

THE PLACE OF INDIA IN ENLIGHTENMENT AND
POST-ENLIGHTENMENT PHILOSOPHIES OF HISTORY

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Within Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophies of history, the Orient was represented not only as occupying a different geographical space from the Occident, but as participating in a different historical moment. Even as the Orient functioned as a site of curiosities, a subject of fantasy, and an object of domination, it was also a source of comparison that played a defining role in Europe's own self-definition and sense of history, including what was often a sense of world-historical mission. This dissertation explores the ways in which an intensifying interest in India, particularly ancient India, shaped European thinkers' historical understanding and their theories of world history. The notion that India was a nation of great antiquity was not an invention of either the Enlightenment or Romanticism; however, the age of India and its supposed role as a land of origins acquired new significance during the Enlightenment with the advent of elaborate attempts to reconstruct the trajectory and logic of world history. Through a focus on the place of India in the writings of Voltaire, J.G. Herder, Friedrich Schlegel, G.W.F. Hegel, and Arthur Schopenhauer, this study shows how some of the defining characteristics of modern historical thought were integrally related to Europe's encounter with the Orient. The debate over Indian origins also reveals how the status of the Orient was bound to the problem of defining history itself. In deciding where and when history began, and in determining which cultures belonged inside and outside of it, philosophers of history were determining both the contours of the concept and the proper method of historical interpretation. The result was instrumental for the rise of modern historical thought.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Taran Kang was born in Miami, Florida in March, 1979. He received his B.A. (Honours) in 2001 and his M.A. in 2003 from the University of Alberta. His doctoral research was generously supported with fellowships from Cornell University and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. He will take up a postdoctoral fellowship at Yale-NUS College in July, 2012.

For My Parents

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Introduction

The Orient and the Emergence of Modern Philosophies of History

In the *Discourse on Method*, René Descartes suggests that to read the writings of the ancients is comparable to traveling to a foreign land and conversing with its inhabitants. Such an exercise not only teaches an acquaintance with the customs and ideas of other peoples; it also subverts our complacency and the naive assumption of the rightness of our own opinions, a subversion crucial to the beginning of the Cartesian philosophical enterprise. But notwithstanding the advantages of such intellectual excursions into the past, Descartes quickly admonishes his readers that an excessive concern with history may so blunt a concern with the present that “one eventually becomes a stranger in one’s own country”.¹ According to Descartes, the danger of historical research is further exacerbated by the fallibility of all historical accounts and the consequent inability of history to provide us with true certitude, which is the desired object of his own philosophical quest. This prejudicial judgement largely repeats a longstanding devaluation of history within philosophy; however, it would also call forth a revolt and, ultimately, a radical reappraisal of history’s philosophical status. By the end of the eighteenth century, not only was history treated as a matter worthy of philosophical inquiry, but the notion of a philosophy of history, foreign to Descartes, was already part of common intellectual parlance. Moreover, Descartes’ casual characterization of the past as a strange land found its own strange corresponding reversal in the portrayal of contemporary foreign peoples as themselves representing or participating in past stages of mankind’s historical development. This notion of the uneven development of different peoples and cultures decisively shaped modern European

¹ Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Related Writings*, trans. Desmond M. Clarke (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 8.

philosophies of history and narratives pertaining to the historical position of Europe and the Orient.

Within Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophies of history, the Orient was represented not only as occupying a different geographical space from the Occident, but as participating in a different historical moment. Even as the Orient functioned as a site of curiosities, a subject of fantasy, and an object of domination, it was also a source of comparison that played a defining role in Europe's own self-definition and sense of history, including what was often a sense of world-historical mission. With the expansion of European trade and conquest came an increase in travel literature and accounts of foreign cultures, which often fed into sentiments of European cultural superiority, but also generated critical self-reflection. The result in either case contributed to the formation of a new historical consciousness in the eighteenth century. Narratives of both progress and decline were integrally related to what European thinkers' thought about other parts of the world and how they conceived Europe's historical connection, or lack thereof, to foreign lands. In particular, an intensifying interest in Oriental origins proved to be decisive in shaping emergent theorizations of the movement, the structure, and even the meaning of world history.

Problems of origins were paramount in Enlightenment debates about the validity of scripture and the historical position of the Orient in relation to modern Europe. At the beginning of the century, Egypt was the country most often associated with ancient origins, particularly among those who remained sympathetic to the hermetic tradition. But as information poured into Europe from other parts of the world, more distant lands become sources of fascination, sometimes with unsettling and disruptive philosophical consequences. In this context, India came to occupy an increasingly important position in the course of the eighteenth century. Voltaire

was at the forefront of those thinkers who sought to mobilize the East for religiously and politically subversive ends. He thus held up China as an exemplar of good governance to better excoriate absolute monarchy in Europe, and he argued for the great age of India so as to cast doubt on the authority and historical accuracy of the biblical narrative about the formation of the first nations. In placing the land of the most ancient origins outside the parameters of the biblical Orient, Voltaire sought to demonstrate that the biblical narrative was geographically and temporally parochial. He thus deftly integrated an assault on the Bible with a cosmopolitan narrative of history that incorporated parts of the world far removed from Europe. In the 1780s, less than a decade after Voltaire's death, interest in India spread further as a result of the rise of Sanskrit studies. The recognition that modern European and Indian languages shared a common ancestral heritage led to a rethinking of the nature and parameters of Orient and Occident. It also further contributed to the conviction that answers to the emergence and development of civilization could be found in the study of the ancient East. The notion that India was a nation of great antiquity was not an invention of either the Enlightenment or Romanticism; however, the age of India and its supposed role as a land of origins acquired new significance during the Enlightenment with the advent of elaborate attempts to reconstruct the trajectory and logic of world history. In the early nineteenth century, the importance attributed to India was intensified in the work of German Romantics, such as Friedrich Schlegel, who imagined that a deeper understanding of Oriental origins opened the way not only to discovering humanity's past, but to shaping its future. These German thinkers were much more well-disposed towards Christianity than was Voltaire, and their interest in India derived from a quasi-religious quest to recover the lost origins of divine revelation.

The divergent ways in which philosophers of history situated India within their larger world-historical narratives bear the impress of conflicting attitudes and desires. And the striking variety of reasons for which scholars and writers entertained an interest in India belies the attempt to reduce this multiplicity of motives to a single dominant impulse. At the same time, within Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophies of history, this interest was frequently tied to one basic problematic, namely the problem of origins. Obviously, that does not mean that all those thinkers who wrote about India imagined that it was a land of the most ancient beginnings or a source of spiritual truth and wisdom. For Hegel and many defenders of the imperialist project, India was rather a benighted country, lost in superstition and lacking in historical consciousness; and this incapacity for history made Indians' claims about the antiquity of their own culture highly suspect. But the fact that thinkers such as Hegel took the trouble to mount elaborate arguments against the historical priority of India shows the extent to which the issue was deemed a matter of serious philosophical consequence. The debate over Indian origins reveals the divergent ways in which European thinkers conceptualized the historical relationship between East and West; more importantly, it shows how the status of the Orient was integrally related to the problem of defining history itself. In deciding where and when history began, and in determining which cultures belonged inside and outside of it, these thinkers were determining both the contours of the concept and the proper method of historical interpretation. The result was instrumental for the rise of modern historical thought.

The expansion of historical perspective, which Voltaire, J.G. Herder and other eighteenth-century thinkers brought about, stoked burning questions concerning the universality of aesthetic and moral standards, the relationship between the universal and the particular, the origins of culture and language, the nature of progress, and the meaning of history. A philosophy

that sought to find meaning, reason, or order in the succession of world events was henceforth not only compelled to reach far back into the past, but also to offer an account of foreign cultures. Voltaire's critique of Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet's purported "universal history" demonstrated the necessity for any future philosophy of history to go beyond the confines of Europe and the Near East and to take account of the non-European world; otherwise, it would be subject to the same charge of parochialism that made the claims of the older theological interpretation suspect. At the same time, the possibility that history would be dispersed into a plurality of disparate narratives endangered the primacy accorded to Europe as well as certain universalist principles. The impetus to a more systematic philosophy of history was not merely a reaction to the decline of an antiquated theological interpretation, but also an assertion of autonomy and ideals of universality. The epistemological problems posed to historical interpretation were strongly accentuated by Europe's deepening acquaintance with other peoples and parts of the world; as travel reports and translated texts flowed into Europe, problems of translation and intercultural understanding were intensely discussed.² The fact that this cultural transmission was made possible by the successes of trade and imperialist conquest could not fail to influence the knowledge transmitted about these cultures or its reception in Europe. But the malleability of the knowledge received and the lack of consensus on its proper interpretation were not inconsequential; and the pronounced differences of interpretation speak against the image of a monolithic Orient or a unified understanding of history within European scholarly discourse.

² As Antoine Berman notes, "It is impossible to separate the history of translation from the history of languages, of cultures, and of literatures—even of religions and of nations. To be sure, this is not a question of mixing everything up, but of showing how in each period or in each given historical setting the practice of translation *is articulated* in relation to the practice of literature, of languages, of the several intercultural and interlinguistic exchanges." *The Experience of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany*, trans. S. Heyvaert (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 2.

The appearance of multiple schools of historical thought during the last few decades of the eighteenth and the first few decades of the nineteenth century gives some indication of the tumult and transformation at work in the historical consciousness of the period. In this context, the study of history was invested with an unprecedented importance. From the Cartesian perspective, history offered only contingent truths and consequently could not provide insight into fundamental problems about nature or existence; but with the development of Enlightenment philosophies of history, the epistemological status of history was reevaluated and human culture was aggressively incorporated into more complete and encompassing systems of thought. If history could be described by Descartes as a foreign land, its invasion was now well underway; not accidentally, so was the invasion of the non-European world. The late Enlightenment “conquest of the historical world” was a conquest of much else besides.³

* * * * *

Ultimately, the present work is less about the history of Orientalism than it is about the philosophy of history and those colossal figures who were formative in its shaping. The four thinkers around whom this project revolves – Voltaire, Herder, Friedrich Schlegel, and Hegel – had markedly divergent interpretations of history; but whatever their differences, they all authored works bearing the name of the philosophy of history and conceived of their larger historical projects with this rubric in mind. Moreover, whether they were contemptuous of the Orient or enamoured of it, they devoted sustained attention to it in explicating their world-historical narratives. And within these narratives, India occupied a prominent position, especially

³ The expression “die Eroberung der geschichtlichen Welt” comes from Cassirer’s *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. Fritz C.A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), pp. 197-233, where it is used to designate the emergence of a new historical consciousness in the eighteenth century.

in regard to the problem of origins. This focus on major intellectual figures, upon whose writings much ink has already been spilled, should not be construed as diminishing the importance of lesser-known Orientalists, those unsung toilers whose laborious study of arcane languages and specialized researches were more influential than their oft forgotten names suggest. It is also not intended to belittle the contributions of important eighteenth and nineteenth-century historians, whose work had fewer philosophical pretensions. In concentrating on major philosophers of history, however, I hope to draw attention to some of the defining characteristics of modern historical thought, including quasi-philosophical claims about the meaning and movement of history, and to show how they were integrally related to Europe's encounter with the Orient.

The first chapter of the dissertation explores the appearance of a new conceptualization of history in Voltaire's *Essay on the Manners and Spirit of Nations*. It draws out the historiographical implications of Voltaire's inclusion of non-European peoples in this work and examines the position of India in his narrative of world history. It also explores how Voltaire's subversion of Mosaic chronology both diminished the importance of ancient Israel and raised the profile of the far East. The subsequent three chapters are devoted to three of the leading German philosophers of history. I here show how both the striking differences and the profound similarities between the historical narratives and methodologies of Herder, Schlegel, and Hegel were integrally related to their understanding and assessment of the Orient. In my reading of Herder, I describe how his attempts to understand the Orient shaped his historical hermeneutics and his brand of historical relativism. Special attention is devoted to his notion of historical childhood as applied to non-European peoples and to his idealized image of India, which spurred on the next generation of German thinkers to look eastwards for new sources of knowledge and inspiration. The following chapter, "Friedrich Schlegel: Indian Origins and the Future of

Europe”, investigates the influence of philology and Sanskrit studies on interpretations of history in the early nineteenth century. Schlegel, the chief theoretician of German Romanticism, undertook his Oriental researches with the conviction that the Occident’s roots could be found in India. Though his often fanciful romantic speculations found little resonance with most academic scholars, his philological approach was formative not only for comparative linguistics and Indology, but also for later understandings of history as text. The fourth chapter, “Hegel’s Vision of India: A Prelude to History”, focuses on Hegel’s work from the 1820s, primarily his lectures on the philosophy of world history. In addition, it looks at his two-part review of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, in which the philosopher offered a critique of the interpretive approaches of Wilhelm von Humboldt and August Wilhelm Schlegel, two of the leading authorities on Indological studies at the time. I argue that both Hegel’s lectures on India and his debates with Sanskritists illuminate the importance of India to his world-historical narrative although Hegel himself denied that India even had history. The fifth and final chapter concentrates on the writings of Arthur Schopenhauer, a thinker who repudiated the very idea of a philosophy of history; it explores how an intensifying anti-Hegelian critique of grand narratives related to changes in the reception of Indian thought and discusses the implications of this critical turn for later historical scholarship.

Such an inquiry into the various forms that the philosophy of history assumed in the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment period makes a provisional definition of it both desirable and suspect. A rough distinction can be drawn between theories of historiography, which pertain to the writing of history, and theories of history as such, which actually seek to apprehend the essence or meaning of events and processes, but even this division neglects to account for the degree to which both frequently shade into one another, particularly during the time period under consideration here. Because the present work endeavours to explore the diversity of philosophies

of history, a more precise determination of the category's general characteristics has not been pursued. Moreover, since I am inclined to accept the assessment of those thinkers who chose to describe their thought or their work with this designation, no attempt has been made to differentiate between a "legitimate" and an "illegitimate" philosophy of history in the fashion of R.G. Collingwood.⁴

However, it should be noted that those thinkers who first described their undertakings in terms of a "philosophy of history" brought together theories of history and historiography with elaborate narratives of world history. In spite of the great differences between them, this conceptualization of the philosophy of history as an amalgam of historical theorization and world-historical narrative was common to Voltaire, Herder, Schlegel, and Hegel. It was also something which set them apart from earlier historians and philosophers, not only authors of "universal history" such as Bossuet, but also prescient theorists of historical method, such as Giambattista Vico. In later philosophies of history, including Collingwood's, this synthesis unravels and an interest in the theorization of history becomes increasingly separated from the narrative of world history, which is marked as less worthy of serious philosophical consideration. The complex reasons for this bifurcation are themselves deserving of a separate study; they include a loss of faith in grand historical narratives, a growing conceptual divide between fact and theory, and an increasingly Eurocentric consciousness, which made the study of non-Europeans appear otiose for a complete understanding of the nature of man and human history. But for the purposes of the present study, what is more significant than the sources of this bifurcation, is the fact that its occurrence has occluded a proper apprehension of the origins and development of modern philosophies of history. An examination of their inception shows that

⁴ For Collingwood's treatment of the problem, see "The Nature and Aims of a Philosophy of History" in *Essays in the Philosophy of History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965), pp. 34-56.

theorizations of history and world-historical narratives, including narratives about the Orient, were inseparable.

Unfortunately, those scholars who have been most occupied with questions pertaining to the philosophy of history have tended to give the Orient insufficient attention. Hans Blumenberg, who puts forward a subtle and original interpretation of the emergence of the modern theory of progress in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, barely acknowledges the existence of a world outside of Europe.⁵ His attempt to reorient debates away from readings of the progress narrative as a mere secularization of an older religious eschatology deserves serious engagement; but it does not address the question of the influence of European interactions with the non-European world on western intellectuals' understandings of progress, temporality, and modernity. Likewise, Reinhart Koselleck's influential studies into changing conceptualizations of temporality in the eighteenth century, look at developments within both contemporary politics, internal to Europe, and developments within the arts, sciences, and technology as constitutive of modernity.⁶ Koselleck identifies changes in the ways that western Europeans conceived their relationship to antiquity and the future in this period, but the lack of sustained treatment of the non-European world gives the impression that the new sense of Europe's historical position had relatively little to do with contemporary interpretations of foreign cultures.

Karl Löwith's *Meaning in History*, which Blumenberg takes to task for its secularization thesis, acknowledges the importance of the Orient in the formation of modern narratives of progress, particularly in the work of Voltaire. He also points out that Voltaire's historiographical work, especially his *Essay on the Manners and Spirit of Nations*, represents a move away from

⁵ Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1985).

⁶ See Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004) and *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. Todd Samuel Presner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

older theologies of history modeled on the pattern of Augustine.⁷ However, Löwith's emphasis on the religious and eschatological character of historical narratives from antiquity to the present leads him to downplay the extent of Voltaire's break with tradition and to exaggerate the continuity of a peculiarly Judaeo-Christian understanding of history in the French Enlightenment. The substantive role of Orientalist discourse in the constitution of philosophies of history is ignored in favour of unearthing the concealed remnants of ancient eschatological visions. No doubt, the indebtedness of the principal exponents of a philosophy of history to Christianity should not be denied; this is true, both for those who sought to justify Christianity and those who wished to subvert it. But the reduction of interpretations of history in the Enlightenment to older religious models cannot be deduced from this indebtedness; nor can the Blumenbergian appeal to western self-assertion, whether in the form of scientific advancement or political emancipation, be separated from Europeans' sense of historical position, so profoundly shaped by western encounters with foreign cultures.

Of course, the corrective to this marginalization of the Orient has produced a voluminous body of scholarship in turn. Here the pioneering work of Edward Said is particularly salient. More than three decades after its publication, Said's *Orientalism* continues to inform scholars' study of western representations of the non-European world, whether taken as a point of departure or an object of criticism. Said, who tends to find western representations of the East monolithic, argues that the opposition between Orient and Occident within Orientalist discourse rests on "an ontological and epistemological distinction" made in distinguishing the two.⁸ An inquiry into this distinction, including certain thinkers' attempts to erase it, reveals that it was rooted in a certain understanding of history as much as in a particular metaphysics. But within

⁷ Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), p. 104.

⁸ Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1994), p. 2.

Said's interpretation of Orientalism, the changing conceptions of history at work in representations of the non-European world are given little consideration, an omission that helps to reinforce his own synchronic claims about Orientalist discourse. Said refers to "historicism" as contributing to the modern formation of this discourse, but he does not indicate how this particular historical approach, or its rivals for that matter, actually related to specific theories of cultural interpretation or representation.⁹

In the ensuing decades, scholars working in the postcolonial vein have been more attentive to this problematic. Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Ranajit Guha's *History at the Limit of World History*, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* grapple with figures such as Immanuel Kant, G.W.F. Hegel, Karl Marx, and Martin Heidegger and explore the intersections between their thinking about history and problems pertaining to western representations of Europe and its others.¹⁰ Chakrabarty, for example, argues for the relevance of Marx and Heidegger to contemporary south Asian historiography even as he subjects both to critical scrutiny; his main concern is not with European intellectual history, but with debates about historical practice and theory, such as the extent to which thoughts can transcend their places of origin and the ways in which "universalistic thought" is related to "particular histories".¹¹ The same issues are at work in Said's *Orientalism*; unlike Said, however, Chakrabarty, Guha, and Spivak are less interested in the historical reconstruction and description of the development of European Orientalist

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 118-9.

¹⁰ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Guha, *History at the Limit of World-History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

¹¹ Chakrabarty, pp. xiii-xiv.

discourse and more concerned with south Asian history, world history, and the status of the subaltern.

To be sure, those scholars who have attempted to follow Said more closely in this respect have not merely extended his analysis, but have often sharply deviated from his interpretations and assessments. Perhaps most significantly, post-Saidian discussions of Orientalism have increasingly drawn attention to the diversity of European intellectuals' representations of different non-European peoples, something which Said was inclined to downplay. There has thus been a recent upsurge in attention devoted to German Orientalism, hitherto eclipsed by its British and French counterparts. In addition to numerous articles and more narrowly focused monographs, a number of broader treatments of German Orientalism have appeared in the last decade, such as Todd Kontje's *German Orientalisms*, Andrea Polaschegg's *Der andere Orientalismus: Regeln deutsch-morgenländischer Imagination im 19. Jahrhundert*, and Suzanne L. Marchand's *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship*.¹² The present work is indebted to such studies and their rethinking of Orientalism, particularly in the form of German Indology. But unlike many of them, its primary focus is not language, race, religion, or empire; while these categories are of the utmost importance and are treated in the pages that follow, in the present work the principal concern is with the category of history, the different ways in which history has been plotted, narrated, and theorized. This work deals not with Indology in general, but with the place of India in the philosophy of history.

