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Preface

TEN YEARS AGO, when I published the little tract *This, Too, a Philosophy of History to Form Mankind*, the titular *Too* was intended to be anything but an expression of *anch'io son pittore* (I, too, am a painter).^{*} Rather, it was supposed, as indicated by the subtitle “Contribution to Many Contributions of this Century” and the subfixed motto,^{*} to sound a note of humility; that the author, far from claiming that the work was a complete philosophy of the history of our species, was instead merely pointing, amid the many beaten tracks trodden so often before, to a small footpath, which, though neglected, was perhaps worth mentally exploring. The writings quoted here and there in the book were sufficient to show the well-worn routes that the author wished to avoid; and so his essay was meant to be nothing more than a pamphlet, a *contribution to the contributions*, as indeed its outward appearance proved.

The work was soon out of print, and I was encouraged to bring out a new edition; but this new edition could not possibly venture before the eyes of the public in its old guise. I had observed that a few ideas in my opusculum had been taken up in other works, without mention of my name, and given a scope that I had not intended.^{*} The humble “Too” was omitted; and yet with the handful of figurative terms—the infancy, boyhood, virility, and old age of our species—that were applied and applicable to but a few nations on the earth, it had never occurred to me to trace a highway by which the *history of culture*, to say nothing of the *philosophy of the whole of human history*, might be surveyed with confident step. What nation on earth does not have its own culture? And how far short would the plan of Providence fall, were every individual of the human species fashioned for what we call culture and ought often to call refined frailty? Nothing is more indeterminate than this word, and nothing more deceptive than applying it to entire nations and epochs. How few are cultivated in a cultivated people? And in what does this merit consist? To what extent does it promote their happiness? The happiness, that is, of individual men: for the conceit that whole states as abstractions can be happy when all their individual members are suffering is a contradiction; or rather, a word void of sense that even at first glance reveals itself to be such.

For the book to have been in some degree deserving of its title, it ought to have begun much deeper and drawn a much wider circle of ideas. What is human happiness? To what extent does it obtain here on earth? To what extent does it obtain anywhere, given the great diversity of all terrestrial beings and especially of men, in every system of government, in every climate, in every revolutionary change of circumstances, times, and the span of an individual life? Is there a yardstick by which these different conditions might be measured, and has Providence reckoned on the well-being of its creatures in all these situations as on its ultimate and principal object? It was necessary to examine all these questions, to pursue and consider them through the helter-skelter of ages and constitutions, before bringing out a general conclusion valid for the whole of mankind. Here, then, was a wide field to traverse and profound depths to plumb. I had read pretty much everything that there was to read on the subject: and since my youth, every new book published on the history of mankind, in which I hoped to find contributions to my grand task, seemed to me like a treasure unearthed. I was gratified that in recent years this philosophy rose to greater prominence, and I took advantage of every resource that fortune sent my way.

An author who presents his book to the public, be it good or be it bad, lays bare a part of his soul; provided that it contains thoughts that, if he did not invent them (for these days how little that is truly new remains to invent?), he at least *found* and made his own; indeed, which for years he inhabited as though they were the property of his heart and mind. He not only reveals what matters were occupying his mind on certain occasions, what doubts troubled him in the course of his life and by what means he resolved them; he also reckons on some, perhaps but a few, congenial souls for whom these or similar ideas were important in the labyrinth of their years (for otherwise what would be the attraction of becoming a writer and sharing with an unruly multitude the secrets of his heart?). With these he converses invisibly and communicates to them his sentiments, as he, when they have advanced beyond him, expects in return their better thoughts and instructions. This invisible commerce of hearts and minds is the sole and greatest benefit of the printing press, which otherwise would have brought as much harm as good to literary nations. The author fancied himself in the circle of those who actually took an interest in what he was writing and from whom he wished to entice their sympathetic and nobler thoughts. This is the finest reward that writing can bestow, and a well-intentioned man will delight more in what he awakens in the reader than in what he himself said. Whoever remembers how opportunely this or that book, or even this or that idea in a book, has sometimes come his way; what pleasure it gave him to find another spirit, though distant yet very near in his activity, on his own or a better track; how often one such idea haunts us for years and leads us onward: he will consider an author, who speaks to him and

shares his innermost being, not as a hireling but as a friend, who steps forth to confide even his unfinished thoughts, so that the experienced reader may think in concert with him and bring what is imperfect closer to perfection.

With a theme like mine—namely, the history of mankind, the philosophy of their history—such *humanity* on the part of the reader is, I believe, an agreeable and primary duty. He who wrote this was a human being, and you who read are also a human being. He might err and indeed perhaps has done so; you have knowledge that he does not and could not have. Use, then, what you can and recognize his good intentions; do not stop at censure, but amend and continue his work. With feeble hand he laid the foundation stones for a structure that only the centuries can and will complete; happy, when one day these stones are covered with earth and forgotten like him who carried them there, when on them, or even in some other spot entirely, a still more beautiful edifice shall be built.

