and confusions of thought in regard to it which draw into a distinct field—and one conducive to confusions—the interpretation of the name.

Over and above all this cautiousness and reservation, however, stands out one fact which even the most decided antagonist of a Philosophy of History has to recognize, not only as a reality but as a thing of importance and significance. This fact is the persistence in the human mind—in every man who thinks at all about the world and about life—of those fundamental interrogatories in regard to the actual problem of the philosophy in question.

It is true that, in view of the potential immensity of future history and the paucity of that at our disposal (as was observed not many months ago by your compatriot Professor Sloane<sup>1</sup>), the persistence in humanity or in great masses of it, of a given idea or preoccupation does not in itself always signify that the notion or ideal in question is consubstantial with our nature, since it may well be a survival, a vibration from primitive stages of thought not yet modified, and to which, in fact (in that relative value of time), we are chronologically very near. For this reason it is not a plausible argument in support of the necessity of an idea or a belief that for many centuries down to the present a more or less considerable number of people have supported it and held it to be something fundamental. The future may wholly disillusion us. But if we ascertain that a definite idea or an ideal exists throughout mankind and is the stronger in a man according to his degree of culture—in an inverse relation to other spiritual phenomena, which exist principally on a sentimental basis and are rooted above all in the uncul-

<sup>1</sup> "The Vision and Substance of History," address delivered at Buffalo, New York, December 27, 1911. Published in "The American Historical Review," January, 1912.

tured masses or where culture is incipient—we have a very powerful argument in favor of its essential necessity for us. It is this which occurs with the problem of the Philosophy of History. Be it with a clear understanding of their meaning, their classification in the Encyclopedia of the Sciences, or be it without ever suspecting the relationship they bear to that, great masses of people are to-day, as in the first stages of civilization, formulating questions which correspond to the fundamental problems of our science; and each individual unit in those masses answers these questions from the point of view of a religion, a system of philosophy, or simply that of a common sphere of culture which finds reflection in himself or in which he has been educated.

It is true that many people pass through life without experiencing a moment in which those questions flash before their consciousness, because the material occupations of the daily struggle for existence leave no room for attention to other questions. It is equally true that among those who have broken free from this material incarceration, and even among those who move by custom in an intellectual circle, these questions pass often enough like swiftly flying sparks rapidly extinguished, or do not acquire that standard of importance which is given to a question as the result of deep preoccupation. For a long time, owing to doctrinal considerations arising from the predominance of certain philosophic systems (philosophic although some of them discountenance philosophy), there has existed an indifference and an apathy on the part of many people in regard to those questions. Although there has been a reaction in this respect, it is a fact that the number is still large of those who fail to appreciate their urgency—a fact, however, which depends on general causes traceable to the conditions of our modern life. The feverish activity, the superficiality and

## 272      Problem of Philosophy of History

show in which the majority exist, cause our moments of privacy and meditation, of communion of the spirit with itself and of self-examination in regard to life, to become more difficult and rare. Distracted by the outside spectacle, we lose the habit of self-examination and become deaf to the promptings of the soul, and often enough we pass through life in ignorance of the exalted curiosity within us. At times, in moments of brief solitude and thought, these questions suddenly appear to us, but the intellectual effort required in pursuing them, and the time they would demand, make us shy and half afraid of them, with the result that we suppress them and continue as though in ignorance of their presence, until, in another moment of doubt, anguish, discouragement or pessimism in which the mind has nothing to fall back upon or other resources but its own, they reappear before us, without, however, our ever possessing the hope of finding time or opportunity for their consideration and their answer.

Such a state of inattention to the problem is not enough, then, to deny that it exists; this state of mind, on the contrary, continually affirms the problem as a presence. Whenever we wish to hear its voice, it is with the utmost clearness that the voice echoes, and this in itself will be enough to guide us in the circumstances.