It may be reasonably asked, though, why India, rather than some other part of the non-European world, ought to be privileged as an object of inquiry. After all, Enlightenment and

¹² Kontje, *German Orientalisms* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004); Polaschegg, *Der andere Orientalismus: Regeln deutsch-morgenländischer Imagination im 19. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: W. De Gruyter, 2005); Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

post-Enlightenment philosophies of history did not emerge out of a study of any one particular foreign culture or nation, but were spurred on by encounters, intellectual and otherwise, with a diversity of peoples and parts of the world, including China, Persia, Egypt, Africa, the Ottoman Empire, and the Americas. The categorization of inhabitants of North and South America was especially important to early Enlightenment debates about the character of man in the state of nature, a topic that had far-reaching political implications. Indeed, as Ter Ellingson points out in *The Myth of the Noble Savage*, “the “Savage” and the “Oriental” were the two great ethnographic paradigms that European writers developed during the age of exploration and colonialism”.¹³ The present project neglects to explore the complexities of the historical status, or rather, the unhistorical status attributed to “savages”, who were often assimilated to a timeless, unchanging nature. Such an investigation would further enrich our understanding of eighteenth and nineteenth-century conceptions of historicity, but it would also take us too far afield. Moreover, the European fascination with India as a land of origins deserves study in its own right. Urs App argues that “[t]he birth of modern Orientalism is intimately linked to this idea of Indian origins as an alternative to the biblical narrative.”¹⁴ And as will be shown in the present work, the interest in Indian origins was also intimately linked to the emergence and development of modern philosophies of history

The point, though, is not simply to demonstrate the importance of an interest in India for eighteenth and early nineteenth-century historical thought; rather, it is to explore the specific ways in which such an interest was related to well-articulated narratives and theories. The divergences between the philosophers of history, who are studied in the present work, are thus no less significant than the points of convergence. Indeed, it is in thinking through alternative modes

¹³ Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. xii.

¹⁴ App, *The Birth of Orientalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), p. 5.

of historical narrative and theorization, which the major thinkers in this study proposed, that historians can best appreciate the complex genealogy of contemporary historiographical theories and practices. Although some of these thinkers' pronouncements on the Orient may appear antiquated, ill-informed, or even offensive, many of the principal aspects of their interpretations of history have proven to be extremely resilient and continue to shape how history is understood today, whether or not their influence is acknowledged or even recognized. The implication is not that the heritage of modern historical thought must be rejected because it has been contaminated by "Orientalism". It does suggest, however, that it is necessary to be attentive to the manner and conditions under which such thought arose.

Chapter 1

Voltaire and the Expansion of History

Although speculations on patterns of historical change and the meaning of history were already current in antiquity, the first work to bear the title of a philosophy of history appeared in 1765. When considered in relation to the elaborate theories of history that would follow in its wake, however, Voltaire's *The Philosophy of History* seems to be almost a misnomer. Voltaire did not attempt to offer a definition of the philosophy of history in this work nor did he present the sort of unified historical narrative that would distinguish later studies under this rubric. And yet the nature of his historical project, its structure and motives, points to a formative moment in European intellectual life and the emergence of a new historical consciousness. The work, interspersed with several digressions on matters of religion and theology, consists largely of an overview of ancient cultures from the earliest civilizations to the time of the Roman Empire. It lacks the coherence of a well organized narrative, but it also synthesizes philosophical inquiry with a cosmopolitan perspective on history that transcends the confines of Europe. In bringing about this expansion of historical perspective Voltaire made his most enduring contribution to the writing and study of history.

Though Voltaire is best remembered today for his *contes philosophiques*, such as *Candide*, his voluminous historical writings take up a larger share of his extant corpus than his fictional prose pieces. Before composing *The Philosophy of History*, Voltaire had already written three sweeping works on European history, *The History of Charles XII* (1731), *The Age of Louis XIV* (1751), and *The History of the Russian Empire under Peter the Great* (1763); these writings were not only commercially successful, but were also recognized for the quality of their

scholarship. The thoroughness of research and the depth of Voltaire's acquaintance with the material belie the facile characterization of their author as a mere dilettante or dabbler in historical matters. However, the advances that Voltaire's historical writing made over its predecessors have sometimes been exaggerated. A study of his forerunners, such as Pierre Bayle, Bernard de Fontenelle, François Fénelon, and Lord Bolingbroke, reveal that many of the distinguishing characteristics of Voltaire's method and style were not altogether novel.¹ His handling of narrative, with the accompanying insertion of lively political and philosophical reflections, marks a break from some of the more dry accounts of earlier antiquarian historians, but here too the mode of presentation drew on well-known, even classical precedents.²

Ultimately, more novel and consequential than Voltaire's historiographical method was the chosen subject matter of his historical inquiry and its conceptualization as embodied in his monumental *Essay on the Manners and Spirit of Nations*. The scope and detail of this work marks a watershed in modern historiography. In many respects, it comes closer to possessing the characteristics generally associated with a philosophy of history than does the work that actually bears the name. Indeed, three years after its initial publication, *The Philosophy of History* was subsumed under the *Essay*, in which it was renamed as the "Introduction" and as a part of which it is often still read today. Voltaire began writing the *Essay* in 1740, and fragmentary portions

¹ All of these figures influenced Voltaire, but the nature and extent of their influence on his historical work remains a matter of contention. J.H. Brumfitt, *Voltaire: Historian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 32-45.

² Scholars' sense of the innovation in Voltaire's work is frequently mixed with an uncertainty in ascertaining exactly what was new in his approach. In the introduction to *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present* (New York: World Publishing, 1972), Fritz Stern rightly asserts that, in retracing key developments in modern historiography, "the choice of Voltaire as a starting point is by no means capricious," p. 14. However, while pointing out that Voltaire was "a very self-conscious pioneer of a new type of philosophical and cultural historian," he does not specify what exactly was novel about the new type of philosophical and cultural history. In his classic study, *Historism: The Rise of a New Historical Outlook*, trans. J.E. Anderson (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), Friedrich Meinecke provides a much more detailed analysis of the constituent elements of Voltaire's historical thinking; he suggests that the distinctiveness of Voltaire's approach lies in a synthesis of "the mechanistic, the moralistic, and the sense of civilised satisfaction." p. 64. Meinecke here identifies the principal marks of Voltaire's historiographical method and temperament, but his own interest in methodological developments, ultimately culminating in "historism", leads him to place less significance on the actual content of Voltaire's work.

appeared sporadically for the next decade and a half. The first complete edition was published in 1756 by the Cramer Brothers of Geneva. In the following years, Voltaire considerably expanded it, adding both *The Philosophy of History* and fifty further chapters; after numerous revised editions, the final version appeared in 1769. Exercising enormous influence in both France and abroad, it was reprinted sixteen times within thirty years of the first publication.

Unlike more conventional histories, Voltaire's *Essay* offered a panoramic narrative that was not confined to matters of politics, diplomacy and warfare, but emphasized developments in commerce, the arts, science, and religion. It did not simply string together a sequence of events, but attempted to capture the spirit of an age and nation through an overview of its customs, practices, and beliefs. While the bulk of the work recounted the history of Europe from Charlemagne to Louis XIII, several chapters were devoted to China, India, Japan, the Ottoman Empire, and the Americas. Following the introductory *Philosophy of History*, the first seven chapters of the *Essay* discuss China, India, and the Islamic world before the author turns to the late Roman Empire. In this organizational schema, Voltaire anticipates Schlegel, Hegel, and later formulators of world-historical narratives, who stage the movement of history from the ancient East to the modern West. However, Voltaire refrains from drawing out any deeper metaphysical significance from the organization of his work and never claims to present an orderly progression of cultures. After the initial treatment of the Orient, Voltaire does not leave it behind for good, in the fashion of Hegel, but goes back to the same subject matter in later chapters. In fact, the penultimate chapter of the *Essay*, prior to the conclusion with its philosophical reflections on the project as a whole, focuses on Japan.³ The result, for the reader, is a sense of the proximity and contemporaneity of the non-European world. Compared to its back and forth movement between

³ Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations et sur les principaux faits de l'histoire depuis Charlemagne jusqu'à Louis XIII*, Tome II (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1963), pp. 794-99.

geographical regions and cultures, the work is more coherent in its temporal sequence, but here too there are numerous interruptions and digressions; there is thus no sharp bifurcation between modern and ancient, European and non-European. Though the *Essay* is hardly free of a sense of European superiority, its very format challenges the orderly succession of cultures, which underwrites standard progress narratives. What might be perceived as organizational sloppiness, actually functions as a check against linear simplifications of history.

In its choice of subject matter, Voltaire's *Essay* put forward a new presentation of the histories of non-European peoples, but it was not without forerunners. Perhaps most notably, a collaborative work, entitled *An Universal History from the Earliest Account of the Time to the Present*, was published in 1737 in England, shortly before Voltaire undertook the writing of the *Essay*. This compendium remained largely factual in content and while it proved to be a very useful sourcebook, it did little to challenge pre-existing interpretations of history. Voltaire, in contrast, did not simply seek to draw together a wealth of historical information about various climes and times; rather, he mobilized this material with the avowed intention of undercutting parochial religious interpretations of the past and inaugurating a more cosmopolitan and enlightened understanding of history. The traditional Christian narrative, as embodied in Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet's *Discourse on Universal History*, published in 1681, was a principal target of attack.⁴ Bossuet began his work with an account of the beginning of creation, dated roughly four thousand years before the birth of Christ, and concluded with a laudation to the reign of Charlemagne. His *Discourse* is grounded explicitly in Christian eschatology; the revolutions of empires are explicated in terms of divine providence and these events are used, in

⁴ Karl Löwith's characterization of Bossuet's work as "the last theology of history" in contradistinction to Voltaire's, "the first 'philosophy of history'", concisely brings out the difference between them. *Meaning in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), p. 104.

turn, to demonstrate the truths of the faith. The final product is a celebration of the Catholic Church and a vindication of the prerogatives of the French monarchy.

Obviously, this account of the past was anathema to Voltaire; what was most objectionable were the pretensions of universality in a work that confined itself to a small region of the globe and neglected to account for the greater part of humankind. Voltaire was particularly perturbed by the excessive attention paid to the Jews and to the omission of China and India; he writes, with much indignation, that the two latter nations were already well formed prior to those with which Bossuet's history begins.⁵ Voltaire's widening of geographical focus was accompanied by a disruption of the purposiveness and providential order that Bossuet had discerned in past events; for Voltaire, history was less a matter of discovering a single, unifying narrative than of providing an account of the plurality of customs and manners among the various peoples of the world. This interest in diversity finds further expression in his *New Considerations on History*, composed in 1744, in which Voltaire adopted as a motto the popular quotation from Terrence, "*Homo sum, humani nil a me alienum puto.*"⁶ Voltaire's invocation of this maxim was never meant to suggest that the narration of human history ought to be free of value judgements and distinctions – Voltaire was far too much of a didactic moralist for that; it did, however, indicate that history should not to be reduced to the story of great men or confined to a particular area of the globe, as in the *Discourse* of Bossuet. A full understanding of humanity and the human necessitated an engagement with diverse peoples and parts of the world.

⁵ *Essai*, Tome I, p. 196.

⁶ Voltaire, *Oeuvres historiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), p. 48.

1. The Uses of the Foreign

On account of its oppositional stance towards Bossuet, the *Essay* has often been portrayed as an Enlightenment polemic against religious orthodoxy. While this characterization contains much truth, it is important to recall that the issue that Voltaire himself foregrounded in his critique of Bossuet was not the faulty theological underpinnings of the *Discourse*, but its untenable exclusion of most of the planet's inhabitants.⁷ In seeking to include and integrate non-European and non-Judaeo-Christian peoples into "universal history", Voltaire was more than vanquishing the Christian opposition; he was articulating his own understanding of history and attempting to make a positive contribution to its study. Of course, Voltaire's *Essay*, though more subtle and understated than some of his fictional pieces, has a strong critical intent, manifested rhetorically in the employment of satire, irony, and occasionally outright insult. He mobilizes other traditions and even heaps praise upon them the better to cast scorn on those aspects of contemporary Europe, including institutions such as the Church, that he finds most disagreeable. That does not mean that the high regard that he shows for certain cultures is insincere or mere rhetorical posturing, but it does suggest that Voltaire's encounter with the foreign, whether in the form of the historical past or contemporary non-European peoples, was shaped with current problems and local controversies very much in mind.

The same tendency towards enlisting the foreign for contemporary purposes can be found in the writings of Voltaire's fellow *philosophes*. Thus Montesquieu's employment of foreign observers in his *Persian Letters*, first published in 1721, has much less to do with an accurate

⁷ After noting that modern critics "tend to underestimate the originality of Voltaire's determination to decentre history," Catherine Volpilhac-Augier suggests that his inclusion of China, India, and Persia at the outset of the *Essay* served a more "emblematic function" than a historical one, aimed largely at attacking Bossuet. "Voltaire and history," in *The Cambridge Companion to Voltaire*, ed. Nicholas Cronk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 142. But Voltaire's inclusion of other parts of the world was not simply a way of "highlighting what he always saw as the weakness of his great predecessor"; it was integral to the cosmopolitan vision of history, which he sought to expound.

representation of the beliefs and ideas of Persians than with a critique of European customs, a critique that an outsider perspective greatly facilitates.⁸ While the encounter with rival cultural and religious traditions could be used to call the status of European tradition into question, a deeper engagement with what lay beyond the confines of Europe was not necessarily an integral part of such critiques. For example, Voltaire's *Micromegas* (1752) tells the story of two extraterrestrial visitors to Earth, an account that brings out the smallness and the vanity of man in general and of contemporary European philosophers in particular; the actual place of origin of these travelers is less consequential than their bare status as foreigners. Elsewhere, Voltaire employs Native Americans and East Indians traveling to Europe with similar effect. An example of the first is *The Ingenu*, whose protagonist grows up among the Hurons; *The Letters of Amabel*, an epistolary account of the adventures of a Hindu scholar, plays with a reversal of perspective in a similar fashion.

The relationship between these fictional works and Voltaire's more properly historical studies may seem incidental. However, they not only share stylistic similarities, namely a quickness of pace and entertaining narrative, but even commonalities at the level of factual content. Voltaire's fictional works about India betray a clear preoccupation with historical matters. In *The Letters of Amabel*, which is set in India and Europe in the early sixteenth century, Voltaire narrates a story of two young Indian lovers who are abducted by Christian missionaries and conducted to Rome. Beneath the romantic and rather clichéd tale of separation, reunion, and overseas adventure, the epistolary novella offers an indictment of the Portuguese missionaries, an unflattering presentation meant to condemn not only early modern Christians,

⁸ In Montesquieu's preface, the narrator states that "these Persians knew as much as I did about the customs and way of life of our nation; they had grasped even the subtlest points, and noticed things, which, I am sure, have escaped many a German who has travelled through France." *Persian Letters*, trans. C.J. Betts (New York: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 40.

but also contemporary ones. Throughout the story, matters of chronology, the origins of religion, and the historical connections between ancient cultures are discussed in detail. These insertions inhibit rather than facilitate the main narrative, and Voltaire's decision to devote space to such issues gives an indication of the importance that he accorded to them. In good Voltairean fashion, no party is spared from the author's ridicule, but while he pokes fun at the beliefs of the Indians and some of their peculiar customs, his voice is clearly in alignment with the judgements of the story's Hindu protagonists. The duplicity and bigotry of European Christians is continually contrasted with the sincerity and tolerance of Amabed, his teacher Shastasid, and his love interest Adaté. It would be wrong to conclude, though, that Voltaire's narrative is a simple celebration of the virtues of indigenous peoples in the face of European aggression and Christian proselytizing. Within *The Letters of Amabed*, as in Voltaire's other writings, there is a marked hierarchy between various non-European peoples, and the author even takes his Christian opponents to task for not sufficiently recognizing such distinctions. For example, during the journey from Goa to Rome, Amabed encounters the Hottentots at the Cape of Good Hope. He describes them in extremely derogatory terms and presents an unflattering account of their intelligence, appearance, and morals. Indeed, on the basis of their difference from both Indians and Europeans, Amabed suggests that the Christian notion of the monogenesis of the species is erroneous; the impossibility of common descent from a pair of ancestors is testified to by the savagery of the Africans.⁹ These views are representative of Voltaire's own opinions on matters of descent, which he voiced in his attacks on the historical authenticity of scripture. They betray the stark limits of his vaunted cosmopolitanism and his attempt to entertain the perspective of the foreigner. In attacking the idea of humanity's common descent, Voltaire succumbed to the very parochialism for which he took his religious adversaries to task.

⁹ Voltaire, "The Letters of Amabed," *The Complete Tales of Voltaire, Volume II*, pp. 35-36.

But regardless of the uses to which he put it, the function of the foreign in Voltaire's thought bears more than a superficial resemblance to the function of history; at times, they are so closely intertwined as to be almost inseparable. Within Voltaire's hands, history and the Orient became means to combat the Judeo-Christian narrative; through an appeal to the ancient origins of eastern civilization, he subverted the priority of Jewish revelation and its hallowed chronology; by calling attention to the more laudable characteristics of the pagan East, he belittled a parochial religious faith that found nothing of worth save in the history of "the Chosen people" or "the holy Church"; and in identifying the more tolerant aspects of certain eastern cultures, he sought to shame absolutist France for its own religious and political intolerance. In reference to Japan, Voltaire states that "liberty of conscience was established in this land just as in all the rest of the Orient".¹⁰

Like Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, the part of the Orient to which Voltaire was most favourably disposed was geographically far removed from Europe. At the end of the seventeenth century, Leibniz proposed that it was not a mere historical accident, but a work of divine providence that the two cultures which exhibited the highest stages of intellectual and cultural development on the planet, namely the European and the Chinese, were situated at opposing ends of the Eurasian landmass.¹¹ He suggested that an exchange of knowledge between Europe and China would lead to the religious enlightenment of the Chinese (who did not yet know the truth of Christian revelation), the political improvement of the Europeans (who could learn much from

¹⁰ *Essai, Tome II*, p. 314.

¹¹ Leibniz introduces his *Novissima Sinica* (1699), a work devoted to recent developments in China, with the following reference to providence: "I consider it a singular plan of the fates that human cultivation and refinement should today be concentrated, as it were, in the two extremes of our continent, Europe and Tschina (as they call it), which adorns the Orient as Europe does the opposite edge of the earth. Perhaps Supreme Providence has arranged such an arrangement, so that, as the most cultivated and distant peoples [politissimae gentes eademque remotissimae] stretch out their arms to each other, those in between may gradually be brought to a better way of life." *The Preface to Leibniz's Novissima Sinica*, trans. Donald F. Lach (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1957), p. 68.

the greater prudence and rationality of Chinese ethics and politics), and to the scientific advancement of both. Voltaire concurred with Leibniz's high regard for China's political organization and administration, but he was much less sanguine about the possibility of Christian missionaries bringing religious enlightenment to the Chinese. His admiration for China stemmed as much from its resistance to religious dogmatism as from its meritocratic form of governance; he even went so far as to claim that "superstition seems to have been established among all nations, except the men of letters in China."¹² The Chinese tendency towards rationality was attributable, in large measure, to the felicitous influence of Confucius and his followers. For Voltaire, Confucius embodied the ideal of the sage, who offered sound practical advice about governance and morality without immodestly setting himself up as a prophet in possession of divine or superhuman wisdom.¹³ Among later German thinkers, Confucius' pragmatism and his indifference to metaphysical speculation made him appear hardly worthy of the appellation of "philosopher". Voltaire, however, refers to him in his *Philosophical Dictionary*, under the entry "philosopher", as exemplary for his uprightness in the pursuit of truth.¹⁴ He even goes so far as to claim that Confucius was the only legislator who never wanted to deceive the people for whom he formulated laws. Because it wisely followed the precepts and spirit of its greatest teacher, China has been spared from the religious fanaticism that, according to Voltaire, has caused much of the greatest harm to human happiness throughout the rest of the world. The perceived sobriety and worldliness of Confucianism, with its emphasis on self-cultivation and its resistance to fruitless metaphysical inquiry, was also in accordance with Voltaire's own skepticism and bourgeois values.

¹² "Enfin les superstitions paraissent établies chez toutes les nations, excepté chez les lettrés de la Chine." *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹³ Shun-Ching Song, *Voltaire et la Chine* (Aix-en-Provence: Université de Provence, 1989), pp. 154-56.

¹⁴ Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, trans. Peter Gay (New York: Basic Books, 1962), p. 420.

Although Voltaire was more suspicious of India on account of its theocratic constitution, it was, after China, the part of the Orient that he viewed most favourably. And while it was upheld less often than China as a model to be emulated, India yet served an even more important function in Voltaire's extended critique of Judaism and Christianity. Since one of his favoured techniques for casting doubt on the Bible was to show how the teachings contained therein and the stories narrated were actually derivative, he welcomed any evidence about the greater age of the non-biblical Orient; the antiquity of India could here be deployed to good effect. In *The Philosophy of History*, Voltaire suggested that "India, China, the banks of the Euphrates, and of the Tigris, were very populous when the other regions were almost desolate."¹⁵ But he adds that "[i]f conjectures are allowable, the Indians towards the Ganges are, perhaps, the men who were most anciently united into a body of people."¹⁶ As evidence thereof, he mentions the fact that the most ancient artifacts which the Emperor of China displayed to visiting Christian missionaries were of Indian origin. He further suggests that an ancient form of Indian specie, which was among the Emperor's possessions, preceded any currency in China and that it was most probably from India that the Persians learned the craft of coining.