But I have inadvertently wandered too far from my original intention: it was supposed to be the story of how I came to treat this subject and then later returned to it with quite different duties and preoccupations. Even in my early years, when the fields of science still glistened in their morning glory, the enjoyment of which the noonday of life denies us, the thought often occurred to me: *whether, since everything in the world has its philosophy and science, should not what concerns us most closely, the history of mankind in general, have its own philosophy and science?* Everything served to remind me of this question: metaphysics and morals, physics and natural history, and especially religion. God, who has ordered the whole of Nature by measure, number, and weight;* who in accordance therewith has established the essence of things, their form and connections, their course and conservation [*Erhaltung*], so that from the universe to the grain of dust, from the force that moves suns and planets to the gossamer of a spider's web, there is but one wisdom, one goodness, one power that prevails; he who in man's body and in the faculties of man's soul contrived everything so wondrously and divinely that, when we dare to reflect from afar on the *Only Wise*,* we lose ourselves in an abyss of his thoughts—would this God, I asked myself, wholly abstain from his wisdom and goodness in the destination and appointment of our species and have here no plan? Or would he wish to conceal that plan from us, when in the lower creation, with which we are less immediately concerned, he has revealed so many of the laws that govern his eternal design? What is the human species as a whole but a flock without a shepherd? Or in the words of that plaintive sage: "And makest men as the fishes of the sea, as the creeping things, that have no ruler over them?"* Or had they no need to know the plan? I well believe it: for what man is able to survey even the least design of his own life? And yet he sees as far as he is meant to see and knows enough to guide his own steps. Nevertheless, is not this very ignorance made the pretext for great abuses? How many there are who,

because they discern no plan, flatly reject the possibility that a plan might actually exist or at least contemplate it with a timorous shudder and a mixture of doubt and belief. They strenuously refuse to regard the human species as an ant heap, where the foot of someone stronger, who is himself a giant insect, tramples thousands, annihilates tens of thousands in their grand and petty undertakings, where the two greatest tyrants of the earth, Chance and Time, sweep away the entire heap without a trace and leave the now vacant spot for some other industrious collective, which one day will also be swept away without a trace. Proud man refuses to regard his species as such an earthly brood, as the prey of all-conquering decay. And yet do not history and experience assail him with this image? What whole is ever brought to completion on earth? And what is whole upon this earth? Is time, then, not ordered as space is ordered? Both, after all, are the twin offspring of one Fate. The former is full of wisdom, the latter full of seeming disorder: and yet man has evidently been so fashioned that he seeks order, that he beholds a speck of time [*Fleck der Zeiten*], that posterity builds on the past: to this end he has memory and recollection. And does not this process, in which one age builds atop another, make the whole of our species a gigantic edifice, where one takes away what the other has laid down, where what ought never to have been erected still stands and in centuries everything falls into ruin, beneath which fainthearted men live all the more confidently the greater its fragility? I do not wish to continue such a sequence of doubts and pursue man's conflict with himself, with other men, and with the rest of creation. Suffice it, I searched for a *philosophy of the history of mankind* wherever I could.

And did I find it? May the work before you, but not yet its first volume, be the judge. This contains only the foundation, consisting partly in a general survey of our place of habitation, partly in an examination of the various organizations that, below us and around us, enjoy the light of our sun. I hope that no one will think this path too circuitous or too tedious: for as there is no other way that permits the destiny of mankind to be read from the Book of Creation, so it cannot be traveled with too much care or deliberation. He who would prefer metaphysical speculations, and these alone, can arrive at them by a shorter cut; but I believe that such speculations, divorced from observations and analogies of Nature, are an aerial excursion that seldom leads to any goal. The progress of God in Nature, the ideas that the Eternal One has actively displayed to us in the sequence of his works: they are the sacred tome, the letters of which I have spelled and will continue to spell—less than an apprentice, to be sure, but at least faithfully and eagerly. Were I so fortunate as to impart to one of my readers something of that sweet impression that I, with a conviction I cannot describe, have received of the inscrutable Creator's eternal wisdom and goodness: this conviction would be the trusty thread equipped with which, in the course of this work, we might venture into the labyrinth of human history. Everywhere the great

analogy of Nature has led me to truths of religion that I was obliged to suppress, though only with effort, because I would not race ahead of myself but instead proceeded step by step, remaining faithful only to the light that gleams forth from the hidden presence of the Author in his works. It will be all the more pleasing for me and for my readers when, following our path, we see this obscure glow eventually blaze like flames and shine like the sun.

Let no one be confounded because I occasionally personify the name of Nature. Nature is no self-existent being; rather, *God is all in his works*: yet I would not defile this most hallowed name, which no grateful creature should mention without the profoundest respect, by a use so frequent that I could not always furnish it with the proper sanctity. He for whom the word "Nature" has been debased and emptied of meaning by the various scribblings of our age ought to think instead of *that almighty power, goodness, and wisdom* and in his soul name that invisible being that no earthly language can name.

The same applies to those occasions when I speak of the *organic forces* of creation: I do not suppose that the reader will take them for *qualitates occultas*, since we see their effects clearly before us. I knew no plainer or more definite term by which to refer to them. I shall reserve for the future a fuller discussion of this and several other matters that I could only hint at here.

And yet I am pleased that my schoolboy composition will appear at a time when, in so many of the individual sciences and fields of knowledge on which I was obliged to draw, the hands of masters are laboring and collecting materials. I am certain that these will not disparage but rather seek to better this exoteric attempt of a stranger to their arts: for I have always observed that, the more real and exact a science, the less likely are those who cultivate and love it to waste their energies in vain wrangling. They leave the war of words to the merely word-wise. In most points, my book shows that a philosophy of human history cannot yet be written in the present age, but that perhaps it will be written at the end of our century or millennium.

And so, Great Being, you invisible, exalted genius of our species, I place at your feet the most imperfect work that ever a mortal wrote and in which he dared to follow your footsteps and your thoughts. Its pages may be scattered by the wind and its letters turn to dust: and so too will the forms in which I glimpsed your traces and the formulas with which I sought to express them for my human brethren. But your thoughts will endure: gradually you will divulge more and more of them to your progeny and exhibit them in ever more glorious figures. Happy, when these pages are swept away by the river of oblivion and more luminous ideas live in the souls of men.

Weimar, April 23, 1784
Herder

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