The Problem of History

We are, first of all, historical beings and, after that, contemplators of history; only because we are the one do we become the other ... I am involved in the interactions of society because its various systems intersect in my life. These systems have sprung from the same human nature as I experience in myself and understand in others. The language in which I think and my concepts originated in the course of time. Thus, to impenetrable depths within myself I am a historical being. The fact that the investigator of history is the same as the one who makes it is the first condition that makes scientific history possible; here we have the first significant element for the solution of the epistemological problem of history.

The Approach to World History

Throughout history living, active, creative, and responsive soul is present at all times and places. Every first-class document is an expression of such a soul. That these documents are so scarce for a certain period results from the selection that history, in the form of memory, makes from the piles of what is written. It allows all that has no meaning to fall to dust, ashes, and rags.

The Historical Concept

Man knows himself only in history, never through introspection; indeed, we all seek him in history. Or, to put it more generally, we seek what is human in it, such as
religion, and so on. We want to know what it is. If there were a science of man it would be anthropology that aims at understanding the totality of experience through the structural context. The individual always realizes only one of the possibilities in his development, which could always have taken a different turning whenever he had to make an important decision. Man is only given to us at all in terms of his realized possibilities. In the cultural systems, too, we seek an anthropologically determined structure in which an “x” realizes himself. We call this human nature but this is only a word for a conceptual system constituted by an intellectual method.¹ The possibilities of man are not exhausted by this either.

The horizon widens. Even if the historian has a limited subject in front of him a thousand threads lead on and on into the infinity of all the memories of mankind. Historiography begins retracing its steps from the present with the description of what is still alive in the memory of the present generation. It is still recollection in the proper sense. Or, annals, added to year by year, record what has just happened. As history advances vision extends beyond one’s own country and more and more of the past enters into the shadow world of memory. Expressions of it all have remained after life itself has passed away; direct expressions in which souls expressed what they were and also accounts of deeds, circumstances of individuals, communities, and states. And the historian stands in the midst of the ruins, of the remnants of things past, the expressions of minds in deeds, words, sounds, and pictures, of souls who have long ceased to be. How is he to conjure them up? All his work of recalling them is interpretation of the remnants that remain. Imagine a person who had no memory of his own past but only thought and acted through what the past had wrought in him, without being conscious of any of its parts. This would be the state of nations, communities, of mankind itself if it were not possible to supplement the remnants, to interpret the
expressions, to lift the accounts of deeds from isolation back into the context in which they originated. All this is interpretation, a hermeneutic art.

The problem is what form it assumes when it is wholly separated from individual existence, when assertions are to be made about subjects that are associations of people in some sense or other, about cultural systems, nations, or states.

First of all, we require a method for discovering firm lines of demarcation within the infinite interactions of individuals, where the unity of personal life provides no frontiers. It is as if we had to draw permanent lines and figures on an ever-running stream. Between this reality and reason no relation of comprehension seems possible, for the concept separates what is connected in the flow of life and represents something that is valid, independent of the person who expresses it, something that is universal and forever. But the flow of life is everywhere unique, every wave in it rises and dies away.

The Nations. National History

Here [in the case of nations), the subject that experiences inwardly the unity and significance of outer events in terms of meaning, value, and purpose, is not present in the same way as in the case of the individual; also the subject that experiences is not the same as that which comprehends; for the individual confronts the nation as a spectator even when he belongs to it.² Because of this, understanding, through the categories peculiar to it, becomes something different.

The question of how the subject (a people, a nation) is to be delimited as a reality -a question that is quite different from the one of how the subject is experienced- can be illuminated only in the sense that the concepts themselves and their delimitations are historically relative. The unity of the subject, a people, is quite variable according to the elements
that constitute it. When was German national unity achieved? In the Middle Ages the unity of language is only relative, because of the difference of dialects in the tribes. By nation we understand a stable, economic, social, and political combination of parts.

But it is the relation between the factually based unity of the subject and the consciousness of belonging together, of nationality and national feeling, on which the unity of the subject finally rests.

This consciousness of belonging together is conditioned by the same elements that assert themselves in the individual’s consciousness of himself.