To be sure, the idea of India as an ancient land had a long pedigree before Voltaire and was hardly an invention of the eighteenth century. However, Voltaire inflated India's historical importance by situating it within a larger world-historical genealogy, wherein the importance accorded to ancient Jewish history was greatly diminished. Speculations on the ancient Orient took on a deeper significance in this context since they threatened to disrupt standard narratives of occidental history, understood as the story of Christendom. Against the marginalization of the Orient, Voltaire declared in his *Essay* that it was "the cradle of the arts, which has given

¹⁵ Voltaire, *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1965), p. 11.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

everything to the Occident”, a judgement that was not only meant to undermine a complacent sense of western superiority, but that also made knowledge of this part of the world indispensable for understanding the West itself.¹⁷ And as Voltaire’s own crusade against the Church intensified in his later years, his attachment to the idea of India as the most ancient nation deepened.¹⁸ In the 1770s, the French astronomer Jean Sylvain Bailly speculated about the Asiatic roots of humankind in his *Letters on the Origins and Sciences of the Peoples of Asia*. In a letter to his compatriot, written in December, 1775, Voltaire expressed his consensus in regard to Bailly’s judgement about Asia’s great antiquity, but he insisted that it was out of India, not north central Asia as Bailly imagined, that civilization first arose. Voltaire asserted that he was “convinced that everything has come to us from the banks of the Ganges, astronomy, astrology, metempsychosis, etc.”¹⁹ However, this argument for the primacy of Indian origins was not intended as an endorsement of the view that India was the original homeland of humankind; in fact, Voltaire mocks the Brahmins who subscribe to this position. Since Voltaire did not believe in the monogenesis of the species, he felt no need to posit a single region or part of the world as the species’ *Urheimat*. For Voltaire, India was not the Edenic garden out of which the primal pair first emerged, but rather a land of ancient civilization, which was the source of much knowledge and wisdom in antiquity.

¹⁷ “l’Orient, berceau de tous les arts, et qui a tout donné à l’Occident”, *Essai, Tome I*, p. 197.

¹⁸ Compared to the earlier historical works, the writings from the 1760s have fewer pretensions to objectivity and are more polemical; they are distinguished by an intensification of his critique of religious intolerance and Christian dogma. The reasons for this change are manifold and are not unrelated to Voltaire’s ongoing personal altercations with religious authorities, who attempted to suppress the publication and dissemination of his writings. The case of Jean Calas, a merchant from Toulouse and a victim of anti-Protestant sentiment who was tortured and executed in 1762 on false charges of homicide, further encouraged Voltaire to step up his own anti-Christian polemic. On the case itself, see David D. Bien, *The Calas Affair* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960); for an account of Voltaire’s attitudes towards religion in general, and Christianity in particular, see René Pomeau, *La Religion de Voltaire* (Paris: A.G. Nizet, 1969).

¹⁹ Voltaire, *Correspondance, XII* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), pp. 340-1.

As was not uncommon at the time, Voltaire argued for the existence of historical connections between ancient India and Europe, particularly Greece. In regard to their mythology, he describes the ancient Greeks as “the disciples of India and Egypt”.²⁰ And he asserts that Pythagoras acquired not only his belief in reincarnation and vegetarianism from Indian gymnosophists, but even some of his most important insights into geometry pertaining to the properties of triangles. More controversial and suspect were his attempts to find the origins of biblical names, tales, and ideas in ancient Indian texts. His insinuation that the name “Abraham” was actually a borrowing from the Indian “Brama” is typical of his subversive, and rather fanciful, etymologizing.²¹ In the *Essay*, Voltaire also claims that the story of the fall of the angels was first recorded in the Hindu *Shasta* and only later adopted by the Jews. And where Voltaire does not find evidence of such connections, either historically or theologically, between the Indian and Judaeo-Christian tradition, it is often to the detriment of the latter; he thus praises the religious tolerance and lofty ideals of the Brahmins, which he contrasts with the fanaticism and parochialism of Christians and Jews.²²

Part of the attraction of India for Voltaire was its geographical location. Whereas Egypt was an important land within the biblical narrative, India fell outside the purview of the Old

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 228. Writing at roughly the same time, William Warburton asserted, in *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated*, that the existence of Greece’s philosophical debts to Egypt was “the best established fact in antiquity”. For a discussion of the subsequent decline of this interpretation and an emphasis on the autochthonous character of Greek/European thought, see Robert Bernasconi, “Krimskrams: Hegel and the Current Controversy about the Beginnings of Philosophy,” in *Interrogating the Tradition: Hermeneutics and the History of Philosophy*, ed. Charles E. Scott and John Sallis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), pp. 191-208.

²¹ *Essai*, Tome I, p. 55. The connection between these names was not an invention of Voltaire, but was a seriously entertained hypothesis at the time. Isaac Newton made a similar claim in his *Chronology*; but in Newton’s version, more congenial to the primacy of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, it was the “the ancient Brachmans” who derived their name from Abraham. App, *The Birth of Orientalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), p. 30.

²² Voltaire’s critical pronouncements about Judaism and the Jewish people have often been interpreted in terms of anti-Semitism. However, Harvey Chisick argues for the inadequacy of this characterization and insists on the importance of contextualizing Voltaire’s judgements on the Jews in terms of the *philosophe*’s ideas about ethics and biblical scripture. “Ethics and History in Voltaire’s Attitudes towards the Jews,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 35 (2002), pp. 577-600.

Testament and the New Testament. Even for those champions of hermeticism, who preferred Egypt to the Israelites, the fact remained that Mosaic teachings were generally considered an important part of hermetic wisdom, even if Moses' ideas were tied to a more ancient Egyptian tradition. Although the defenders of the hermetic tradition often held ideas that were highly unorthodox or even heretical, an appeal to the wisdom of the ancient Egyptians yet remained compatible with a commitment to Christianity. But in emphasizing the antiquity of India, Voltaire sought to radically subvert Mosaic chronology and displace Israel. The argument that India was a land more ancient than any of those mentioned in scripture undermined claims for the priority and universality of the biblical narrative. It is no coincidence then that as Voltaire's polemic against Christianity intensified in the last two decades of his life, he became more interested in ancient Indian origins and more inclined to make bold claims about India's antiquity.

Voltaire's interest in Indian origins is clearly evident in his scattered reflections on the *Ezour-vedam*, a work that was supposedly an abbreviated version of the most ancient Indian holy book, but was actually a forgery. In his *Essay*, he lauds the sublime conception of God contained in this supposedly ancient text; he also asserts that it contains information about the deluge, the four ages of history later found in Hesiod, and the story of the first man, named Adimo.²³ The fact that the *Ezour-vedam* was later discovered to be a forgery, and was even looked upon with great suspicion by many of Voltaire's contemporaries, has been cited as indicative of Voltaire's lack of insight and his readiness to believe anything that confirmed his prejudiced views of religion and history.²⁴ However, it has also been more recently argued that Voltaire was not

²³ *Essai*, pp. 240-241.

²⁴ Pomeau, pp. 364-365.

really a dupe, but utilized the text for his own ends without being convinced of its authenticity.²⁵ In any case, Voltaire never imagined that the *Ezour-vedam* provided access to some primordial revelation obscured by time; rather, he used it to show that the idea of monotheism was common to many ancient nations and was not the sole possession of the ancient Israelites. And this was a conviction he sincerely held, whatever we might make of his actual views on the authenticity of the *Ezour-vedam*. While his attempts to deflate the historical importance of the Jewish people in favour of India thus bear some resemblance to the attempts of earlier proponents of hermeticism to elevate ancient Egypt at the expense of Israel, Voltaire did not believe, as the hermeticists did, that the Orient contained some divinely inspired esoteric wisdom about the godhead. Likewise, the later Romantic fascination with Oriental origins, through which the word of God could supposedly be accessed, was completely foreign to Voltaire's understanding of divinity, his approach to history, and his personal temperament.

Apart from its polemical uses as a weapon to batter down Mosaic chronology and Christian theology, India also served a more constructive purpose in buttressing Voltaire's own philosophy of God and morality. According to Voltaire's brand of deism, no religion has a monopoly on the proper belief in God, nor is any single people in possession of the one true revelation. Instead, the belief in God, like a sense of morality, is natural to human beings and common to all, notwithstanding the great distortions that this belief has undergone historically. In showing that the most ancient nations, particularly China and India, were monotheistic, Voltaire sought to prove that "Theism is a religion that is present in all religions; it is a metal that

²⁵ App, pp. 51-64.

alloys with all the others and whose veins run underground to the four corners of the world.”²⁶ And whereas some Christian thinkers argued that the presence of monotheistic elements in Chinese and Indian religion was the product of an imperfect transmission of biblical teachings to the East, Voltaire reversed the direction of transmission, claiming instead that the Old Testament was derivative of ancient Indian texts.

2. Situating India and Europe

The existence of Europe’s debts to Asia did not, for all that, annul the reality of profound cultural differences between them, and Voltaire attempted to give an account of the causes at work in producing these differences. A frequently invoked argument at the time was that the birth of civilization in eastern climes was due to temperate and favourable environmental conditions which facilitated the cultivation of the arts and sciences. Voltaire explained that the early origins of Indian civilization were to be attributed to the fertility of the land in the subcontinent and the ease with which cultivation consequently occurred. This superabundance allowed the people to flourish and prosper almost effortlessly; conversely, less hospitable regions, such as that of northern Europe, demanded much more labour and planning, a fact that militated against the development of culture in these areas. The argument that climatic conditions shape a people’s customs and spirit, a point made by Montesquieu and Johann Joachim Winckelmann among many others, was a commonplace in Enlightenment discourse.²⁷ Montesquieu even drew a direct correlation between a people’s moral character and the climatic

²⁶ “La théisme est une religion répandue dans toutes les religions; c’est un métal qui s’allie avec tous les autres, et dont les veines s’étendent sous terre aux quatre coins du monde.” *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, v. 20 (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1879), p. 505.

²⁷ Winckelmann tied the appearance of a people’s physical beauty to its climate, at least in part; he further suggested that peoples of certain regions were more predisposed to produce great art due to their frequent interaction with the beautiful. *History of the Art of Antiquity*, trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2006), pp. 117-120.

conditions under which it arises. After claiming that “men are more vigorous in cold climates”, he went on to note that “Indians are by nature without courage” and attributed this fact to the excessive heat of the environment.²⁸

The difficulty of such explanations was that they were not able to sufficiently account for historical change since the succession of historical events outpaced alterations in the natural environment; the ostensible advantage was that they facilitated an apprehension of the unchanging spirit of nations, the synchronic substratum or structure beneath the appearance of superficial events. This subordination of history to natural phenomena was integral to the later, more thorough essentializing of cultures; its cultural inflections are already evident in Voltaire’s assertion that “the Oriental and southern climes derive everything from nature; whereas we, in the northern Occident, owe all to time, to commerce, and to a belated industry.”²⁹ Not accidentally, later interpretations of history as a story of man’s liberation from nature seamlessly meshed with a trajectory of the Occident’s surpassing of the Orient, which was itself inscribed as a site of unchanging nature.

But even though Voltaire attempted to account for the beginnings of human civilization in terms of environmental influences, he expressed reservations towards arguments reducing forms of government and religion to climate. For Voltaire, climate, government, and religion together form the three greatest influences on the human spirit, and, while they exercise influence upon one another, none of them can be reduced to the other.³⁰ Voltaire thus attacks the logic of explaining the appearance of political systems and social arrangements in accordance with environmental factors and takes issue in the *Essay* with some of Montesquieu’s specific

²⁸ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. and ed. Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller, and Harold Samuel Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 231-5.

²⁹ “Les climats orientaux, voisins du Midi, tiennent tout de la nature; et nous, dans notre Occident septentrional, nous devons tout au temps, au commerce, à une industrie tardive.” *Essai, Tome I*, p. 197.

³⁰ *Essai, Tome II*, p. 806.

explanations. He notes the inconsistency in Montesquieu's assertion that liberty arises more easily in mountainous areas rather than plains and points out that Asia has more mountain ranges than Europe, a fact that the author of *The Spirit of the Laws* seemed to have neglected when denying the presence of liberty in Asia.³¹ Indeed, inverting Montesquieu's assessment of the Indians as condemned to despotism due to climatic factors, Voltaire remarks that the heat of the Indian climate and the fecundity of its soil actually contributed to the "liberty" of the natives.³²

The reference to liberty in this context was intended as a rebuttal to Montesquieu's description of the dominant form of government in Asia as despotism. This characterization became a staple of Orientalist discourse in the nineteenth century and was frequently invoked in order to differentiate freedom-loving Europeans from slavish Asiatics. While Voltaire delighted in recounting the exotic customs and beliefs of others, he was suspicious of totalizing generalizations about the differences between Asians and Europeans in regard to government and religion. He took particular exception to the commonly held opinion at the time that Indians possessed no property since all land was actually the property of the Mughal emperor. This view was upheld both by European political theorists and even some European travelers to India, such as François Bernier, who visited the Mughal court and served as a physician to the emperor Aurangzeb in the 1660s. Voltaire relied on travel reports, such as Bernier's *Travels in the Mughal Empire*, but he also exercised a skepticism towards claims about foreign peoples that he believed were incompatible with reason and human nature. More specifically, he identified inconsistencies within travelers' accounts and the contradictions between them; against Bernier's judgement about the Mughal emperor possessing all lands, he asks how this claim can be squared with Jean-Baptiste Tavernier's observations about the great wealth and opulence of Indian

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 807.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 227.

merchants.³³ In the face of contradictory reports, Voltaire was generally inclined to prefer the more favourable description of India and its people against the more disparaging assessments.³⁴ Any identification, then, of the Indian form of government with despotism was unwelcome.

For Voltaire, despotism is “not a form of government, but the subversion of all government”; it is ultimately destructive to itself and cannot subsist for long; therefore, no viable form of social organization can rest upon its foundations and endure.³⁵ Those who believe that despotism is the foundation of Oriental cultures are consequently asserting something which is socially and politically impossible. It is further “an idea, humiliating to the human species” to imagine that there are countries in which the majority of people toil, without their own interests and property, only so that everything can be devoured by their exploiters.³⁶ Voltaire suggests that the misinterpretations about Indian property relations derive from a poor understanding of the system of vassalage at work; in fact, he draws comparisons to medieval European feudal arrangements as somewhat analogous to the Indian case. He intimates that double standards are at work in pronouncing harsh judgements on foreign peoples. As a thought experiment, he urges his reader to entertain the idea of an Indian Banyan visiting Italy in the early medieval period – “would he [the Banyan] have had reason to affirm that the Italians possessed nothing of their own?”³⁷ Even as Voltaire happily expounds upon the strange and exotic ways of foreign peoples, he also warns about the dangers of exaggerating the extent of important differences.

And the differences between European and non-European nations, which he chooses to emphasize, are not always to the credit of the former. In the *Essay*, he notes that the one thing

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 404-405.

³⁴ Jyoti Mohan, “La civilisation la plus antique: Voltaire’s Images of India,” *Journal of World History* 16 (2005), pp. 173-185.

³⁵ *Essai, Tome II*, p. 784.

³⁶ “On ne peut trop combattre cette idée, humiliante pour le genre humain, qu’il y a des pays où des millions des hommes travaillent sans cesse pour un seul qui dévore tout.” *Ibid.*, p. 322.

³⁷ “Un Banian qui aurait voyagé en Italie du temps d’Astolphe et d’Albouin aurait-il eu raison d’affirmer que les Italiens ne possédaient rien en propre?” *Ibid.*, p. 322.

that unites East and West is the tendency towards war, murder, and destruction; but after lamenting their ubiquity, he adds that both India and China have suffered much less from these ills than other parts of the world and have not displayed the same conquering zeal as their northern neighbours.³⁸ The subsequent emphasis on the softness of the Indians certainly bears an element of condescension; the Indians are lacking in the manly warlike nature, by which Europe has distinguished itself. Voltaire himself vacillates between describing their peaceful character in terms of “virtue” or “sweetness”.³⁹ This condescension is mixed, however, with a sense that such softness is morally preferable to the violence and inhumanity of the conquerors. Throughout the *Essay*, Voltaire inveighs against war and its horrors; he attributes its endurance to avarice, cruelty, fanaticism, and stupidity. In Voltaire’s account, the soldier and the martial prince, who were traditionally the chosen heroes of historical narration, are frequently denigrated for their violence and lust for conquest. For Voltaire, those who generate wealth and spread knowledge should be preferred to those who shed blood; and history itself must be understood not as a sequence of battles, but as a story of whole nations in their various aspects.⁴⁰ Voltaire’s pronouncements on war are representative of mainstream Enlightenment denunciations; with a few exceptions, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Ferguson, who, while critical of plunder and rapine, also recognized the virtues of war in building a healthy and virile body

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 808.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 808.

⁴⁰ J.G.A. Pocock questions “Voltaire’s repeated dismissals of ‘kings-and-battles’ history as unworthy of the philosopher’s attention” and cautions us not to take these pronouncements at face value; he argues rather that the *Essay* “cannot be viewed apart from Voltaire’s other major works of history, and that these take the form of histories of great kings”. *Barbarism and Religion, Volume II: Narratives of Civil Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 75. Pocock himself shows how the *Essay* is illuminated when placed in relation to Voltaire’s writings on “the kings of the north,” but he also underestimates the extent to which this work deviates from Voltaire’s more courtly histories on Charles XII, Louis XIV, and Peter the Great.

politic, most of the *philosophes* were in agreement about war's pernicious causes and consequences.⁴¹

Unlike the general condemnation of war, the attitudes of the leading thinkers of the Enlightenment towards European imperialism were much more fraught and ambivalent. Notwithstanding Voltaire's passionate condemnation of war in general, his observations about European conquest and colonization are uncertain and inconsistent. Even in criticizing the slave trade, he suggests that the Africans are more culpable than the Europeans since it is the former who are so ignoble as to sell their brethren into bondage; this line of argument diminished rather than strengthened the moral imperative for Europeans to abolish the practice. At the same time, his antipathy to Europeans' violence against native peoples was instrumental in generating more radical critiques, such as the Abbé Raynal's popular anti-imperialist tract, *The History of the Two Indies*. Raynal's work, which owes much to the *Essay* in both its subject matter and its attempt to counter European prejudices through the widening of historical perspective, carries a far more critical account of European expansionism. Voltaire's influence is perhaps most evident in the first edition's rather glowing assessment of China, which draws attention to the efficiency and legality of China's government.⁴² These passages were themselves amended in later editions, most probably by Denis Diderot, who was both less prone to view the operations of the Chinese state favourably and more inclined to attack the excesses of European expansionism. Compared to Diderot's vigorous condemnation, Voltaire's objections sound tepid.⁴³ Often times, he speaks

⁴¹ Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation. Volume II: The Science of Freedom* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), pp. 401-407.

⁴² Raynal, *A History of the Two Indies: A Translated Selection of Writings from Raynal's "Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements des Européens dans les Deux Indes"*, ed. and trans. Peter Jimack. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 9-11.

⁴³ In *Enlightenment against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), Sankar Muthu shows that Diderot was critical not only of the cruelty of European conquerors, but of European pretensions to civilize foreign peoples. He thereby shifted the ground from a moralistic critique of European excesses towards an indictment of the imperialist enterprise as a whole.

out against colonial ventures less because of the harm they have caused foreign populations under the European yoke than because they have proven financially burdensome to the government and people of the imperialist metropolises. They have also led the European powers to stupidly fight amongst themselves. In a piece that examines the contemporary state of India and its people, particularly in terms of its relations with the conquering French and English, Voltaire claims that “[w]e have shown how much we surpass them in courage and in wickedness, and how inferior we are to them in wisdom.”⁴⁴ But this lack of wisdom manifests itself as much in the lack of knowing one’s own self-interest as it does in any absence of humanity towards others.

As a result of the depredation of foreign conquerors, India has suffered, according to Voltaire, from a spiritual and intellectual degeneration in recent centuries. He notes that up until the thirteenth century, the philosophical spirit still had not been wholly extirpated and cites, as evidence, a tract from the time attacking religious dogmatism and upholding a healthy skepticism congenial to Voltaire’s own philosophical temperament.⁴⁵ Voltaire suggests that “a superstitious respect for antiquity” in India has unfortunately prevented further philosophical and moral progress, and he notes that this same false reverence for the past was the cause of the mediocrity of Europe in the middle ages.⁴⁶ Drawing a further parallel with European history, he explains that the rule of the Tartars has depressed the Indian spirit and sciences just as the rule of the Turks depressed the spirit of the Greeks.⁴⁷ In spite of this decline, he describes the Brahmins as repositories of wisdom and models of compassion; in them, “there is a persevering goodness of

⁴⁴ Voltaire, *Fragments on India*, trans. Freda Bedi (Lahore: Contemporary India Publications, 1937), p. 3.