The historian derives a knowledge, or what he believes to be a knowledge, of the principal facts concerning the history of mankind; he traces the rise and fall of the great empires; he describes in its separate stages the process of civilization, its oscillating and, at times, contradictory movement, the advantage to one state of the labor of another which it resumes and carries on, the things which have been accomplished in modern times, and the trajectory and law of development of institutions and aspirations regarded as fundamental in importance; and then, over and above all

this remain those same great, disquieting questions which embody the whole program of the Philosophy of History: Where and toward what is mankind traveling? Is there a goal of which, at present, it is ignorant, but toward which is moving the central current of its history? Is it being impelled toward that end by something beyond and transcendental to it? What is its significance and value in the whole, in the general process of the universe? Is it the creature of chance, or has it an orientation and direction? And if it has, can we deduce that movement through such of the facts about humanity as we have knowledge of? Does there exist in the actual conditions of its life some other foundation than the corner-stone of history? And, following from all this, what state is it which marks or is to mark the triumph of that history, the culminating situation most nearly approaching and conforming to the purpose of the universe? Is it possible to define and predict for the future some main path for man, or is the Philosophy of History ever restricted to the limits of the present? Of the utmost clarity for every one engaged in the investigation of those questions which history, deeply contemplated, raises, must be the real and logical hierarchy which exists between them. Not all are on the same level, not all are equally far-reaching, and if I may use a phrase which is unscientific and inexact but which well reflects what would be thought by an uneducated person (that is to say, by the majority of people), they are not all equally philosophical, but some more so and others less. This question of a hierarchy and of a relative importance possesses a greater significance than would at first sight be imagined, because if we regard it as a proper and well-founded one, it at once brings us to the point as to whether or not the professionals, the writers who have propounded scientifically the problem of the Philosophy of History, have

## 274      Problem of Philosophy of History

grasped in fact the whole and entire problem, or whether they have limited themselves merely to the study of some one or several of the questions it embodies, and perhaps to some of them which, compared with those embracing the main object of the science, would be called secondary; and more than this, we are even led to the question whether it may not be the case that, while preoccupied with what they regarded as the real problem, they were not confining themselves, through an error of perspective, to aspects of history quite general and comprehensive in themselves, but above which they have never risen, never attaining a transcendental vision in the true philosophic field to which they were aspiring. I am not far from thinking that it has been thus in the majority of cases, at least with those great systems which have attempted a fundamental revolution in the Philosophy of History. I do not allude by this to the observation, continually reiterated by the critics and some of the most recent exponents in the matter, that the majority of these systems, if not all of them, losing sight of the complex nature of the problem, have given an ingenuous explanation of the History of Mankind to which is owing their failure or insufficiency. I refer to that which, apart from the degree of comprehensiveness in the problem they embrace, it is impossible to ask in regard to whether those systems embark on the true problem of the Philosophy of History, on which problem depends a series of others to be called consequences, or whether, on the contrary, it is not from one of these self-same "consequences" or minor problems that they have arisen, the minor being mistaken for the greater problem in whose solution rests that of all the others. That this equivocation is clear in Montesquieu, in Rousseau, in Voltaire ever so much more so, and in other authors of an analogous scientific standing in relation to the Philosophy of History,—

that they failed to get abreast of the question and seriously tackle its solution,—no one will deny. But even with the great masters of the school, the same doubt is legitimate, and the decision may be actually against them. Will it be said that Herder, notwithstanding the discrimination with which he subordinated to the more general standpoint those secondary questions which were almost the only preoccupation of his predecessors in the century, actually raises in his problem of the factors and issues of the History of Mankind the real and basic question of the Philosophy of History? Was it approached by Kant in his own explanation of human progress—that is, the solution which is offered to the conflict between individual liberty and the general welfare—in the State? After this is there no room, even when the Kantian solution is accepted, for questions regarding the metaphysical problem of the plan of history, questions above and beyond the antagonism of individual liberties among themselves—that is to say, questions of a more general and comprehensive character, by the side of which the above is subordinate and over concrete? And in spite of the incontestable grandeur of the conception of Hegel, are we not left, perhaps, with the impression that in reality it lowers and depreciates the problem and denies it what should be a higher point of view, in which the development of the moral conscience, of freedom, and of the functions of the State becomes subordinated? The observation of history and its mode of development, and the interpretation of it exclusively from the viewpoint of a standard of ethics, notwithstanding a metaphysical quality, is yet something which too nearly approaches a broad but, in certain respects, very concrete vision of historical development which allows a vaster and remoter problem to float above it. Yet clearer is this in Comte and his disciples, and in Marx and his, the character of whose