Some experiences are felt to concern everybody. This is also the case in a teleological system, for example, a religious organization. But this communal feeling is present only in a certain class of experience. In a nation, however, all sorts of common experiences stand in conscious relation to the community. This community refers to all aspects of the lives of the individuals who belong to it. The result is that every great experience is felt as something affecting the values of the community. Those purposes that belong to this national context are formed is an expression of that same consciousness of belonging together. For all these individuals -each of whom pursues his own purposes (often competing against each other) or the purposes of the family or other associations- the state is a sphere having its own particular purposes. In this sphere they act as a single subject. In the consciousness of belonging together they realize the purpose that the national context prescribes for them.

Indeed, in this whole, the consciousness of a -at a time- highest good for it, is formed. This occurs under the influence of a common mood or under the leadership of a great man, as in the time of Luther or Bismarck. Then the feeling of belonging together is present in the common purposes. Then,
too, the outer events, destinies, and actions are measured by the purpose that, at the time, represents the inner content of the nation’s life. As no nation counts on its death, plans and purposes have quite a different place in its life from the one they have in the life of the individual. They always have only a temporal, relative, relation to the inwardness of the nation. For the latter is capable of infinite potentialities.

Thus, every form a nation takes is transitory. The possibility that one formative tendency should be supplemented by its contrary because of consciousness of its inadequacy is always at hand.

Thus, here, the concept of development is given a much more comprehensive but also more indeterminate meaning. The regular patterns that anthropology associates with passion, illusion, reason, idea, or self control vanish completely here. Every generation forgets the experiences of the one before.

Philosophers raise the problem - is the goal of every individual not within himself and does not the value of life lie only in an individual existence? In the positing of this question lies a transgression of all experience, a transition into an empty metaphysics of history; for my rejection of the philosophy of history means just this; that neither the above assumption (that values only acquire reality in individuals) nor the opposing view, that nations or mankind have an ascertainable goal of development, is in any way scientific. The common experiences of a nation, common purposes, and memories are real. They are the source of the communally determined purposes of individuals. It is a commonplace that only individuals can experience the satisfaction of realized goals, the consciousness of common experience and of being sustained and filled by common memories. But, it does not follow from this that what takes place only in individuals exists only for their satisfaction. On the contrary, the fact is that an individual wills national purposes as his own, experiences national experiences, and knows the memories of
such experiences as his own and is filled and sustained by them. It is not possible to penetrate behind this reality that consists of the consciousness of value, meaning, purpose and good, by means of problematical, psychological, reasoning. We do not know directly as a fact how it happens that, as well as realizing a meaning related to the course of our own lives, we also find a meaning in life through these shared experiences. It is one of the many transgressions of explanatory psychology that it should occupy itself with aimless conjectures about this. These are on a par with the conjectures of those who, instead of describing religious experience as history reveals it, based it on their own feeble personal religious experience, tracing it back to selfishness and personal satisfaction.

But, equally pernicious transgressions occur when positive hypotheses are framed about the relation of personal consciousness to a real superindivdual unit, whether this unit is determined transcendentally or in terms of racial psychology. These hypotheses are as inadmissible as those that maintain the reality of divine activity in the individual consciousness.

The inference that there is a superempirical subject manifesting itself in the individual consciousness is based on the consciousness of belonging together and the general validity of thinking and obligation, and marks the turning point from Kantian speculation to the transcendental method of construction. This assumes that a system of reality that will make these relations comprehensible underlies the facts of connection, of belonging together, of the exchangeability in the place of concepts and of binding obligation. The creation of this transcendental method is the death of history because it excludes the digging down into the realities just mentioned by means of fruitful historical concepts. Equally to be rejected is the transgression that bases historical connections on actual persons instead of making them the
logical subjects of assertions that are different from those of individual psychology. Herbart, who first conceived the idea of seeking out regular relations in communities, distinguishable from those in the individual soul, was far from making such an assumption.

Reality, Value, Culture, The Problem of Value in History; Conclusion of the Treatise

If we eliminate the foundation in transcendental philosophy then there is no method for ascertaining unconditional norms, values, or purposes. There are only those that claim unconditional validity but that, because of their origin, are tainted with relativity.