⁴⁵ *Essai, Tome I*, p. 231.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

⁴⁷ *Essai, Tome II*, p. 803. While both the Turks and the Mughals are blamed for the decline of the native peoples living under their rule, this does not lead to a more general attack on Islam, as might be expected. Indeed, elsewhere, Voltaire praises Arab Muslims for helping to civilize and refine parts of Asia, Africa, and Spain. For an account of Voltaire’s complicated relationship to Islam, see Djavâd Hadidi, *Voltaire et l’Islam* (Paris: Publications Orientalistes de France, 1974). Though Voltaire was initially extremely critical of Islam, and even portrayed its prophet as a wicked charlatan in his play *Mahomet*, he subsequently came to a far more favourable and sympathetic assessment of the religion and its founder.

soul, maintained by a religiously abstemious life; a sublime philosophy, though a fantastic one, veiled by ingenious allegories; a horror of the shedding of blood; a constant kindness towards man and beast.”⁴⁸ After this encomium, he adds, though, that their encouragement of the practice of *sati*, in which widows burn themselves on the funeral pyres of their husbands, counts as “the most despicable superstition”.

Clearly, then, Voltaire’s method of using the Orient as a theoretical weapon to attack a dogmatic, scripturally-based interpretation of world history could also assume the form of a comparison detrimental to the non-European world in which the latter was portrayed as inhabiting a stage of stagnation or historical retardation overcome by modern European civilization. At the same time, the slowness and incompleteness of this overcoming in the heart of civilized Europe never failed to attract Voltaire’s notice and disdain. After listing the distinguishing characteristics of savages in his *Philosophy of History*, Voltaire remarks that “[t]here are such savages as these all over Europe.” Going further, he even adds that “[i]t must certainly be agreed that the people of Canada, and the Caffres, whom we have been pleased to style savages, are infinitely superior to our own.”⁴⁹ This sense of the limits of Europe’s own emancipation and his relentless mockery of the parochialism of his adversaries did not prevent him, however, from sharing in many of their prejudices or their sense of cultural superiority. Following a lengthy indictment of northwestern Europe’s barbarous past, including accusations that the ancient Gauls were cannibals and that the ancient Germans engaged in human sacrifice, and after eulogizing the great Oriental cultures of the ancient world, he takes care to add that what Europe lacked in its initial development, it has more than compensated for with accelerated

⁴⁸ *Fragments on India*, p. 24.

⁴⁹ *The Philosophy of History*, p. 26.

advancements in recent centuries.⁵⁰ Surveying the accomplishments of the East, Voltaire states that, with regard to any of Asia's most cultivated nations, the modern European can confidently assert that "it has gone before us and we have surpassed it".⁵¹ The tension between the centrality of Europe in Voltaire's account and his cosmopolitan vision, which seeks to give a prominent place to other parts of the world, finds full expression here.⁵²

Voltaire's self-satisfaction in the superiority of his own era has often been interpreted as participating in some form of progress narrative. His comparison of Europe to Asia in the *Essay*, in which the former overtakes the latter after its belated beginnings, certainly points to moments of historical advancement and development. However, his pronouncements on the trajectory of world history are often inconsistent and even contradictory. In reflecting on the future, he opined that "[t]he time will come when the savages of today will have their operas, and when we will be reduced to the dance of the peace pipe."⁵³ It is difficult to assess to what extent Voltaire actually believed in the likelihood of such an outcome; it seems more probable that his assertion was intended to emphasize the contingencies of history rather than to provide a reasonable prediction of future events. In any case, he certainly harbored little conviction in the inevitability of progress or a belief in the ultimate triumph of knowledge and freedom over ignorance and tyranny, although he conceived of his own efforts and interventions as facilitating such advances. With Voltaire, universal reason functions both as an implicit origin and a desired end; its priority

⁵⁰ *Essai, Tome I*, pp. 199-200.

⁵¹ *Essai, Tome II*, p. 412. "Il nous a précédés, et nous l'avons surpassé."

⁵² The distinction between Voltaire's Europeanism and cosmopolitanism has not always been clearly drawn. In *Narratives of Enlightenment: Cosmopolitan history from Voltaire to Gibbon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Karen O'Brien tends to conflate the latter term with "an intellectual investment in the idea of a common European civilization." p. 2. For a more critical account of the tensions between these tendencies, see Volker Steinkamp, "Voltaire – Europäer oder Kosmopolit? Überlegungen zum *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*," in *Voltaire und Europa: Der interkulturelle Kontext von Voltaires Correspondance*, ed. Brigitte Winklehner (Tübingen: Stauffenburg Verlag, 2006), pp. 69-78.

⁵³ Henry Vyverberg, *Historical Pessimism in the French Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 170.

is established by the immutability of human nature; its futurity, the historical success of reason over superstition and dogma, finds its embodiment in the ongoing Enlightenment project.⁵⁴ But the success of the project remains in doubt. In the *Essay*, Voltaire describes his own endeavour as attempting to preserve the memory of the little wisdom and virtue human history presents to us amidst the morass of all its folly and wickedness. The recollection of the former stirs us to emulation, and the latter humbles us and teaches what we ought to avoid. The explicitly didactic function of the *Essay*, which instructs us in what we should do, dampens metaphysical speculations about where we are inevitably heading. Indeed, even a socio-economic theory of change is lacking; while there is a hierarchical distinction made between the savage and the civilized, Voltaire does not provide a structural model for the transition from the one to the other in the manner of Adam Smith, with his stadial theory of development.⁵⁵

In Voltaire's case, a confidence in the superiority of eighteenth-century Europe was tempered with a sense of its fragility. His invocation of God and the moral law was itself a way of providing a firm foundation for life in an unpredictable and uncertain world. Not surprisingly then, he was suspicious of those more radical *philosophes* who threatened to do away with God and rational religion altogether. Against the atheistic musings of Diderot, Claude Adrien Helvétius, Baron d'Holbach, and Julien Offray de La Mettrie, he insisted that the denial of God's existence was contrary to reason and deprived morality of one of its strongest supports. In presenting this case, Voltaire was once again able to deploy history and the Orient to argumentative effect. By bringing forth evidence that civilized peoples, from the most diverse

⁵⁴ Stéphane Pujol, "Histoire et philosophie de l'histoire au XVIII^e siècle: la critique de l'universalisme chez Voltaire et Herder," in *Eighteenth-century Research: Universal reason and national culture during the Enlightenment*, ed. David A. Bell, Ludmilla Pimenova, and Stéphane Pujol (Paris: Champion, 1999), pp. 183-5.

⁵⁵ It is worth noting here that while stadial theories later came to be integral to Eurocentric progress narratives, Smith's own explanation of the socio-economic transitions between stages was largely free of prejudicial value judgements about earlier stages and the peoples inhabiting them. See Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

parts of the world and throughout the ages, had shared a common conviction in the existence of God and in a universally valid ethics, he sought to reinforce his own deistic position against the younger, more revolutionary generation of *philosophes*.⁵⁶ Despite the pronounced differences between Europe and Asia, Voltaire insisted that their ethical principles were fundamentally the same, and this commonality was suggestive of both the existence of a transhistorical morality and a deity who inscribed it on the hearts of men. He affirms that “the foundation of morality is the same among all nations”.⁵⁷ Amidst the great diversity of customs, which Voltaire delights in recounting, he holds fast to “a small number of invariable principles”, which he sees present across time and space. Instead of finding an argument for cultural relativism, Voltaire drew upon his knowledge of the past and other cultures to lend support to the Enlightenment commitment to certain universals. After poking fun at the silly superstitions of the Brahmins, Voltaire praises their body of law and morality encoded in “ten commandments”. He writes, “[t]hese ten commandments make us forgive all the ridiculous rites. We evidently find that morality is the same with all civilized nations; and that the most sacred customs amongst one people, appear to others as extravagant or detestable. Established rites at present divide mankind, and morality reunites them.”⁵⁸ The almost aesthetic delight in variety here joins with the comforting thought that human beings are ultimately united in the moral law.

⁵⁶ The emphasis on the judgements of so-called civilized peoples consciously omits consideration of “savages”. Voltaire thus attacks Bayle’s claim that there are nations of atheists. In reference to “Kaffirs and Hottentots”, he asserts that “To maintain that they are atheists is like saying that they are anti-Cartesians; they are neither for nor against Descartes. They are really children; a child is neither atheist nor deist – he is nothing.” *Philosophical Dictionary*, pp. 103-104.

⁵⁷ “le fondement de la morale est le même chez toutes les nations,” *Essai, Tome II*, p. 313.

⁵⁸ *The Philosophy of History*, p. 80.

3. Voltaire and Vico

Whatever one might think of Voltaire's reflections on God and the moral order of things, his *Essay on the Manners and Spirit of Nations* constitutes one of the most ambitious and influential attempts within Enlightenment historiography to bring together historical and philosophical inquiry. For Voltaire, history was no mere antiquarian recording of the past, but an intellectual pursuit that bore on vital questions pertaining to religion, morality, politics, and the place of human beings in the world. And more than any of his other historical works, the *Essay* highlighted the relevance of history to these problems. Yet, rather ironically, Voltaire's immense contribution to the expansion of the writing of history has often been neglected due to the sense that its originator was sadly lacking in philosophical insight. Indeed, according to a longstanding Hegelian judgement, the common-sensical empiricism of Voltaire's approach disqualifies it from even being considered a proper philosophy of history. In drawing attention to the historiographical revolution that Voltaire helped to inaugurate, it is thus instructive to briefly recall the contributions of his older and more "philosophical" contemporary, Giambattista Vico.

Unlike Voltaire, whose fame in the mid-eighteenth century was unrivalled, Vico was hardly recognized during his lifetime outside of his native Naples and his ideas exercised little direct influence on later eighteenth-century historians. Subsequent scholars, however, have rightly recognized him as one of the most original thinkers of his time and a prescient forerunner of later theorizations of history. He has come to be enlisted by a host of scholars with markedly divergent agendas, including Marxists, neo-Kantians, neo-Hegelians, pragmatists, structuralists, post-structuralists, and more. And while Vico's star has risen among historical theorists of diverse persuasions, Voltaire's has tended to fall. The contrast between them extends far beyond the striking differences in the history of their reception. As a great historian of the Enlightenment

has noted, “[i]f ever there were two incompatible modes of speech, they were Vico’s and Voltaire’s.”⁵⁹

In his masterpiece, *The New Science*, the first edition of which appeared in 1725, Vico argued against the idea of an immutable human essence; he maintained, instead, that human beings continually refashion and transform themselves through time. They do this not only as individuals, but as members of a culture, which constitutes an organic whole. In order to know and appreciate such cultures, Vico insisted that they needed to be understood on their own terms and not be subjected to external standards.⁶⁰ Perhaps more radical still, in opposition to the prevailing Cartesian orthodoxy, Vico asserted that humans have a deeper understanding of what they make themselves than they have of the external world; and since they make their own history, they have a privileged access to its study, an access denied to the physical sciences.⁶¹ In addition to this theorizing of history as a science, Vico showed the fruitfulness of his approach in its practical application. This is perhaps most evident in his lengthy discussion of the composition of the Homeric epics, which comprises the entire third book of the 1744 version of *The New Science*. Through focusing on the people and the continuity of tradition, at the expense of great men and individual events, he came to the ingenious conclusion that an individual named Homer was not the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, but that these works were composed over generations by numerous rhapsodes.⁶² These epics should thus be read not as historical documents reflecting the events of the Trojan War, as was common at the time, but as expressions of the spirit of the culture within which they were formulated.

⁵⁹ Paul Hazard, *European Thought in the Eighteenth Century: From Montesquieu to Lessing*, trans. J. Lewis May (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), p. 406.

⁶⁰ Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 8-12.

⁶¹ Löwith, *Vicos Grundsatz: verum et factum convertuntur. Seine theologische Prämisse und deren säkulare Konsequenzen* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1968).

⁶² Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 301-332.

Compared to Vico's radical reconceptualization of history and its study, expressed in these insights, Voltaire's judgements on the relationship between human existence and historical reality appear almost banal. He adheres to a rather familiar notion of human nature, models his own study of history on a certain ideal of quasi-Newtonian mechanism, and judges diverse cultures and places according to an ostensibly timeless universal standard of beauty and morality. Whether or not one ultimately agrees with the positions of Vico or Voltaire, it is evident that, on these issues at least, Vico was the great innovator.

And yet it was Voltaire, and not Vico, whose work decisively shaped eighteenth-century historiography and the philosophy of history. This may be ascribed to an unfair neglect of the latter, but it also owes much to the great contribution of the former, namely the expansion of the horizon of history beyond the confines of Europe, something to which Vico was conspicuously indifferent. In spite of his penetrating insights into human beings' historicity, Vico was inattentive to the bearing that non-European cultures might have on the study of history.⁶³ For example, he claimed that there were characteristics that all peoples shared in common – a belief in a providential divinity, the practice of legalized marriage, and customs pertaining to the burial of the dead; however, he did not feel compelled to find empirical verification for this claim through an examination of the customs of foreign peoples. Voltaire made a similar claim in regard to the ubiquity of the belief in God, but he was driven to study other cultures in order to assess the extent to which a notion of the deity was common to them.⁶⁴ Vico's gaze, in contrast, was almost wholly concentrated on the Greco-Roman world, and the references to other nations

⁶³ Peter Burke observes that "For a man of his time, Vico took surprisingly little interest in the history of Asia or America." Peter Burke, *Vico* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 69.

⁶⁴ Even more strongly than Voltaire, Vico opposed Bayle's notion that a nation of atheists was possible; he opposed this on a number of grounds, including linguistic ones, since he judged religion to be a prerequisite of language and therefore of society itself. He consequently expressed doubt about travelers' reports of peoples without any knowledge of God, to which Bayle gave some credence. *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, §334, p. 97.

in *The New Science* are sparse. In the first edition of his work, he repeats some rather disparaging remarks about the Chinese written script; India is mentioned only in passing in an extended discussion of ancient Greece; and in regard to the inhabitants of the Americas, he states that “at the time of their discovery, [they] were found to be governed with dreadful religions and were still in the state of families.”⁶⁵ In the 1744 edition, published in the year of Vico’s death, there are more references to the Chinese and Amerindians, but they remain scattered and unsystematic.⁶⁶

Part of the reason for Vico’s neglect of the non-European world stemmed from his theory of the internal development of cultures. While Voltaire was fascinated with the transmission of ideas between Orient and Occident, Vico was extremely skeptical of diffusionist hypotheses, even within the European context. For example, in opposition to the then prevailing thesis that the ancient Romans derived their laws from studying the legislation of the Greeks, he maintained rather that the Law of the Twelve Tables arose out of an indigenous tradition within Latium.⁶⁷ Because, for Vico, a culture constitutes an organic whole, its internal development is far more consequential than external borrowings, which remain comparatively superficial. This attentiveness to the ways in which practices and institutions are imbedded in a particular cultural context led to the development of some of Vico’s most striking ideas. It also vitiated his interest in the foreign since knowledge about the Orient was consequently deemed less relevant to an understanding of the history of Greece, Rome, and modern Europe. Moreover, because Vico was skeptical of reports about the antiquity of the Chinese and Egyptians, and since he maintained, in

⁶⁵ Vico, *The First New Science*, ed. and trans. Leon Pompa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), §211, p. 128.

⁶⁶ At the beginning of this edition, Vico provided a chronological table based on the three historical ages – the age of gods, the age of heroes, and the age of men. The seven peoples listed in this table (the Hebrews, the Chaldeans, the Scythians, the Phoenicians, the Egyptians, the Greeks, and the Romans) all belong to traditional biblical and Greco-Roman history.

⁶⁷ *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, §284-285, pp. 84-86.

accordance with scripture, that the Hebrews were the most ancient people, it seemed to him that a study of the Orient could contribute little towards a reassessment of historical chronology and patterns of historical development.⁶⁸

Of course, the fact that Vico discussed non-European peoples in his historical reflections indicates that he was certainly acquainted with some of the relevant literature about them; but his knowledge on the subject remained peripheral to his theorization of history. It was left to later thinkers, such as Herder, to recognize that questions pertaining to the course of history, patterns of historical development, and the universality of certain customs and judgements – problems which so interested Vico – could not be adequately addressed without a careful consideration of the histories of all those peoples who were not part of the western tradition. And it was Voltaire who forged the way for this line of inquiry.

As a trailblazer, he obviously did not go so far down the path he initiated as those who were to follow him. But if Voltaire did not resolve the problem of the historical relationship between East and West or the accompanying problem of the philosophical relationship between the universal and the particular, his expansion of historical perspective was decisive for future formulations of them. His belief in the historical role of inter-cultural transmission, particularly in regard to beliefs and ideas, made the study of the Orient relevant to European history. More still, he taught that non-European peoples deserved to be studied in their own right and should not be considered as mere appendages or peripheries to European Christendom, in the fashion of Bossuet. As for his reflections on the antiquity and historical role of India, they proved to be more resilient than he could have anticipated. They excited the interest of French Orientalists, such as Abraham-Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron, Louis-Mathieu Langlès, and Constantin-

⁶⁸ Paolo Rossi, *The Dark Abyss of Time: The History of the Earth and the History of Nations from Hooke to Vico*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 246-247.

François Volney, and spread throughout European scholarly and literary circles. If Vico expressed reservations about the importance of the ancient Orient in helping to more precisely date the early history of mankind, within only a few decades after his death, biblical chronology came under increasingly intense scrutiny and thinkers after Voltaire, particularly among the Germans, looked to India for knowledge of the most ancient times. These German philosophers of history were little inclined to Voltaire's Sinophilia or his embrace of Confucianism, but the image of India as a land of ancient origins, which he helped to propagate, exercised an abiding influence on their theorizations about the trajectory of world history, even when they were critical of him. Indeed, here as elsewhere, the influence of Voltaire's treatment of history was no less great in the disagreement it called forth than in the adherents it won. It was a provocation that subsequent philosophers of history could not ignore.

Chapter 2

Poetic Beginnings: J.G. Herder and the Childhood of Humankind

Whereas Voltaire considered priestcraft in general and the Church in particular to be the principal enemies of the advancement of knowledge and the spread of Enlightenment, the most prominent philosophers of history in Germany depicted the rise of Christianity as a decidedly salutary event in world history. The attempt to reconcile the truths of the faith with those of an increasingly secular world, rather than to emphasize their opposition in Voltairean fashion, would mark the historical understanding of Herder, Friedrich Schlegel, and Hegel. Furthermore, error, which was the bugbear of Voltaire and the Encyclopedists, assumed in the German context a much less malignant aspect and was even shown to be an integral part of the growth and education of humanity, not merely an unfortunate impediment or obstruction. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's imaginative presentation of the problem in *The Education of the Human Race* perhaps most clearly illustrates this redemptive impulse. The recuperation of error, as opposed to the exposure of folly, distinguishes Lessing's brand of historical optimism from that of Voltaire, which was predicated on the destruction of pernicious beliefs and institutions as much as on the establishment of sound and prudent ones. Although Herder did not adopt Lessing's messianic vision, his belief that the movement of history was purposive and meaningful was a guiding principle of his philosophizing and historical studies.

Herder came of age at a time when young German writers and thinkers were attempting to develop a literary and philosophical tradition in their own language, unlike their predecessors whose language of choice was Latin or French. Lessing, who was at the forefront of this debate, disputed the slavish adherence to the classical unities as represented in French drama,

particularly the tragedies of Voltaire, which he subjected to excoriating criticism.¹ Likewise, Herder forcefully argued against a single standard of artistic excellence; since the historical conditions under which art was produced varied, a standard that neglected to take account of the cultural specificity of artistic productions threatened to suffocate naturalness and spontaneity.² Accordingly, authenticity and originality, rather than a more abstract set of rules, became the distinguishing mark of great art, and a simple imitation of unchanging models was derided as spiritless pseudo-art. This tendency profoundly shaped later German Romanticism and German historical thought. Herder's pioneering essay on Shakespeare, from 1773, emphasized the imbeddedness of works of art in their cultural context and called into question the assessment of art in accordance with timeless standards of beauty.³ With this piece, the twenty-nine year-old native of Mohrungen, a small town in East Prussia, became the leading theorist of the *Sturm und Drang* movement.

In seeking sources of inspiration for the creation of a new German artistic tradition, Herder cast his gaze far abroad and deep into the past. One of the primary sources of influence was the philhellenism of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, whose historical and aesthetic works on the art of antiquity fundamentally altered the intellectual landscape of the German-speaking world.⁴ Winckelmann himself was much too fastidious and committed to his beloved Greeks to

¹ Horst Albert Glaser, "Lessings Streit mit Voltaire: Das Drama der Aufklärung in Deutschland und Frankreich" in *Voltaire und Deutschland: Quellen und Untersuchungen zur Rezeption der Französischen Aufklärung*, ed. Peter Brockmeier, Roland Desné, and Jürgen Voss (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1979), pp. 399-407.

² Karl Menges, "Herder and the 'Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes'," in *Eighteenth-Century German Authors and Their Aesthetic Theories: Literature and the Other Arts*, ed. Richard Critchfield and Wulf Koepke (Columbia: Camden House, 1988).

³ Eva Knodt, "Dramatic Illusion in the Making of the Past: Shakespeare's Impact on Herder's Philosophy of History," in *Johann Gottfried Herder: Language, History, and the Enlightenment*, ed. Wulf Koepke (Columbia: Camden House, 1990), pp. 209-223.