## 276      Problem of Philosophy of History

philosophies is purely an analysis of the factors behind the phenomena of human history, factors which only explain these phenomena in a secondary manner. Even in the acutest and most comprehensive of these systems the mind is not left satisfied as when one has set hands on the real solution to a problem; it feels (and I say it without wishing to depreciate the value of those investigations and the clear light they have thrown on the movements of mankind) that there is something still wanting, something greater which remains unanswered, and which, if answered, would respond more fully to aspirations, properly speaking, philosophical.

I regard as scientifically legitimate this dissatisfaction of the mind even with the profoundest and minutest analysis of human progress. I am also of opinion that the problem of the Philosophy of Human History ought not to be wholly limited to the two questions formulated by Herder,—on the value of that history and the conditions in regard to its development,—since, although, in the consideration of the latter question, there may have been a glimpse of the ultimate and basic problem, the systems soon settle down into a mere analysis of conditions and a generalization about the facts of history which is secondary to the main problem. . . . That which cannot be described as an explanation of human facts by other facts of a like nature (they may be as general and fundamental as you like, but that does not affect their nature) cannot be described as history; and thus, what has by some schools of thinkers been called the “anatomy” and the “physiology” (or the “psychology,” from another standpoint) of human action, is not Philosophy of History.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It is not passing from that narrow standpoint that those claiming to have construed doctrines and systems of a Philosophy of History have been able to introduce and discuss the question of the anticipation of future history. In the concrete conception of this question it has been affirmed: “Humanity, in the future, will act in such and such a way, and attain such and such standards of civilization and development.” The question is neither

## Problem of Philosophy of History 277

And now, in conclusion, there remains this culminating question: Does there exist any actual reality and basis corresponding to that aspiration of ours towards a transcendental explanation of what is a greater problem than all those scientifically formulated until now in the so-called Philosophy of History, or is it a pure whim and caprice of the spirit that is never to be satisfied? To this question I do not believe we can provide at present a scientific answer; but I should point out that neither our present nor permanent impotence regarding the solution of what is an idealistic problem can banish that problem from the mind, which continues to formulate it as an aspiration that is ineradicable and to which it is forever hopeful of finding a solution.

And lastly we should remember, in order that the logical statement of the problem may leave no loophole of uncertainty, that the questions in which we embody the main substance of the Philosophy of History do not, in their formulation, prejudge an affirmative answer, nor is such an answer an ineludible necessity for their existence. Although our answer to all these questions were in the negative, they would continue to be problems present in our minds—so long, that is, as the answer is not indisputably a scientific one; and even if it were, it would, none the less, be legitimate material for a Philosophy of History as real and settled as if it answered in the affirmative those same interrogations which for the majority of men correspond to a desire, latent but ineradicable, to see explained in an ordered, rational and scientific method, according to the general plan of the whole universe, the Life of Man.

permissible nor can it be included in the field of the Philosophy of History. Thus, Meyer is right (in his "History of Antiquity") when he judges that such predictions are impossible, since in that which is generally referred to, the individual element predominates, escaping all prognostication; and affirms, always from that standpoint, that history only allows of comprobation, and not of any fixing of the future.

## 278      Problem of Philosophy of History

For this reason the essential necessity of a Philosophy of History depends neither on a special solution of its problems nor on the actual possibility of a solution being afforded them. It arises principally from the presence of the problem in our minds and from the corroborated fact that the highest expression of what, as concerns our history, is called progress, consists in the awakening of humanity to the idealistic quality behind its actions, of the things it is accustomed to perform in ignorance of their value and significance; and in the guidance of his life by man, ever increasingly, through the medium of that consciousness and with an ever clearer vision of the "why and wherefore" of things. To assist, by due attention to this problem, in promoting the study of it, and, some day (whenever that may be), the solution of it, is more reasonable and human than to bang the door upon it with an *a priori* negative against its possibility, or than to belittle and discard it.