But, we do, in fact, measure meaning in terms of some real or ideal context in relation to which a person or an event acquires this characteristic …

One aspect at least is clear; what I find significant in the present is what is fruitful for the future, for my actions in it and for the progress of society towards it.

And here I see clearly, from a practical point of view that I must start from universally valid judgments about the object of my endeavor if I am to control the future. The present does not contain circumstances but processes and systems of interactions. These reach towards a future attainment that can be achieved. Bismarck’s statement that he had been placed by his religion and his state into a position in which service to that state was more important than all cultural tasks was generally valid for him because it was based on religion. From this it follows that, in retrospect, we have to assume the same relationship. In an age general norms, values, and purposes arise and the meaning of an action has to be grasped in relation to them. According to whether these are only conditionally, or unconditionally, determined there is a further difference. It appears that even within one nation
there is conflict about values.

So we arrive, on a deeper level, at the statement that the development of such ideas moves in contradictions (Kant, Hegel) contained in the course of the formation of institutions, etc. These are then formulated and, again and again, their relation to each other makes a wider and freer position possible. There are, to start with, no values that are valid for all nations. In the Roman empire there developed an aristocratic conception of mankind as the bearer of humanitas. In Christianity the notion of mankind as something of value arose and this notion was given fresh emphasis in the Age of Enlightenment. History itself is the productive force for the creation of valuations, ideals, and purposes by which the significance of people and events is measured. …

It is said that the consciousness of relativity thus arises in history. No doubt every historical phenomenon is finite and, therefore relative. …

The final problem of a critique of historical reason along the lines indicated in this; in history there is already formation and selection in the search for the inner connections. There is always progression in accordance with the conditions of finitude, suffering, power, contrast, and accumulation that connects one part of history with another; and power, values, meaning, and purpose are the links in which the connections of history lie. But are the experienced connections, the experienced values, meaning, and purpose the last word of the historian?

My line of argument is determined by the following statements:

1. The concept of value arise from life.

2. The norm for every judgment, etc., is given in the relative conceptions of meaning, value, and purpose of nations and ages.
3. The task is to describe how these have widened out into something absolute.

4. To sum up, this means the total recognition of the immanence to historical consciousness of even the unconditionally held values and norms.

The historical consciousness of the finitude of every historical phenomenon, of every human or social condition and of the relativity of every kind of faith, is the last step towards the liberation of man. With it man achieves the sovereignty to enjoy every experience to the full and surrender himself to it unencumbered, as if there were no system of philosophy or faith to tie him down. Life is freed from knowledge through concepts; the mind becomes sovereign over the cobwebs of dogmatic thought. Everything beautiful, every thing holy, every sacrifice relived and interpreted, opens perspectives that disclose some part of reality. And equally, we accept the evil, horrible, and ugly as filling a place in the world, as containing some reality that must be justified in the system of things, something that cannot be conjured away And, in contrast to relativity, the continuity of creative forces asserts itself as the central historical fact.

Thus a view of life arises from experience, understanding, poetry, and history and forms a constant background. Reflection only raises it to analytical precision and clarity. The teleological view of the world and of life is recognized as a metaphysical system resting on a one-sided, not fortuitous but partial, vision of life. The doctrine of the objective value of life as a metaphysical system transcends what can be known. But we experience connections between life and history in which each part has significance. [The parts of] life and history have meaning as letters have in a word. Just as there are particles and conjugations so there are syntactical elements in life and man seeks their significance in various ways. The attempt used to be made to grasp life
through the world. But there is only the one road from the interpretation of life to the world and life is only there in experience, understanding, and historical apprehension. We do not carry the meaning of the world into life. We are open to the possibility that meaning and significance arise only in man and his history, not in the isolated individual but in man as a historical being. For man is something historical.

Notes

1. Modern cultural anthropology tends to confirm Dilthey’s view that what we call human nature is usually a culturally determined realization of certain human potentialities.

2. If Britain passes through an economic crisis this does not mean that I pass through such a crisis. Though I may be affected as a citizen, I am, as an individual, the observer of something which does not happen to me.