⁴ Goethe dubbed the eighteenth century "the century of Winckelmann", a judgement which seems much less hyperbolic than it first appears when one considers the immense influence that his *History of Ancient Art* (1764) exercised on almost all aspects of German intellectual culture. For a further discussion of German philhellenism, which treats individual intellectuals in their relationship to ancient Greece, see E.M. Butler's *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935); a more recent work, that emphasizes archaeology

have the eclectic tastes of those whom he influenced, but his aesthetic quest generated a passionate search for exemplars from other times and climes. In this sense, the celebration of Phidias has much in common with the concurrent cults of Shakespeare and Ossian that developed in the later half of the eighteenth century when seen as an attempted resistance against the dominance of French intellectual culture; the quest for exemplars, whether in the form of Greek sculpture, Elizabethan drama, or Celtic heroic verse, was unified in its intent even if the objects of attraction were disparate. Of course, this longing and nostalgia for a distant past cannot be treated as the exclusive property of one intellectual movement; thus while Romanticism has often been characterized in opposition to Classicism, both similarly sought to bring about the regeneration of contemporary art and culture through a deeper engagement with the past.⁵

Herder praised Winckelmann for his effort to provide a history of Greco-Roman art, which was attentive to the culture in which this art was imbedded, but he was also skeptical of his depiction of classical art as the embodiment of a timeless standard of beauty. In regard to Winckelmann's negative assessment of the art of the ancient Egyptians, Herder writes that "[t]he best historian of the art of antiquity, *Winckelmann*, clearly judged the Egyptians' artworks solely according to Greek standards, doing very well as far as *condemnation* was concerned, but describing so little of their *own nature and kind* that a blatantly one-sided and cross-eyed quality comes to light in almost every one of his sentences in this major treatment."⁶ Such prejudicial judgements ran counter to Herder's ideas on the interpretation of cultures, his ecumenical

and its institutionalization, is Suzanne L. Marchand's *Down from Olympus: Archaeology and Philhellenism in Germany, 1750-1970* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁵ See David Ferris, *Silent Urns: Romanticism, Hellenism, and Modernity* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000).

⁶ Johann Gottfried Herder, *Another Philosophy of History and Selected Political Writings*, trans. Ioannis D. Evrigenis and Daniel Pellerin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004), p. 15.

impulse, and his narrative of history. Instead, he favoured a providential vision in which each people and age expressed an essential and unique moment in history, an idea that Leopold von Ranke later took up in describing every historical period as “immediately present to God”. According to Herder, the task of the historian was not to deride the past, in the cynical fashion of Voltaire, but to appreciate it and to understand the diverse forms that human culture has assumed across time. Yet notwithstanding the striking differences between Voltaire’s disposition towards the past and his own, Herder continued the *philosophe*’s work of expanding the horizons of history beyond the confines of the Occident and articulating a more inclusive narrative of world history.⁷ And like Voltaire, his interest in the history of other cultures was not an isolated one, but wedded to fundamental questions pertaining to matters of religion, morality, art, and politics.

In 1766, the young Herder composed a piece “On the Change of Taste”, a work that illustrates his early recognition of the relevance of the study of foreign cultures for an understanding of history. Although the title suggests a focus on matters of aesthetic judgement, “On the Change of Taste” deals with problems that go beyond the question of artistic standards. Herder explains that his principal interest is “to gather historical examples of how far the diversity of human beings can extend, to bring it into categories, and then to try to explain it.”⁸ This plan, which Herder conceived at the age of twenty-two, came to be one of the great intellectual projects of his life, the foundation of his diverse historical and anthropological writings. An interest in anthropological questions was kindled early on under the tutelage of Kant, who first encountered Herder in Königsberg in the early 1760s. But whereas Kant

⁷ For all the differences between Voltaire and Herder, Isaiah Berlin identifies a point of convergence in their joint opposition to “the European habit of dismissing as inferior remote civilizations”. “The fact that Herder turned this weapon against Voltaire himself, and accused him of a narrowly *dix-huitième* and Parisian point of view, does not alter the fact that the head and source of all opposition to Europocentrism was the Patriarch himself.” *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 171.

⁸ Herder, *Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Michael N. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 248-9.

ultimately subordinated anthropology and history to critical philosophy, Herder remained committed to a philosophy of history that synthesized universalism and cultural pluralism.⁹ In his encounter with the Orient, Herder did not seek to flatten out Oriental cultures and reduce them to a common denominator, but to understand each of them in their uniqueness and particularity. His aesthetic appreciation for variety here found a felicitous counterpart in his historical sensitivity to difference.

Apart from a sheer delight in diversity, it was a fascination with origins that drew Herder to the Orient. The problem of origins plays a prominent role in Herder's speculations on language, exemplified in his prize-winning essay *On the Origin of Language*, and his interpretations of the Bible, particularly evident in his lengthy study, *The Oldest Document of the Human Race*. For Herder, in apprehending the origins of a thing we achieve a deeper understanding of the thing itself; indeed, there is even a sense in which the origin of a phenomenon reveals its essence. In regard to "the most ancient history of the world", Herder argues that the more we learn about "its migrations, languages, customs, inventions, and traditions, the more likely becomes, with every new discovery, *the single origin of the whole species*."¹⁰ This argument for monogenesis, with which Herder begins his path-breaking *Another Philosophy of History*, was intended to bolster the biblical narrative against doubters such as Voltaire; it also illustrates Herder's conviction that a proper understanding of the origin was crucial to a knowledge of the movement of history and the nature of humanity. And since he was convinced that the origins of the human species, along with its language and civilization, were to

⁹ For an overview of the complex relationship between Kant and Herder, and their role in the emergence of anthropological studies, see John H. Zammito, *Kant, Herder, and the Birth of Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

¹⁰ *Another Philosophy of History*, p. 3.

be found in the Orient, it is not surprising that it occupied a defining place in both his historical and philosophical reflections.

Herder's encounter with the Orient shaped not only his world-historical narrative, but also his historical method. It was through his study of biblical scripture and ancient Oriental cultures that he developed a historical approach which sought to both retrieve the origin and reinvest it with the living power that it once possessed. Since Herder believed that the imposition of external standards onto the past led to a distortion of it, he insisted that it was necessary for the historian to understand the past on its own terms. This did not mean, however, the unreflective adoption of past modes of judgement, but rather feeling one's way into the spirit of the other. His insistence that empathy is a constitutive part of historical understanding derived from his attempt to understand that which was most foreign. He did not simply develop this method and apply it to the study of the Orient after he had formulated it; rather, his historical method and his encounter with the foreign developed through a process of mutual interaction. The attempt to preserve the strangeness of the foreign, as opposed to domesticating it for the sake of intelligibility and the ease of consumption, was vital to Herder's theory of textual translation; it was also foundational for later German translation theory and praxis, which eschewed the French tendency to make all foreign texts speak Parisian.¹¹ And this problem of translation between languages and cultures was inseparable, for Herder, from the problem of historical interpretation.

Among the parts of the non-European world to which Herder showed a particular preference and affinity, India occupied an important place. In the last two decades of his life, it assumed an increasingly significant role in his reflections on the beginnings of human history and his judgements about the present state of European interactions with the non-European

¹¹ Antoine Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany*, trans. S. Heyvaert (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 35-36.

world. Indeed, the centrality of Herder's role in the emergence of a growing enthusiasm for India in Germany has led him to be described as the principal formulator of "the mythical image of India".¹² His historical interest in India was further reinforced through contact with translated Indian poetry and drama, particularly Kalidasa's *Sakuntala*. For Herder, the origin often partakes of a purity, an innocence, and even a certain unpolishedness that appeals to his poetic sensibility.¹³ His celebration of the natural and spontaneous, as opposed to the artificial and derivative, leads him to an appreciation for the folk-songs of different peoples and a devaluation of artworks shaped according to rigid rules, as in the case of French classical drama. Though he imagined the Indians to be a cultured, not a wild people, he discerned in them a childlikeness and proximity to the origin, which made him receptive to their poetry and led him to believe in their historical significance. In his *Aesthetica in Nuce*, Herder's brilliant and eccentric teacher Johann Georg Hamann declared that "poetry is the mother-tongue of the human race".¹⁴ This idea was an organizing principle of Herder's reflections on language and history. And while Herder soon departed from the theology that underwrote Hamann's idea, the idea itself remained crucial to his understanding of history and his conception of its poetic beginnings.

¹² A Leslie Willson, *A Mythical Image: The ideal of India in German Romanticism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1964), pp. 49-71.

¹³ Donald Lüttgens notes that for Herder, the origin does not indicate merely the beginning in a chronological sense; it also carries connotations of originality, authenticity, and simplicity. Indeed, origins even serve as models for the future ("Modelle für die Zukunft"), which call us to repeat the act of creation. *Der "Ursprung" bei Johann Gottfried Herder: zur Bedeutung und Kontinuität eines Begriffs* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1991), pp. 117-118. Lüttgens places particular emphasis on Herder's reading of biblical scripture as formative for his concept of the origin. Another source that helps to explain the importance which Herder accorded to origins may also be found in the natural sciences of his day. According to János Rathmann, it was out of the theory of preformation, espoused by Jan Swammerdam among others, that Herder attempted to arrive at "a heuristic principle" for studying history. In terms of the theory of reformation, every development is only an unfolding since the form of a thing exists prior to its development; within this framework, a knowledge of a thing's "prehistory" becomes indispensable for an understanding of it. *Historizität in der deutschen Aufklärung* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1993), pp. 17-19.

¹⁴ Johann Georg Hamann, *Writings on Philosophy and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 63.

1. India and the Search for Paradise

In *Another Philosophy of History*, published in 1774, Herder offers an imaginative narrative in which the movement of history parallels the maturation of the human individual. In this tale of historical development, the ancient Orient resembles the age of childhood; Egypt, the boyhood of the species; Greece, its youth; and Rome, its manhood. The broad outlines of the narrative seem to suggest a teleological development which finds its culmination with modern Europe; however, one of Herder's principal arguments in this piece is that eighteenth-century Europeans have been terribly presumptuous in imagining that they sit atop the apex of history. In undermining such complacency, he seeks to show how past cultures were not simply benighted and ignorant of modern truths, but were in possession of admirable qualities, some of which the present age sorely lacks. The point is not to return to some idealized bygone era; Herder insists on the unrepeatability of history, the uniqueness of each culture and moment, and the folly of trying to mimic what was natural only in times past; rather, in waxing poetic about the particular virtues of each age, he attempts to undo the notion that all times and places can be judged by a uniform standard. This critical impetus results not in an advocacy of unabashed relativism, a position that would deprive him of the right to pronounce judgement on the virtues and vices of different cultures, but in a questioning of his European contemporaries' self-congratulatory faith in their own superiority.¹⁵

¹⁵ Sonia Sikka provides a good account of the nature and extent of Herder's relativism, including scholarly debates about it. She refers to "the basic blend of universalism and relativism" in Herder's writings, but she also describes his perspective as a form of "deep relativism" since Herder not only claims that "cultures need to be understood from their own perspectives", but that "happiness and virtue, as properties belonging to individual human beings, are constituted in relation to these perspectives." *Herder on Humanity and Cultural Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 38-43. On the question of objectivity and subjectivism in Herder's thought, Berlin argues that "Herder is not a subjectivist. He believes in objective standards of judgement that are derived from understanding the life and purposes of individual societies, and are themselves objective historical structures, and require, on the part of the student, wide and scrupulous scholarship as well as sympathetic imagination. What he rejects is the single overarching standard of values, in terms of which all cultures, characters and acts can be evaluated." Berlin, p. 237.

The Orient that Herder seems to have in mind in this work is primarily the biblical Orient, the near-eastern lands of patriarchs and shepherds described in the Old Testament. Herder thus makes only a passing reference to India, listing the Ganges along with the Oxus and the Euphrates as rivers of the Orient, whose cultures preceded the Egyptian nation on the Nile.¹⁶ But while Herder's narrative within *Another Philosophy of History* is largely confined to the near East, Egypt, and Europe, he acknowledges that history is the history of all peoples. In this respect, he was far removed from Hegel, who discerned a somewhat similar historical trajectory at work in antiquity, but went further in denying history to all those peoples who fell outside of it. Herder's argument, on the contrary, was for more inclusiveness, not less, and for a greater appreciation regarding what seems strange and alien. He even writes that before long "[w]e will learn to appreciate ages that we now despise – the feeling of a *universal humanity* and *happiness* will become keen."¹⁷

And yet it may be objected that Herder's narrative betrays a condescension, in spite of its avowed intention, towards cultures and peoples who supposedly remain in a state of childhood. There is no denying that, for Herder, Europe's position of adulthood permits a certain privileged philosophical perspective on history, which grants him and his contemporaries more insight into the past than permitted to non-European peoples. At the same time, in the fashion of the Romantics who would follow him, his celebration of childhood as a more pure and holy state of being, one in which the child is closer to God than is the adult, makes his comparison much less invidious than it may first appear. After describing the Oriental as possessing a childlike sensibility, he states that in the ancient Orient "[t]he human spirit received the first forms of

¹⁶ *Another Philosophy of History*, p. 11.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

wisdom and virtue with a *simplicity, strength, and majesty* that – to put it bluntly – has no equal, no equal at all in our philosophical, cold, European world.”¹⁸

To be sure, the correlation between cultures and ages of the human life-cycle permeates Herder’s early and later thought. However, he did not adhere to this narrative rigidly as if the metaphor were the master key to unlock the hidden structure of world history. In the midst of comparisons drawn from the metaphors of life stages, Herder switches to the metaphors of building and describes the Orient as constituting the unshakeable foundations upon which all later history has been constructed.¹⁹ This very profusion of metaphors and analogies in Herder’s writings points to his freedom from the dogmatic adherence to any one of them too strictly. In the 1780s, Kant publicly objected to this mode of discourse as indicative of Herder’s conceptual sloppiness, but it may be more properly attributed to his recognition of the limitations of concepts in apprehending the nature of things and the indispensability of metaphors for interpreting the world around us. An appreciation for metaphor also contributed to Herder’s receptivity to the literature of the Orient and its use of literary tropes; since his own writing made such ample use of figurative language, he did not consider it to be indicative of a superseded stage of intellectual development. While Herder’s analogy between the life stages of the human individual and the ages of history forms a crucial part of his world-historical narrative, it is thus important to remember that he does not endorse a straight-forward view of historical supersession or cleave to a strict correspondence between ontogeny and phylogeny.

As Another Philosophy of History demonstrates, Herder’s reflections on the nature of history and its method of interpretation are infused with narrative; indeed, they are inseparable from it. Herder does not simply use narrative as a vehicle to express certain philosophical

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

convictions about the nature of things; nor can his philosophical insights be reduced to a mere explication or addendum to the larger story he tells. The sense that a philosophy of history ought to be both a theory of narrative and a narrative itself was something which was integral to his early and later work alike. The fragmentary, almost aphoristic musings of Herder's *Another Philosophy of History* were taken up a decade later and formulated much more systematically in his *Ideas Towards the Philosophy of History of Mankind*, which Herder worked on from 1784 until 1791. While the former work has frequently been identified as inaugurating the beginning of historicism and the inception of a new historical consciousness, the latter has more comprehensive and even quasi-systematic pretensions with all the strengths and weaknesses that attend such grandiose undertakings. Of course, in pursuing this project, Herder was fully cognizant of the challenges to formulate a philosophy of history, and the title itself indicates that he was far from imagining that his ideas constituted the last word on the topic under consideration. Unfortunately, Herder's *Ideas* has often suffered in comparison to his more youthful and imaginative piece of 1774.²⁰ But until the advent of Hegel, it stood as the most ambitious and influential attempt of any German thinker to formulate a comprehensive philosophy of history.

Herder begins the first book of his *Ideas* with a reference to the heavens and the place of the earth in the cosmos.²¹ This beginning illustrates his conviction that a philosophy of history worthy of the name must situate human beings in the wider world, including the natural world, and must reach far back in time in order to shed light upon the origins of things, at least as far as reason and evidence permit. It also gives a sense of both the scale and the loftiness of Herder's

²⁰ Meinecke describes Herder's *Ideas* as "a powerful book which had a tremendous effect on his contemporaries, but is no longer so impressive today." *Historism: The Rise of a New Historical Outlook*, trans. J.E. Anderson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 298.

²¹ Herder, *Werke in Zehn Bände (WZB), Band 6* (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1989), p. 21.

project, which invites the reader to contemplate the sublime vastness of creation. Voltaire also began *The Philosophy of History* with reference to the influence of nature on human history. In the case of Herder, however, the engagement with the problem of man's place in the cosmos is much more sustained, detailed, and philosophically reflective. Herder's *Ideas* comprises twenty books and the first three of these are devoted to cosmology and natural history; the next six books develop an anthropology, which draws heavily from the natural sciences and offers an elaborate account of the constitution of the human organism and its relationship to the environment; this includes a discussion of language, religion, and human beings' sociability and need for society. The point of transition between Herder's anthropological reflections and his narrative of the world's different peoples and nations centres around the problem of where human beings first originated. And this problem leads Herder to the Orient.

In the tenth book of his *Ideas*, Herder asserts that the movement of history and the trajectory of culture provide compelling proof that human beings first arose in Asia. Evidence of the oldest instances of animal domestication and agriculture, as well as the monuments of antiquity, attests to the great antiquity of Asia. Herder places particular emphasis on the available philological evidence, which indicates that Europeans, including Finns, Germans, Slavs, and Celts, migrated from the Orient. The remnants of these languages still live, Herder claims, in regions in the vicinity of the Black Sea.²² He adds that a more thorough and detailed investigation of the history of languages is still lacking, but expresses hope that future philological work will shed new light on the connections between Orient and Occident. For Herder, the study of ancient Oriental languages offered a window into the spirit of the peoples who spoke them; it also gave access to the most remote ages since the extant texts in these languages provided some of the best available evidence about the earliest human cultures. The

²² WZB, *Band 6*, p. 390.

Old Testament was especially important on this count, and Herder devoted sustained attention to it in order to understand the spirit of the ancient Hebrews and to reconstruct their past.

Herder's use of scripture for the purposes of historical reconstruction was not dogmatic, but encouraged inquiry and questioning. He believed that such an approach was incumbent upon historians and theologians alike. From 1776 until his death in 1803, Herder served as the General Superintendent of the Lutheran clergy for the duchy of Weimar, and this role demanded an engagement with both theological and pedagogical matters. This was hardly a burden since Herder was, by inclination, both a preacher and a teacher. But while a Christian religious sensibility infuses his thought, his theological convictions were not altogether orthodox. It has even been argued that his conception of God has more in common with the God of Spinoza than the traditional Christian God.²³ And there are significant points of convergence between Spinoza's treatment of scripture in his *Theologico-Political Treatise* and Herder's own interpretive procedure. In the first letter of his *Letters Concerning Theology*, Herder asserted that it was necessary to read the Bible "in a human way, for it is a book written by human beings for human beings; its language is human; it has been written and preserved by human means; finally, the mind whereby the Bible can be understood, every interpretive tool which elucidates it, and all the ends and uses to which it is applied are human."²⁴ Herder thus did not consider it an infallible guide; even when approaching the text with reverence, which he insisted was necessary for a proper appreciation of it, he explained that the point was not to extract divine truths from it.²⁵

²³ Herder's most important work on Spinoza and religion is *God, Some Conversations*, trans. Frederick H. Burkhardt (New York: Veritas Press, 1940). On Herder's position in the controversies surrounding Spinoza in the 1780s and 1790s, see Klaus Hammacher, "Herders Stellung im Spinozastreit," in *Herder und die Philosophie des deutschen Idealismus*, ed. Marion Heinz (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), pp. 166-188.

²⁴ Herder, *Against Pure Reason: Writings on Religion, Language, and History*, trans. and ed. Marcia Bunge (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 218.

²⁵ "Herder did what no other Bible translator succeeding in doing: he detached the poetry of the Bible from theology without demoting the Bible to irrelevance." Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 172.

His two monumental works on the study of the Old Testament, *The Oldest Document of the Human Race* (1774) and *On the Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* (1782-3), sought to historically situate scripture and to ascertain the spirit of the people who composed these writings.

While Herder did not rely upon the Old Testament uncritically, his belief that its earliest parts constituted humankind's oldest preserved historical records, led him to place great weight upon its pronouncements about historical origins. This is evident in his speculations on the geographical location of the species' first dwelling place. In the *Ideas*, he writes that it was probably located in the region of the Himalayas; earlier in the eighteenth century, this high mountain range had been proposed as the area in which human beings had survived the great deluge recounted in *Genesis*, and Herder seems to be drawing upon these prior speculations in constructing his historical narrative. He adds that although we might be inclined to imagine that the people who have remained closest to the original homeland of the species would be the most beautiful, a study of its homely present-day inhabitants shows that this is not the case.²⁶ This assertion, followed by an unflattering description of the physical appearance of the Mongolian peoples who occupy this part of the world, exhibits the invasion of aesthetic preferences into his treatment of other cultures in opposition to his repeated admonition that we should not judge them according to alien standards. His frustrated expectation that the people who remained geographically closest to the site of the origin of the species would be the most attractive also illustrates both his tendency to idealize origins and his willingness to subject this idealization to critical scrutiny. Elsewhere in the *Ideas*, however, Herder continues to play with the possibility of another location for the original homeland of humankind, a much more paradisiacal and idyllic region, yet still neighbouring the aforementioned high mountain range.

²⁶ WZB, Band 6, p. 216.

In speculating about the location of the species' first dwelling place, Herder poses the question, "Where now was then the garden, in which the creator placed his gentle and defenseless creation?"²⁷ The formulation of the question in these terms already indicates that the author's interpretation of ancient origins is rooted in Genesis, but the answer he gives is rather unconventional. He places great weight on the fact that the people of ancient Israel, who resided in west Asia, asserted that the garden of Eden was to the east of their own land. Herder finds this claim remarkably "non-partisan"; since every ancient people is inclined to believe that it is autochthonous, the Israelites' belief that humankind's homeland was situated far from their own place of habitation must give us pause.²⁸ In fact, Herder takes this instance of lack of prejudice as strongly favouring the truth of the claim. Largely on the basis of a philological inquiry into the names given in Genesis for the four rivers of paradise, Herder suggests that the region referred to lies in the vicinity of northern India.²⁹

Herder asserts that the land described in Genesis as rich in gold and precious stones could hardly be any other than India. In attempting to find correlations between the four rivers of paradise – namely the Pison, Gihon, Hidekel, and Euphrates – and the rivers of India, he points out that all of India recognizes the Ganges as the river of paradise. He identifies the Hidekel with the Indus, and the Gihon with the Oxus; both claims are substantiated on the basis of the convergence of the Arabic and Indian names with those used in the Bible.³⁰ However, after entertaining the possibility that the Edenic garden might have been in the area of present-day Kashmir, Herder cautions us to be circumspect in such speculations on account of the paucity of

²⁷ "Wo lag nun aber der Garten, in den der Schöpfer sein sanftes wehrloses Geschöpf setzte?" *Ibid.*, p. 415.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 415.

²⁹ Charles W.J. Withers notes that Herder was not novel in "linking philology to the geography of paradise", but followed in the tradition of seventeenth-century works such as Marmaduke Carver's *A Discourse of the Terrestrial Paradise* (1666) and Bishop Huet's *A Treatise of the Situation of Paradise* (1694). Withers, "Geography, Enlightenment, and the Paradise Question," in *Geography and Enlightenment*, ed. David N. Livingstone and Charles W.J. Withers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 78-80.

³⁰ *WZB, Band 6*, pp. 415-417.

available evidence and the fact that the biblical narrative, like so many other ancient sagas, has an allegorical dimension that should not be read literally. Herder further notes that we do not know the names of the first human beings or the language which they spoke. Whereas the Bible gives their names in Hebrew, other peoples call them in accordance with their own languages, and none of these can lay claim to final authority.³¹

The conviction that the first humans appeared in the setting of a garden is obviously indebted to scripture, but Herder mounts another defense for this thesis, which relies less on the historical accuracy of the biblical narrative than on a philosophical anthropology grounded in certain theses about the nature of man. For Herder, the fact that the garden was the simplest and least onerous place for human beings to begin their existence also made it the most natural and logical.³² Prior to the invention of agriculture, which required knowledge acquired through time and experience, human beings lived more simply. This simpler existence should not be pictured, though, in terms of a brutishly Hobbesian state in which war and violence were endemic. Human beings were not made for war and did not emerge out of a violent state of nature into society; on the contrary, the tendency towards peaceful cooperation is natural to the species. Accordingly, Herder interprets instances of savagery and wildness among certain peoples as a “degeneration” (*Entartung*) from the natural state, not a true representation of it.³³ He hints that wildness first began when human beings shed the blood of animals and blames external factors for the distortion of humans’ healthy natural tendencies. These pronouncements are reminiscent of Rousseau, but if the resemblances are not superficial, neither are the differences. Whereas Rousseau thought of the natural man as solitary, Herder represented him as instinctively sociable; and while Rousseau, in his darker moments, tended to see civilization, including its arts

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 420.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 414-415.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 414.

and sciences, as corrupting humans' innate goodness, Herder celebrated it as contributing to the cultivation of our humanity. He was far from condemning society wholesale and much more specific in his criticism of particular injustices and instances of violence. Finally, while Rousseau's natural man was modelled in large measure on Amerindian peoples, Herder looked to India for the present-day embodiment of the childlikeness he associated with the most ancient origins.

Herder's speculation about the location of Eden in the vicinity of India finds echoes in his description of the character and appearance of its current inhabitants. In the sixth book of his *Ideas*, he provides a general outline of the physical variations between different peoples in different parts of the world. Despite his disavowal of the category of race and racial hierarchy, this book offers a sort of racial anthropology with undisguised aesthetic preferences. In dividing up the peoples of the world, Herder organizes them largely in accordance with geographical parameters. However, one of the headings he employs is the value-laden description of "the region of the most beautifully formed peoples".³⁴ This region corresponds roughly to the temperate zone, which includes northern India, Greece, and the other lands bordering the Mediterranean. Strangely, while Herder discusses the racial characteristics of East Asians, Southeast Asians, Africans, Amerindians, and peoples in the vicinity of the North Pole, northern Europeans seem to almost fall out of Herder's survey altogether. However, in his section on "the region of the most beautifully formed peoples", Herder does make a reference to the position of northern Europeans, in which he consoles his readers that while northern Europe is some distance from this region, "at least we are not the antipodes of the land of beauty."³⁵

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 222-228.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

Herder begins this section with a reference to the beauty of the northern Indian landscape; he writes that “in the lap of the highest mountains lies the kingdom of Kashmir, hidden like a paradise of the world.”³⁶ The beautiful valleys and hills of the region are surrounded by high snow-capped mountains, which rise sublimely into the clouds; within this paradisiacal setting, the land is fertile, abundant with healthy fruit and vegetation, and there are no predatory and poisonous animals. Following Bernier, he suggests that these might justifiably “be named the innocent mountains, upon which milk and honey flow”.³⁷ The attractiveness of the landscape is mirrored by the beauty and the spirit of its inhabitants. Herder asserts that the Kashmiri women are often “exemplars of beauty”, and the people as a whole are distinguished as the most intelligent and skilful of the Indians. With reference to the other peoples of the subcontinent, he describes “the Hindus” as “the most gentle tribe among men”.³⁸ They do not seek to harm any living thing, and they derive their sustenance from milk, rice, and the nourishing fruits and vegetables that the land provides. Establishing a parallelism between the beauty of the body and the beauty of the soul, he repeats and endorses William Macintosh’s description of them as slender, well-proportioned, and graceful in their movements. And he invidiously contrasts this symmetry of form with the misshapen figure of their north-eastern neighbours. He bemoans the desolation of this “garden of nature” caused by foreign oppression, and he concludes this lyrical portrait with a lament – “blessed lambs, why could you not graze undisturbed and free from care in your meadow of nature?”³⁹

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 222.

³⁷ “Man könnte, wie *Bernier* sagt, diese die unschuldigen Berge nennen, auf denen Milch und Honig fließt und die Menschengattung daselbst ist der Natur nicht unwert.” *Ibid.*, 222.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

³⁹ “Glückliche Lämmer, warum konntet ihr nicht auf eurer Aue der Natur ungestört und sorglos weiden?” *Ibid.*, p. 223.

Herder did not invent this idealized image, but based it on travel reports; however, his use of the available sources was certainly selective, and he could have easily relied on more pejorative assessments of the Indians if he had been so inclined. Part of the reason for this representation must surely be attributed to the connection in Herder's mind between India and ancient origins. His image of the Indians as a race of innocent and beautiful children is akin to Winckelmann's image of the ancient Greeks, whose incomparable physical beauty corresponded to their artistic spirit and aesthetic sensitivity. Still, Herder's idealized depiction of the land and its people was accompanied by certain reservations; later in the eleventh book of the *Ideas*, Herder offered less laudatory judgements about Indian customs and practices. After praising the wisdom of the Brahmins and the virtues of the people, he puts forward a critical appraisal of the injustices of Indian society. He expresses indignation at the practice of sati, the burning of Indian widows on funeral pyres, and the poor treatment of the untouchable class of pariahs.⁴⁰ These instances of lack of consideration for others strike him as inconsonant with the gentle spirit of the people, and he attributes their emergence and persistence to the prevalence of certain oppressive forms of social organization and false beliefs, such as the doctrine of reincarnation. In presenting the more blameworthy aspects of Indian society as later corruptions, Herder was able to preserve an ideal of originary goodness, which he argued was the natural disposition of human beings in general and Indians in particular. This conviction made the study of ancient India both philosophically significant and morally edifying.

Unfortunately, obtaining reliable information about India's history proved difficult. Herder complains that European travelers in India have not yet been able to recover the most ancient tradition of the Hindus. He also expresses some doubt as to whether the Indians themselves still have access to their most ancient traditions since the oldest sect of Brahma

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 455-457.

(*Bruma*) has suffered extinction at the hands of its rivals, the followers of Vishnu and Shiva.⁴¹

Herder does not indicate why he believes that the worship of Brahma antedates these other cults and fails to provide documentary evidence in support of this thesis. Perhaps it derives from his conviction, tacitly indebted to the Judaeo-Christian elevation of the creator God, that the oldest faith must revolve around the worship of the creator rather than that of the preserver, Vishnu, or the destroyer, Shiva. He notes that the Indian sagas differ from province to province, but beneath the multiple layers of fantastical additions, he perceives “a golden nugget” of an original historical saga.⁴² The antiquity of these historical remnants are among the oldest which humankind can boast, but he judges them much less reliable than the writings of the Old Testament.

The differences and the similarities with Voltaire’s account of Indian history are striking. Voltaire had suggested that India was the centre of the most ancient civilization in order to discredit Christianity and the Bible. Herder’s narrative indicated that the possibility of ancient Indian origins was not something which Christians needed to fear; it was possible to integrate the fact of the non-biblical Orient’s great age with a providential vision of history grounded in Christian principles. Indeed, in arguing that the primordial garden was situated in India, Herder did not appeal to the oldest Indian sources, but relied on the writings of the ancient Israelites since he considered these to be the most ancient extant texts. Of course, Herder’s narrative was itself difficult to square with a rigid Mosaic chronology or orthodox theology, but he humanized scripture in order to salvage it. To some extent, he defanged Voltaire’s polemic by integrating aspects of it into his own cosmopolitan narrative.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 399.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 399.

2. The Poetic Spirit of the Indians

In 1791, Georg Forster sent his recent translation of an Indian drama to Weimar, where Herder was then residing. The play, *Sakuntala*, had been translated two years earlier by the renowned Sanskritist and President of the Royal Asiatic Society, Sir William Jones. Jones translated the original Sanskrit text, which was composed sometime in the fourth century by the Indian playwright Kalidasa, first into Latin and then into English. Forster, one of the leading ethnologists and travel writers of the late eighteenth century, obtained a copy of Jones' English version and translated it into German. Jones' *Sakuntala* met with a positive response back in England, but Forster's translation ignited a veritable *Sakuntala*-craze in Germany.⁴³ Friedrich Schiller praised the presentation of the eponymous female protagonist of the play, who surpassed, in his estimation, the great heroines of Greek tragedy.⁴⁴ And Goethe even modelled the prelude to *Faust* on Kalidasa's introductory scene of the play.⁴⁵ Among the play's enthusiasts, Herder was at the forefront. In his *Ideas*, he had described the Indians as a race of beautiful children with a close proximity to nature, and in *Sakuntala*, he found what he perceived to be a confirmation of his earlier judgements on their culture and spirit.

The play itself narrates the romance of a king, Dushyanta, and a beautiful young maiden of semi-divine parentage, Sakuntala. The first scene takes place in a hermitage in the forest, where Sakuntala was born and raised; a paragon of tenderness, she is depicted as sharing an intimate relationship with the animals, trees, and flowers of the forest. At the beginning of the play, a chance encounter between Dushyanta and Sakuntala results in love at first sight, quickly followed by promises of marriage, in which the king gives her a ring as a token of their vows. After Dushyanta departs, however, a wandering sage, Durvasa, arrives at the hermitage and takes

⁴³ Michael J. Franklin, *Sir William Jones* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1995), pp. 99-101.

⁴⁴ Willson, pp. 72-73.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 69-70.

offense at Sakuntala, who in her lovesick state of distraction fails to greet him properly. Durvasa places a curse on her in which he announces that whoever she is thinking about will fail to remember her when they next meet unless she presents the person with a token of recollection. Lost in thoughts of her beloved, Sakuntala remains oblivious to both the man and his malediction. Months later, Sakuntala, pregnant with the king's child, seeks out Dushyanta in his palace, but she loses the ring along the way while crossing a river. When she arrives at the court, accompanied by her adoptive father and her companions from the hermitage, Dushyanta no longer recognizes her and accuses her of lying about their past encounter. It is only much later, after Sakuntala's public humiliation and further tribulations, that he discovers the lost ring, and the spell is finally broken.

In a collection of letters, entitled "On an Oriental Drama", Herder provided a brief synopsis of the play as well as an analysis of it and its relation to the culture out of which it emerged. In this piece, which first appeared in the *Zerstreute Blätter* in 1792, Herder argued for the authenticity of the drama against doubters who imagined that it might be a European forgery; he asserted that it was so infused with Indian religion and mythology that it had to be the work of an Indian author. He also effusively praised the play for its poetry, its development of character, and its narrative structure. The same expression of high esteem reappears in Herder's preface to the second edition of Forster's translation, which Herder completed in 1803, the year of his death. Herder begins the preface with the observation that, prior to the appearance of *Sakuntala*, it had been well known that the Indians were in possession of a wealth of poetry; however, this work, which Herder dubs a "flower", surpassed all expectations about the quality and beauty of Indian drama.⁴⁶ In keeping with his penchant for floral metaphors, he predicts that William Jones' name will "bloom" with *Sakuntala* and be remembered in connection with this work long

⁴⁶ WZB, Band 10, p. 986.

after his other contributions have been forgotten.⁴⁷ And he praises Forster's translation as surpassing in some respects Jones' English version, on which it was based.

In both "On an Oriental Drama" and the 1803 preface, Herder draws attention to the "naturalness" of the work. The play opens in the middle of the forest with the king Dushyanta pursuing an antelope for sport. For Herder, this setting, along with the depiction of Sakuntala as perfectly integrated into forest life, indicates the Indian proximity to nature. The work is natural in its scenic representations, its portrayal of the *dramatis personae*, and its floral metaphors, to which Herder himself was more than partial. Beyond that, it is also natural in its narrative structure and internal coherence. Herder notes that the scenes of the drama do not appear as the artificial or willful product of the playwright's imagination, but organically grow out of one another; every scene "arises out of the matter itself, like a beautiful plant, naturally".⁴⁸ This claim stands in marked contrast to the judgements of later commentators, such as Hegel, who faulted Indian art, both in its plastic and poetic forms, for its highly unnatural, fantastic, and grotesque representation of things. Herder, on the contrary, discerns the natural even in the wondrous elements of *Sakuntala* since, for the Indian, the natural world is animated with spirit and nature itself is an expression of the divine. And just as knowledge about the Indian disposition towards nature helps us to understand the play, the play in turn gives us a portal through which to understand India. Herder interpreted Sakuntala's close communion with animals and her love for flowers both as the characteristics of an individual in a work of fiction and as an expression of the spirit of the Indian people. His enthusiasm for the work stemmed not only from the

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 986.

⁴⁸ "Mit Blumenketten sind alle Szenen gebunden; jede entspringt aus der Sache selbst, wie ein schönes Gewächs, natürlich." *Ibid.*, p. 987.

subjective aesthetic delight he derived from its reading, but from the confirmation it provided for his image of India and his theory of the interpretation of art.⁴⁹

Herder alerts the reader that, in order to appreciate *Sakuntala*, “one must thus read the play in an Indian, not in a European spirit.”⁵⁰ He explains that there are sublime and tender passages in the drama, the likes of which cannot be found among the Greeks; and this should not surprise us since the work partakes of a different national spirit. In his work on Shakespeare, written more than a decade and a half before his reading of *Sakuntala*, Herder had argued that an appreciation for the genius of the bard demanded that his works be historically contextualized and not be judged in accordance with Greek aesthetic standards.⁵¹ And this held even more when interpreting Kalidasa’s drama since it resided outside the domain of European literature altogether. In his piece “On an Oriental Drama”, Herder demonstrates the inapplicability of Aristotle’s categories to *Sakuntala*. He explains that it is worthwhile to show the extent to which *Sakuntala* does not confirm to the Aristotelian theory of tragedy and comedy since such an exercise helps us to recognize the peculiarities and the unique qualities of the Indian play. According to Herder, it also provides insights into the more general problem of the universality of aesthetic judgements; he asserts that the degree to which Aristotle’s theory provides general rules, as opposed to expressing culturally specific preferences, has yet to be adequately resolved, and testing the applicability of his categories on *Sakuntala* gives an indication of their range of

⁴⁹ Dorothy Figueira explains that “[t]he *Śākuntala*’s discovery and translation was a literary event which would have significant repercussions. The *Śākuntala* opened up not only the boundaries of humanism, but also fostered a widespread reevaluation of national literatures. The existence of the Indian masterpiece supported Herder’s belief in the ability of all ethnic groups to produce great art.” *Translating the Orient: The Reception of Śākuntala in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 16.

⁵⁰ “Im Indischen, nicht Europäischen Geist muß man also auch die Sakuntala lesen.” *WZB, Band 10*, p. 987.

⁵¹ Prior to contextualizing the works of Shakespeare and Sophocles, Herder asserts that “[i]n Greece the drama developed in a way that it could not in the north. In Greece it was what it can never be in the north. In the north it is not and cannot be what it was in Greece.” *Shakespeare*, trans. and ed. Gregory Moore (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 5.

validity.⁵² In Herder's account, this procedure reveals that, despite being a beautifully crafted work of literature, the play violates many of Aristotle's' principal precepts; and that fact alone calls into question the conflation of the Aristotelian and the universal.⁵³ A proper appreciation of *Sakuntala* requires a sensitivity to Indian culture and an acquaintance with the religion and mythology of the people; the appeal to alien aesthetic standards must give way then to historical contextualization and empathetic understanding.

Here as elsewhere, Herder's encounter with the Orient was much more than a felicitous instance of finding pleasure in diversity or discovering new sources of inspiration for German poetry and literature; rather, it bore upon pressing philosophical problems concerning the universality, or lack thereof, of moral and aesthetic standards. These issues, to which Kant devoted his *Critique of Practical Reason* and *Critique of Judgement*, were central to philosophical discourse during the German Enlightenment. Theological problems pertaining to the existence of God and the immortality of the soul, which Kant addressed in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, were also at play in Herder's reflections on India though usually subordinated to the problem of the relationship between religion and culture. *Sakuntala* was not a theological tract, but the scenes of the drama took place in a world governed according to certain religious principles, and Herder emphasized their centrality to the logic of the narrative. While he did not provide a sustained account of the role of religion in the play, he discussed Oriental religious teachings in other works from the 1780s and 1790s. One of these teachings, closely associated with Indian religion and mythology, was the doctrine of reincarnation.

⁵² WZB, Band 10, p. 57.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 58-68.

An interest in reincarnation was common to some of the leading figures of Weimar Classicism, including Goethe, Schiller, and Christoph Martin Wieland.⁵⁴ The references to it in their correspondence and literary fiction were often playful and even ironic. In a letter to Karl Ludwig von Knebel, Herder noted that in the course of his numismatic researches, he was struck by the uncanny resemblance between the outline of Julius Caesar's face on ancient Roman coins and Goethe's profile; he jested that Goethe had been the Roman dictator in a past life and had now returned in an inferior social position as a result of his bad prior actions.⁵⁵ Such jests could easily shade into more serious speculations, and it seems that Goethe himself was quite convinced that he had lived before. Herder was more skeptical, but he devoted serious attention to the problem, as his writings "On Metempsychosis" (1782) and "Palingenesis" (1797) attest.

The former piece, which was first published in Wieland's *Merkur*, assumes the form of a dialogue between two speakers, Charikles and Theages. While Charikles expresses sympathy for the theory of metempsychosis, Theages assumes a more a critical stance towards it; he raises objections to the theory and provides an account regarding the historical conditions under which it has arisen. Charikles asks why many ancient peoples, including Indians, Egyptians and even the followers of Pythagoras, adhered to the belief that human beings reincarnated as animals. Theages states that it was a consequence of the historical position that they occupied, namely their position of historical childhood; like children seeking to understand the meaning of suffering and penance, they seized upon a fanciful notion that helped them to make sense of the world.⁵⁶ Theages distinguishes this primitive version of reincarnation, understood as a form of punishment, from a more progressive and plausible vision, in which the soul continually

⁵⁴ Lieselotte E. Kurth-Voigt, *Continued Existence, Reincarnation and the Power of Sympathy in Classical Weimar* (Rochester: Camden House, 1999).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁵⁶ WZB, *Band 4*, pp. 468-470.

advances.⁵⁷ Herder's dialogue remains equivocal in its assessment of the reality of metempsychosis, but Theages' judgement on this score seems to closely mirror Herder's own. At the least, Herder found the idea of reincarnation as a form of atonement objectionable; and he thought that it was the product of a mindset appropriate to the childhood of the species, not tenable for more mature cultures.

These same themes are taken up again fifteen years later in Herder's essay on palingenesis, but his slightly modified judgements show the influence of his deepening acquaintance with Indian religion and literature. This piece begins with a series of quotations from Lessing's *The Education of the Human Race*, in which Lessing poses questions about the possibility of past lives and future reincarnations.⁵⁸ For Lessing, the thought of a complete end to individual existence, occasioned by death, runs counter to the spirit of perpetual betterment, but so does a static heaven in which time ceases and all things come to a standstill. These two undesirable alternatives spur Lessing on to consider the possibility of future lives. His recognition of the antiquity of the doctrine of metempsychosis leads him to ask the reader chidingly, "Is this hypothesis so ridiculous just because it is the oldest one? Because the human understanding hit upon it once, before it was distracted and weakened by the sophistry of the schools?"⁵⁹ And entertaining the fantasy of an interminable education, he inquires, "Why should I not come back as often as I am able to acquire new knowledge and accomplishments? Do I take away so much on one occasion that it may not be worth the trouble coming back?"⁶⁰ These and the remaining references to reincarnation do not assume the declarative form, but they do invite

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 427.

⁵⁸ *WZB, Band 8*, pp. 257-258.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

the reader to consider possibilities that Lessing himself did not go so far as to affirm in his own voice.

Lessing refers to the great antiquity of the idea of reincarnation, but he neither names the peoples who subscribed to it nor discusses its relationship to other aspects of ancient culture. In “Palingenesis”, however, Herder attempts to discern the cultural roots of the idea. In the fashion of religious anthropology, he draws correlations between different peoples’ visions of the afterlife and their ways of life on earth.⁶¹ He also assesses the beneficial and baleful effects of these beliefs on the social order. With reference to India, he censures the use of the doctrine of reincarnation to justify existing inequalities in Indian society and laments that it has exacerbated a certain passivity and fatalism, which has rendered the otherwise compassionate Indians indifferent to the suffering of others; Herder does not associate the Indian version of metempsychosis with Lessing’s uplifting narrative of continual improvement, but with a more punitive metaphysical system. Although he salvages the doctrine to some extent on account of its imaginative vision and poetic merits, his overall assessment is critical.

Yet after expressing these criticisms, Herder denies that metempsychosis lies at the foundation of the Indian religious worldview; rather, it constitutes an extension and even a perversion of a much more noble truth. Herder asserts that “it is not actually the belief in metempsychosis that has given birth to that sublime morality, which we find in the teachings of the Brahmins and which deserves the greatest respect; rather it comes from that true and great principle, *one in all, all for one*.”⁶² Through the attribution of this holistic vision to Indian religion, Herder was able to represent the more fantastic aspects of metempsychosis, such as

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 259-263.

⁶² “Nicht also eigentlich der Glaube der Seelenwanderung hat jene erhabene Moral geboren, die in den Lehren der Braminen alle Hochachtung verdienet; sondern vielmehr der wahre und große Grundsatz, *Eins in Allem, Alles zu Einem*.” *Ibid.*, p. 282.

humans turning into animals in future lives, as a distortion of a more fundamental insight that all living things are connected and interrelated. And this interpretation of the world, which Herder also perceived in *Sakuntala*, was in agreement with his own convictions. Indeed, the concluding pages of “Palingenesis” contain an excerpted scene from Kalidasa’s drama, in which the heroine departs from her adoptive father and bids farewell to the plants and animals of the hermitage.⁶³ Although the closeness between Sakuntala and the creatures of the forest might strike Europeans as strange, Herder believed that it was grounded in the sense that the world is a living unity. The resulting morality and poetic spirit were more congenial to Herder than was Indian metaphysics. In India, Herder did not find a logical philosophical system, to which he could give his assent; however, he did find a literature wherein the apprehension of certain truths was clothed in a sensuous and poetic language that was akin to his own.

3. In Defense of Humanity

Herder’s appreciation for the poetic spirit of different cultures, and his sense that these cultures had to be understood through an act of empathetic understanding, was a mainstay of his thinking since his youth. His diverse works on philosophy, religion, politics, and literature helped to propagate this interpretive approach; but his historical method, with its reliance on analogy and imagination, was also attacked for its lack of conceptual rigor. Among Herder’s most trenchant critics was Kant, a teacher whom Herder revered in his youth and continued to respect throughout his life. Kant felt that after promising beginnings in Königsberg Herder regrettably abandoned the path of rigorous philosophy for *belles-lettres*. This trajectory ran in opposition to the development of Kant’s own thought, which from the 1770s onwards increasingly moved in the rarefied realm of critical philosophy.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 275-277.

Following the publication of the first installment of Herder's *Ideas Towards the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* in 1785, Kant published a critical review that made the substantive points of difference with his former pupil clear. He took issue with Herder for his overly optimistic image of man, his failure to take account of the existence of radical evil, his refusal to recognize the necessity of state coercion for the maintenance of social order, and his argument for life after death, which Herder partly based on observations about the operations of organic life; he also objected to Herder's portrayal of human beings' in the state of nature, a depiction that did not adequately acknowledge the role of reason in the overcoming of natural instincts.⁶⁴ Even more pronounced than these differences pertaining to anthropological issues, however, were those related to methodological ones. For Kant, Herder's anthropology consisted of a body of vague generalities and imaginative analogies, which provided "food for thought", but did not lead to a "philosophy" of history as Kant understood the term. Instead of a coherent philosophy, Herder offered "a cursory and comprehensive vision" that paid little attention to "consistency in the use of principles".⁶⁵ Kant expressed particular suspicion towards Herder's "aptitude for arousing sympathy for his subject" since the appeal to "feelings and sentiments" was made at the expense of articulating well-defined concepts.⁶⁶ Conversely, according to Herder, the method that Kant advocated overlooked lived experience in favour of conceptual precision and thereby threatened to denude history of its life and vitality. Moreover, for Herder, it was those who placed false faith in the concepts they invented and imagined that they

⁶⁴ G.A. Wells states that "Kant does not discuss any of Herder's ideas in detail except those with metaphysical implications." *Herder and After: A Study in the Development of Sociology* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1959), p. 143. This is something of an overstatement though it certainly is the case that the issues which Kant addresses at length in reviewing Herder's *Ideas* are those that bear upon problems relevant to Kant's critical philosophy.

⁶⁵ Kant, *Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss and trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 201.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

adequately represented the complexities of existence and the richness of experience, who were most guilty of abusing them.⁶⁷

Though Kant and Herder shared a concern for individual autonomy and human beings' cultivation of their faculties, their historical narratives and interpretive approaches were opposed to one another. The dispute between the two has sometimes been characterized as representative of a more fundamental clash between the Enlightenment and its adversaries. Within this framework, Herder has come to be seen as a leading figure of the anti-Enlightenment; in the most tendentious versions, he appears as a progenitor of German race theory, a rabid German nationalist, and an enemy of reason and rationality.⁶⁸ Of course, the differences between Herder and some of the leading figures of the French and German Enlightenment are not inconsequential, but the similarities are no less striking than the divergences. And as Herder's *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity* attests, his later philosophy enshrines many of the ideals and precepts most often associated with Enlightenment thought.

This work, completed between 1793 and 1797, constitutes the mature expression of Herder's "philosophy of humanity". For Herder, the term "humanity" refers to human nature, including the capacity for reason and language that we all have in common, but it also points to a moral ideal for which human beings should strive; it is simultaneously descriptive and prescriptive. Throughout the work, Herder urges his readers to cultivate their reason, goodness,

⁶⁷ Herder's most sustained critique of the abuse of concepts occurs in his *A Metacritique on the Critique of Pure Reason* (1799), an attempted refutation of Kant's critical philosophy. See Marion Heinz, "Herders Metakritik," in *Herder und die Philosophie des deutschen Idealismus*, pp. 89-106.

⁶⁸ R.G. Collingwood falsely imputed to Herder the belief in the immutability of race (which Herder actually attacked Kant for espousing) and the idea that only Europeans possess history; he even scandalously asserted that "[o]nce Herder's theory of race is accepted, there is no escaping the Nazi marriage laws." *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 90-92. While serious Herder scholars repudiate these mischaracterizations, the portrayal of Herder as an anti-Enlightenment irrationalist continues in certain circles. Zeev Sternhell thus claims that "Herder's fight against the *philosophes* was a fight against rationalism" and also a fight "against the propagation of a civilization based on the autonomy of the individual and the rights of man." *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition*, trans. David Maisel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 91.

and sense of fairness, and he attacks slavery, war, authoritarian governance, and patriotic bigotry as inimical to the ideal of humanity, which he upholds. In seeking to reconcile his delight in multiplicity with a universalism that did not denigrate different cultures, Herder articulated a philosophy that was at once sensitive to cultural difference and didactic in its advocacy of moral ideals. Whether or not he was successful in mediating between cultural relativism and human universalism remains an open question, but the attempt itself bears witness to Herder's Enlightenment pedigree. Many of the principles and tendencies of the Enlightenment are subjected to criticism in Herder's work, but they are also absorbed and incorporated into it.⁶⁹ Indeed, it is not without reason that Herder has even been associated with the movement of the "radical Enlightenment", the Enlightenment's most progressive strand.⁷⁰ Of course, a number of the disagreements about Herder's position within eighteenth-century thought pivot on conflicting definitions of the Enlightenment, and while the resulting debates are illuminating to a point, they have the potential to become constrictive when it is simply a matter of classifying thinkers under generic rubrics.

A recognition of the complex relationship between Herder and Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant and Voltaire helps us to better situate both his philosophy of humanity and his encounter with the Orient. Unfortunately, there has been a tendency to reduce Herder's interest in the Orient to a mere extension of a fixation on problems of German identity, an assessment that downplays Herder's humanism and cosmopolitanism.⁷¹ This reading has more plausibility

⁶⁹ Frederick Beiser points out that Herder's criticisms of the *Aufklärung* were themselves grounded in Enlightenment principles of individual autonomy and personal freedom. *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism: The Genesis of Modern German Political Thought, 1790-1800* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), pp. 189-197.

⁷⁰ Jonathan Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. 70-71.

⁷¹ Nicholas Germana argues that "Herder's main interest in India, and his interest in other cultures generally, was always subordinated to his desire to honor German culture and encourage its growth." *The Orient of Europe: The Mythical Image of India and Competing Images of German National Identity* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), p. 57. This claim is suspect even without the emphatic adverb "always". While it is true that

when applied to some of the later German Romantics though it still amounts to a gross simplification. To be sure, Herder's interest in India and other parts of the Orient was related to issues of German identity, and he certainly did turn to foreign sources in seeking inspiration for the creation of a vibrant German cultural and artistic tradition. More importantly, however, this interest was wedded to pressing questions about the origins of human culture, the structure of history, the origins of language, the universality of aesthetic and moral standards, the proper method of historical understanding, and the nature of our shared humanity. In wrestling with these questions, Herder developed one of the most original and insightful modern philosophies of history, one that cannot be adequately grasped solely, or even primarily, on the basis of issues of German identity.

The reduction of Herder's Oriental researches to ultimately Germanic concerns also runs the risk of interpreting his categories of analysis too narrowly. Herder's often misunderstood and much-maligned emphasis on collectives, such as the *Volk*, needs to be situated in relation to the Enlightenment historiography against which he was reacting and not read simply in light of later developments in German history, such as the triumph of National Socialism.⁷² Although his idea of the *Volk* appears to participate in a certain essentialism, the spirit of a people is always in a process of becoming; it cannot be grounded in immutable racial qualities, something which Herder did not even believe existed, though it does find expression in a people's language, religion, cultural practices, and social forms of organization, all of which have a history and undergo transformations through time. And while Herder strongly disputes atomistic conceptions of society and upholds an organic view that emphasizes individuals' imbeddedness in a larger

Herder wished to assert German culture in opposition to the dominance of the French, and he hoped that his own work would further its growth, Germana's presentation of Herder's encounter with other cultures neglects the role of larger historical and philosophical problems at work in his thought.

⁷² For a good overview of Herder reception in Nazi Germany, see the edited collection *Herder im "Dritten Reich"*, ed. Jost Schneider (Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 1994).

whole, he is careful not to sacrifice the individual to the collective. Indeed, for Herder, there can be no happiness apart from the happiness of the individual since the idea of a collective happiness is a chimera.

It was a concern for the happiness and the suffering of individuals that aroused some of Herder's harshest indictments of both the Orient and the Occident. What most excited Herder's indignation was human beings' ill-treatment of one another, something which undermined the foundations of our shared humanity. In spite of Herder's lyrical effusiveness and his penchant for hyperbole, he was little inclined to wholesale condemnation or approbation of entire cultures. His judgement of foreign cultures, like the judgement of his own, was almost always qualified. When speaking out against the follies and vices of eighteenth-century Europe, he did not neglect to acknowledge its virtues and the advances that it represented over the past; and even when idealizing past cultures, he coupled praise with blame and guarded against advocating a return to them. No doubt, Herder's openness to different cultural traditions hardly excluded preferences or prejudices, and Herder has been taken to task for some of his more pejorative judgements of certain peoples. Even in his description of Indians, for whom he expressed a particular fondness, his comparison of them to children and peaceful animals, such as lambs, diminishes their status as fully adult humans. Nonetheless, when juxtaposing his judgements with those of his contemporaries, we must surely count him among the eighteenth century's most astute and passionate critics of Eurocentrism.⁷³ In his *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity*, Herder asserted that "one must have no preferred race, no *Favoritvolk* on the earth" since no people has

⁷³ In *Enlightenment against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), Sankar Muthu presents a compelling portrait of both Herder and Diderot as critics of Eurocentrism and western imperialism. His interpretation of Kant as similarly invested in the struggle against "Empire" is much less convincing, although Kantian principles may very well be deployed to anti-imperialist ends. In regard to Enlightenment representations of Africa and its peoples, Wolbert Smidt draws a stark contrast between Kant and Herder; he contrasts "Herder's strategy", which consists of seeing the foreign as related through the bonds of humanity, with the Kantian approach, which seeks to make the foreign more foreign than it is – "das Fremde noch fremder machen". *Afrika im Schatten der Aufklärung: das Afrikabild bei Immanuel Kant und Johann Gottfried Herder* (Bonn: Holos, 1999), pp. 98-99.

a monopoly on good or evil.⁷⁴ And in his essay on metempsychosis, Herder states that “there have always been good human beings, who did much good for the sake of good itself. Such people may be found among *all* stages of culture, among *all* nations.” He even suggests that perhaps there are more of them among those “whom we call savage” than there are in countries that imagine themselves to be enlightened.⁷⁵

In his “Conversation on the Conversion of the Indians”, which appeared in 1802 as part of the third volume of Herder’s *Adrastea*, this deflation of European pretensions of superiority was coupled with a condemnation of European violence perpetrated against other peoples and a skepticism towards missions to civilize them. The conversation assumes the form of a dialogue between two speakers identified only as “the European” and “the Asian”. The dialogue begins with the Asian asking the European, how he would feel if a foreign people invaded his land and treated all that he held to be most holy with contempt, as Europeans have done when encountering the inhabitants of India. The European responds that the inequality between the two peoples demands that they be judged according to different standards; he proudly asserts that “we have power, ships, gold, canons, *culture*.”⁷⁶ This response, which implies that might makes right and almost reduces culture to power, leads the Asian to remark that the Indians possess perhaps the finest culture to be found among the human race. He draws attention to the sublimity of the Brahmins’ concept of God and the purity of their precepts and moral standards, which Europeans all too often fail to attain. When the European objects that although these ideas may be lofty, the common people adhere to dreadful superstitions and believe in absurd fables, his interlocutor counters that, if this is the case, then the common people among the Indians and the Europeans are not so different from one another. The European insists, though, that the Indians

⁷⁴ WZB, *Band 7*, p. 698.

⁷⁵ WZB, *Band 8*, p. 270.

⁷⁶ WZB, *Band 10*, p. 468.

suffer from a double yoke, the burden of their religion and the burden of their despotic overlords; and he asks why it is so objectionable if proselytizing Christians should seek to liberate them from this condition.⁷⁷ After the Asian lists some of the atrocities that Europeans have committed against non-Europeans, the European adds that the rescuing and unification of peoples nonetheless lies in European hands. The Asian does not contest the point and even admits that the peoples of the world would be most grateful if such a union were actualized. The conversation concludes, however, with the Asian's observation that this humanitarian quest must not be confused with the activities of the East India Company.⁷⁸

Although the dialogic form of the "Conversation" prevents us from assuming that Herder's voice is identical with either of the two interlocutors, his own judgements are much more closely aligned with the Asian's than with the European's. The conclusion is instructive, then, since even in questioning the conceit about the virtues of Christian proselytizing and imperial commerce, the Asian seems open to the possibility that the future unification of peoples may indeed be brought about by Europeans. But this state of affairs derives less from the moral superiority of Europeans than from their power, which may be used for either good or ill. The Asian further suggests that it is the destiny of European Christians that they will have to make amends for the misuse of this power.⁷⁹ Such a pronouncement is especially noteworthy given that it appears in a work entitled *Adrastea*, an epithet of Nemesis, the Greek goddess of retribution.⁸⁰ The idea, though, is not so much that Europeans will be punished for their misdeeds as that they will be set right by the consequences of them and will recompense those whom they

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 473.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 476.

⁷⁹ "Christen, ihr habt viel zu vergüten, viel zu versöhnen! Daß Ihr es tut, daß Ihr eure Schuld erstattet, dafür bürgt das *Schicksal*." *Ibid.*, p. 475.

⁸⁰ On the figure of Nemesis and the role of retribution in Herder's philosophy of history, see Michael Maurer, "Nemesis-Adrastea oder Was ist und wozu dient Geschichte?" in *Herder Today: Contributions from the International Herder Conference*, ed. Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1990), pp. 46-64, and Wulf Koepke, "Nemesis und Geschichtsdialektik," in *Ibid.*, pp. 85-96.

have harmed. Near the conclusion of the *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity*, Herder insists that “Europe *must* give compensation for the debts it has incurred, make good the crimes it has committed – not from choice but according to the very nature of things.”⁸¹ But Herder also expresses a hope that Europe will learn from its past mistakes and pursue loftier spiritual goals in the interest of humanity; the chastisement it experiences may even facilitate a spiritual regeneration and the realization of a greater world-historical mission.

Still, Herder’s criticisms of contemporary Europe and his sense of uncertainty about its prospects have led some to characterize him as a pessimist.⁸² But while Herder may have had reservations about Europe’s future, and was hardly immune to bouts of melancholy in his personal life, his historical optimism and faith in humanity were not shaken by the failings of Europe since he did not conflate the continent with humankind as a whole.⁸³ Herder warns his readers against such an overestimation of Europe’s importance – “*So let no one augur from the greying of Europe the decline and death of our whole species!* What harm would it do to the latter if a degenerated part of it perished?, if a few withered twigs and leaves of the sap-rich tree fell off. Others take the place of the withered ones and bloom up more freshly.”⁸⁴ Although Herder was concerned about the fate of German culture and European civilization, he was more interested in the general welfare of the world’s peoples than in the maintenance of Europe’s

⁸¹ *Philosophical Writings*, p. 418.

⁸² For an account of conflicting judgements about Herder’s pessimism, particularly in relation to “Europe’s world-historical mission”, see Dominic Eggel, *Imagining Europe in the XVIIIth century: the case of Herder* (Geneva: The Graduate Institute of International Studies, 2006), pp. 74-85.

⁸³ Georg Iggers suggests that Herder, like other proponents of German historicism, “was much more optimistic about the meaningfulness of history than were even adherents of the classical idea of progress.” For Herder, history received its justification not only in a longed-for future, but in the present since “[a]ll of Nature and of history reflect God.” *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 1968), p. 36. In a similar vein, Hayden White asserts that “Herder not only saw the plan of the whole historical drama as a Comic plan, he saw every act of that drama as a Comic play in miniature, a small, self-enclosed world in which things are always precisely what they *ought to be* as well as what they manifestly *are*.” *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), p. 73.

⁸⁴ Herder, *Philosophical Writings*, p. 419.

dominance. Unlike the later Romantics, whose obsession with the ancient Orient was usually coupled with an indifference to the condition of its present-day inhabitants, Herder showed a concern for the state of the contemporary non-European world and its future role in the advancement of humanity. In his philosophy of history, Herder imputed to the Orient an ancient past; he did not fail to acknowledge that it also had a future.

Chapter 3

Friedrich Schlegel: Indian Origins and the Future of Europe

“Here is the actual source of all languages, all the thoughts and poems of the human spirit; *everything*, everything without exception comes from India.”¹ With this extravagant claim for India’s priority, Friedrich Schlegel expressed his newfound enthusiasm for Indological studies to Ludwig Tieck. In the same letter, written from Paris in 1803, Schlegel described how these studies had altered his previous views and insights on broad questions about poetry and religion, particularly in regard to their origins and historical development. The quest for origins, an eminently historical pursuit, was the principal motivation of Schlegel’s Oriental researches; it was not simply the foreignness of India, its exoticism, that attracted his attention, but the belief, amounting at times to a faith, that this land held answers to questions about the beginnings of human history. His undertaking of the demanding study of non-European languages was no dry, antiquarian exercise in philological scholarship; rather, it was bound to the conviction that the Occident’s roots could be found in the Orient, which, once discovered and understood, would have deep implications for the future of Europe.

With the *Athenäum* journal, which he founded in 1798 with his brother August Wilhelm, Schlegel, at the age of twenty-six, had already distinguished himself as the chief theoretician of what would later be dubbed German Romanticism. In one of the essays of the journal, which urged the creation of a modern mythology, Schlegel suggested that the highest romantic ideal was to be sought in the Orient, but the parameters of the Orient, geographical and cultural,

¹ “Hier ist eigentlich die Quelle aller Sprachen, aller Gedanken, und Gedichte des menschlichen Geistes; *alles*, alles stammt aus Indien ohne Ausnahme.” *Ludwig Tieck und die Brüder Schlegel: Briefe*, ed. Edgar Lohner (Munich: Winckler Verlag, 1972), pp. 135-136.

remained nebulous and not precisely delineated.² Such an enthusiasm for an ill-defined and dreamlike East permeated the writings of the early German Romantics, who found in the supposed enchantedness of the Orient a counterweight to the oft-lamented mechanization and despiritualization of modern Europe.³ It belonged to Schlegel, however, to subsequently bring together these romantic musings with a sustained study of non-European languages and a comprehensive philosophy of history. In his *Ideas Towards the Philosophy of History of Mankind*, Herder had suggested that “a philosophical comparison of languages would form the best essay on the history and diversified character of the human heart”, and Schlegel sought in his own linguistic endeavours to bring about such a comparison. With Herder, Schlegel shared a belief in the centrality of language to human thought, a fascination for ancient origins, and a commitment to a philosophy of organicism that conceived of cultures as living wholes. However, after his initial youthful enthusiasm for Herder’s contributions to the history and theory of literature, he quickly came to see his predecessor as lacking in the rigor that he hoped to attain in his own historical, literary, and philological studies.⁴

When Schlegel arrived in Paris in 1802, he promptly made use of the impressive holdings of the *Bibliothèque Nationale* for his researches on medieval and Oriental literature; these included non-European texts that could not be obtained in Germany. Under Antoine-Leonard de Chézy, he undertook the study of Persian before turning to Sanskrit the following year. At that time, Alexander Hamilton, a British navy officer employed by the East India Company and a

² Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe (KFSA)*, ed. Ernst Behler et al. (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1958-), II, p. 320.

³ A. Leslie Willson identifies J.G. Herder as the author of “the kernel of the mythical image of India”, which later German Romantics (including the Schlegel brothers, Novalis, and Karoline von Günderode) drew upon and modified. *A Mythical Image: The ideal of India in German Romanticism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1964), p. 71.

⁴ Ernst Behler, “‘The Theory of Art is its own History’: Herder and the Schlegel Brothers,” in *Herder Today: Contributions from the International Herder Conference*, ed. Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1990), pp. 246-267.

member of the Asiatic Society of Calcutta, happened to be residing in Paris and was unable to leave on account of the war that had erupted between Britain and France.⁵ Hamilton, the only scholar on the continent who knew Sanskrit, found an eager pupil in Schlegel, who devoted himself tirelessly to Indological studies and quickly became conversant with the available Sanskrit literature. From the outset, the endeavour to understand the spirit and the language of the Indians was tied, in Schlegel's mind, to pressing contemporary questions about German and European identity.⁶ Even as he pored over ancient Indian manuscripts, Schlegel still found time to write voluminously on European literature, art, philosophy, and history. These concerns are perhaps most clearly evident in his contributions to the periodical *Europa*, which he founded in 1803 and which was published in four installments over two years.⁷

Though the name *Europa* appears to imply a unified object of study, Schlegel suggests, in an article from the first volume, that “we perhaps wrongly consider Europe to be so thoroughly a unity”.⁸ This assertion, made at a time when Schlegel was residing in the capital city of Napoleonic France, placed contemporary European political disunity within a much larger historical context. Schlegel neither denied the unifying elements of European culture, nor downplayed crucial differences, but acknowledged the uneasy tension between them. In the same article, he attempts to draw the Occident and the Orient closer together; he claims that antithetical aspects of Christian and Greek religious culture, both foundational for later European history, “find their highest original form in their common fatherland, in India.”⁹ He further

⁵ Rosane Rocher, *Alexander Hamilton (1762-1824): A Chapter in the Early History of Sanskrit Philology* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1968), pp. 34-36.

⁶ Behler sees “the critique of western culture” as the foundation of the romantic interest in India. “Das Indienbild der deutschen Romantik,” *Germanisch-Romanische Monatschrift* 49 (1968), p. 21. But, in addition to this essential critical dimension, there was an equally consequential search for Europe's historical origins at work in Schlegel's turn to the Orient.

⁷ Henri Chélin, *Friedrich Schlegels “Europa”* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter D. Lang, 1981).

⁸ “wir Europa vielleicht mit Unrecht so durchaus als Einheit betrachten”. Schlegel, *KFSA*, VII, p. 73.

⁹ “beide finden ihres höheres Urbild im gemeinschaftlichen Vaterland, in Indien.” *Ibid.*, p. 74.

proposes that just as anyone who wishes to learn about art needs to travel to Italy, it is necessary to travel to India in order to learn about religion.¹⁰ The injunction precedes a damning assessment of his own times, where he refers to “the total incapacity for religion” and the degrading mechanization of human beings as the defining characteristics of the present era.¹¹ Despite this harsh condemnation, the idea was not that Europe was intrinsically deficient in religiosity, but that its latent religious potential could be reactivated through an encounter with its primordial Oriental sources. “Even in the total corruption of Europe, germs of a higher destiny are still visible.”¹² Schlegel’s Oriental studies strive to identify these germs, the points of historical intersection between Asia and Europe, and to encourage their further development and growth.

The attempt to understand Europe’s historical position, frequently accompanied by the desire to change it, was a continuation of the romantic emphasis on self-reflexivity. The task of self-reflection did not confine itself to the individual in isolation, but asked after the subject’s relationship to the greater whole of which it was a part; it thus entailed an engagement with both the philosophical problem of identity and broader questions of culture and politics. Romantic poetry enacts this expression of extreme self-consciousness and self-reflexivity; the poet observes himself in the act of poetizing and this observation of the self is not concealed, but presented to the reader, often with disruptive and disconcerting effects. *Lucinde*, Schlegel’s most experimental work of fiction, exemplifies this playfulness and ironic distance. In the *Athenäum*, which contains one of the most innovative theorizations of romantic poetry, Schlegel notes that

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

¹¹ “die gänzliche Unfähigkeit zur Religion”. *Ibid.*, pp. 75-76.

¹² “In der gänzlichen Verderbtheit Europas selbst sind die Keime der höhern Bestimmung sichtbar.” *Ibid.*, p. 77.

“the romantic spirit seems to pleasantly fantasize about itself.”¹³ Beneath the ostensible frivolity of such a claim lay a serious meditation on and engagement with recent developments in German philosophy. The Kantian emphasis on critical reflection, the probing of knowledge’s conditions of possibility, exercised a captivating spell on Schlegel and his young contemporaries; it offered a method of both understanding and producing active subjects.¹⁴ But Schlegel was also deeply unsatisfied with Kant’s circumscription of knowledge; the fixed, transhistorical determination of the limits of reason frustrated the romantic longing for the infinite, its own aspirations to surpass, through the very process of endless self-reflection, the limits set by Kant. The recognition of the dynamic character of the subject, its formation and development in time, pointed to the necessity of re-working the Kantian epistemology so as to take account of the category of history.¹⁵

Although greatly indebted to Fichtean idealism, even at the moment of his greatest enthusiasm, Schlegel was far removed from Fichte’s assertion that counting peas was preferable to studying history.¹⁶ On the contrary, one of his principal objections to Kant was the philosopher’s ahistorical method and his failure to adequately situate his own work within the history of philosophy. In his numerous essays and lectures on philosophy and literature, Schlegel sought to correct this deficiency by tracing the interactions between literature, philosophy, and the context in which they were imbedded. For Schlegel, since politics was itself a matter of the

¹³ “der romantische Geist scheint angenehm über sich selbst zu phantasieren.” *KFSA*, II, p. 245.

¹⁴ Kantian critical philosophy initiated “an analytic of the finite subject”, which Schlegel took up even as he sought “to spring the bolt Kant had placed on speculation and the unfolding of the infinity of the subject.” Antoine Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany*, trans. S. Heyvaert (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 70-71. According to Berman, this speculative enterprise was integrally related to the expansion of the boundaries of the self through its encounter with the foreign Other. In regard to the process of “auto-production”, the self-making of the subject, see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).

¹⁵ “Schlegel’s emphasis on history as essential to critique is part of his general view of philosophy as framed by life, as beginning *in media res*.” Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert, *Friedrich Schlegel and the Emergence of Romantic Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 128. See also Manfred Frank, “‘Wechselgrundsatz’: Friedrich Schlegels philosophischer Ausgangspunkt,” *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 50 (1996), pp. 26-50.

¹⁶ *KFSA*, VIII, p. lxxiii.

spirit, such an approach was far from a contextual reductionism, not to speak of a materialist attempt to explain the works of the spirit as products of material relations. Thus, prior to elucidating the concept of literature, Schlegel acknowledges that “this concept can only be provisional since the completed concept would be the history of literature itself.”¹⁷ This recognition of the historical character of concepts, which Schlegel found lacking in Kant, pervades the early writings and represents a defining moment in modern intellectual history. Against the classification of literature in terms of immutable genres, Schlegel champions “the historical method” that gives precedence to emergence, development, and transformation.¹⁸ His observations are thus often marked by an attentiveness to the ways that literary, artistic, and philosophical works are historically situated.

At the same time, an almost obsessive concern for “the whole” (*das Ganze*) and for unity within the whole, without which there would be a mere assemblage of parts, contributes to essentialist characterizations of eras and cultures, which Schlegel struggles to apprehend as organic totalities. In order to begin to understand history, it is first necessary for there to be an “idea of the whole”; otherwise the historian is in danger of being lost in an ostensible chaos.¹⁹ Schlegel’s work both presupposes the existence of a whole and seeks to illustrate it; he employs the concept in interpreting the spirit of nations, eras, schools of thought, authors, and individual works. In regard to the relationship between a work and its author, he states that “not only the thing formed, but also the one who forms it is an organic whole.”²⁰ And this maxim not only

¹⁷ “Dieser Begriff kann aber nur ein vorläufiger sein, indem der vollständigste Begriff die Geschichte der Literatur selbst ist.” *KFSA*, XI, p. 6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4. For example, he claims that “European literature forms an interconnecting whole, where all the branches are most intimately intertwined.” [“Die europäische Literatur bildet ein zusammenhängendes Ganzes, wo alle Zweige innigst verwebt sind.”] *KFSA*, XI, p. 5.

²⁰ Citing Schlegel, Wilhelm Dilthey further draws out the organic character of his methodological approach. “A literary work is viewed here as Schelling views an organism: Its being consists in its form.” *Selected Works*:

applies to the writer of fiction, but also to the historian, the work of history, and history itself. Schlegel aims to resolve the problem of contextualization through the apprehension of a whole which illuminates and is, in turn, illuminated by its parts. Whereas his teachers at Göttingen, such as Christian Gottlob Heyne, conceived of philology as an instrument of analysis, Schlegel wanted it to be a synthetic science; its subject would not be an “aggregate” to be analyzed, but a unity that was both discovered and generated through a process of interpretation.²¹ His work thus stands at the beginning of the tradition of German hermeneutics.²²

Because the whole is never static and unchanging, but always in movement, Schlegel reasoned that it could be grasped only through a historical understanding of its origins. The origin (*der Ursprung*) reveals the essence that animates the whole. This quest for origins has been identified as one of the defining features of the romantic style of thought, and it unifies Schlegel’s extremely diverse interests in religion, poetry, philosophy, and history.²³ As Schlegel moved closer to the Church, the origin’s significance was further inflated through its identification with divine revelation. But even prior to his conversion to Catholicism in 1808, he consistently opposed the thesis that humankind and the works of the human spirit began in a state of rude animality; on the contrary, the origin represented a moment of divine harmony that was subsequently lost in time. But while the valorization of originary essence stands opposed to the progressivism of thinkers such as Hegel, it would be a gross simplification to characterize

Hermeneutics and the Study of History, ed. and trans. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 117.

²¹ Hans-Joachim Heiner, *Das Ganzheitsdenken Friedrich Schlegels* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1971), p. 6. Heiner relates these tendencies to Schlegel and Novalis’ unfulfilled Encyclopedia project, which sought to unify the arts and sciences.

²² Robert S. Leventhal points out Schlegel’s fundamental contributions, which have often remained unacknowledged, to the history of hermeneutics, but he also contrasts Schlegel’s version of hermeneutics, for which he shows a marked sympathy, to the more dominant hermeneutic tradition of Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer, pp. 293-295. *The Disciplines of Interpretation: Lessing, Herder, Schlegel and Hermeneutics in Germany, 1750-1800* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994).

²³ Erich Ruprecht identifies the search for the origin as “the decisive characteristic of the romantic way of thinking”. *Geist und Denkart der romantischen Bewegung* (Pfullingen: Günther Neske, 1986), p. 12.

Schlegel as a historical pessimist. The romantic exaltation of Oriental origins was utilized not merely to critique western modernity, but to transform it for the better.

The lasting legacy of this attitude was more than an idealization of the Orient, an idealization which Schlegel certainly did not inaugurate and from which he himself gradually moved away. Its significance resided in a new conceptualization of how Indian origins were relevant to contemporary Europe. First, Schlegel did not content himself with simply asserting or even proving the great age of ancient Indian culture; instead, he actually sought to find a genetic relationship between India and Europe. The connection was established primarily on linguistic grounds though it also took philosophy, mythology, and patterns of migration into account. Second, though Schlegel lamented the lost origins of a bygone Edenic age, he was strongly convinced of the possibility of an “Oriental Renaissance” through a return to ancient sources.²⁴ The Italian Renaissance offered the paradigmatic example of such a cultural rebirth, but Schlegel wished to go further back than Greece and Rome to western antiquity’s own Oriental roots. He suggested that Indological studies, if properly supported and cultivated, could bring about a transformation of Europe “not less great and universal” than was achieved in Italy in the fifteenth and sixteenth century.²⁵

This fantasy of the rejuvenation of European culture through an encounter with India profoundly shaped later German writers’ perspectives on the Orient, particularly those outside of mainstream Oriental scholarship. At the same time, in spite of professional philologists’ skepticism towards Schlegel’s often fanciful speculations, they remained remarkably faithful to

²⁴ In his sweeping study of the European reception of India, Raymond Schwab refers to Schlegel as “literally the inventor of the Oriental Renaissance”; the term itself was first coined in 1841 by Edgar Quinet. *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe’s Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680-1880*, trans. Gene Patterson-Black and Victor Reinking (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 72.

²⁵ *KFSA*, VIII, p. 111.

the genetic method of linguistic analysis that they inherited from him.²⁶ These seminal contributions to Orientalism have long been recognized though they have received more attention recently.²⁷ There is also a substantial literature on Schlegel's ideas on philosophy, politics, and history, particularly as expressed in the writings from the 1790s.²⁸ But while work has been done on both the historical and Orientalist studies, the integral relationship between them has not received sufficient scholarly attention. Too often, Schlegel's interest in India has been reduced to questions of religion and language, but these concerns were themselves so thoroughly saturated with problems pertaining to the nature and interpretation of history as to be inseparable from them. An exploration of the complex interactions at work in this relationship sheds light on the ways that Schlegel's philosophy of history conditioned and was conditioned by his vision of India.

1. Universal History: In Search of the Whole

In the autumn of 1805, Schlegel began to give a series of private lectures on universal history to the Boisserée brothers, Sulpiz and Melchior, who had served as both friends and patrons during his time in France. The brothers, wealthy merchants and amateur art enthusiasts from Cologne, became acquainted with Schlegel in Paris and encouraged him to deliver lectures on literature, art, and history.²⁹ His lectures on universal history, presented in Cologne from October, 1805 to the summer of the following year, illustrate Schlegel's first attempt at

²⁶ See Sebastiano Timpanaro, "Friedrich Schlegel and the Development of Comparative Linguistics in the 19th Century," in *Ueber die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier*, ed. E.F.K. Koerner and trans. J. Peter Maher (Amsterdam: John Benjamins B.V., 1977).

²⁷ Even though Said pays little attention to the German context in *Orientalism*, Said refers to Schlegel's *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians* as being, along with Goethe's *West-Eastern Divan*, one of "the two most renowned German works on the Orient". *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1994), p. 19.

²⁸ Perhaps the most comprehensive treatment of the early Schlegel's historical philosophy is Klaus Behren's *Friedrich Schlegels Geschichtsphilosophie (1794-1808): Ein Beitrag zur politischen Romantik* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1984), but this monograph omits the writings from the last two decades of Schlegel's life.

²⁹ Behler, *Friedrich Schlegel in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1966), p. 92.

formulating a comprehensive survey of world history. Although Schlegel did not publish these lectures and the only surviving written version is not in his hand, they offer crucial insights into the development of his ideas on history and the Orient, and mark the moment when his historical studies became increasingly political and religious in orientation.³⁰ He asserts at the outset that politics and religion form a privileged object of historical inquiry; such a pronouncement is all the more striking given the fact that his own most innovative historical writings prior to that time dealt with literature and philosophy, subjects to which he had devoted himself wholeheartedly and from which he expected brilliant cultural and intellectual renewal. The shift in perspective evinces Schlegel's increasing interest in recent political developments though it also corresponds to his commitment to grasp the whole in its most universal form. He thus argues that advances in the sciences and arts as well as technical inventions have only an indirect relationship to universal history, the proper sphere of which is "moral development" as embodied in politics and religion.³¹

Schlegel introduces his lectures on universal history with the bold claim that "since all science is genetic, it follows that history has to be the most universal, the most general, and the highest of all the sciences."³² On account of this "generality", a distinction is drawn between universal history and more conventional historical works, which through the detailed descriptiveness and specificity of their presentation are more akin to works of poetry than to philosophy. Contrariwise, universal history strives to be "scientific" (*wissenschaftlich*) at the cost of an aesthetically pleasing or artistic mode of presentation; the depiction of laws at work in

³⁰ A fuller treatment of the state of the extant manuscript and its edited reconstruction can be found in Jean-Jacques Anstett's critical commentary on the lectures. *KFSA*, XIV, pp. ix-xviii.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³² "Da überhaupt alle Wissenschaft genetisch ist, so folgt, daß die Geschichte die universellste, allgemeinste und höchste aller Wissenschaften sein müsse." *Ibid.*, p. 3.

history forms the crux of this scientific perspective.³³ Such an apparent adherence to a nomothetic approach does not lead to the enumeration of generalized laws, however, but to the genetic tracing of influences and transmissions between and within cultures. This genetic method was far removed from a search for mere causal connections; rather, it posited the existence of an underlying substrate that was preserved through time even as it underwent historical modifications and transformations.

Following a brief overview of the concept of universal history, Schlegel takes up the problem of the geographical and geological conditions of history's beginnings. He insists that this discussion, which draws heavily from both geology and *Genesis*, serves merely as an introduction to the study of universal history and actually lies outside its proper sphere of inquiry. Even so, on the basis of a brief excursion into natural history, Schlegel decisively sets the stage for his subsequent narrative. His argument for the natural superiority of the northern hemisphere, adduced on the basis of the greater proportion of land to water in the north as well as "the magnetic force" of the north pole, neatly aligns with his perspective that all history is confined to this hemisphere.³⁴ But Schlegel also denies the absolute validity between all other geographical binaries, especially East and West; the designation "Orient", while meaningful from a European perspective, is not valid for other countries, such as India.³⁵ He thereby relativizes the longstanding distinction between Orient and Occident even as he reinscribes and naturalizes the opposition between north and south. The consequences for history are decisive; those peoples indigenous to the southern hemisphere, a naturally inferior part of the world, find no place in universal history.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

This circumscription of history, its attribution or denial to certain peoples, coincides with the attempt to determine the historical position of Europe in terms of both its contemporary situation and ancient antecedents. Thus, Schlegel's decision not to include China in his overview of universal history is justified on the grounds that the Chinese are isolated and do not have an influence on a greater whole. He asserts that "this nation may be noteworthy in and for itself, but not in relation to the *whole*, and in history only those peoples and events are worthy of consideration which have exercised an influence on the *whole of the human race*."³⁶ In one sense, Schlegel's claim is consistent with his understanding of history as the traffic and interaction of different parts that constitute a whole; isolationism stands opposed to the movement of history. But what lies beneath this exclusion of China is the tacit identification of the so-called "*whole of the human race*" with modern Europe; whereas India, Egypt, and the Jews have all contributed to the formation and history of the Occident and warrant being included in an account of universal history, the lack of strong cultural and historical ties between Europe and China proves the historical insignificance of the Chinese. However, the reason for China's exclusion from universal history is not simply the absence of historical connections with other peoples, but its supposed lack of influence. Although India influences China through the transmission of Buddhism, the influence does not flow back in the other direction; even though China has a mediated connection with Europe through India, it has no influence on it, mediated or otherwise, and, therefore, no bearing on its destiny.

The actual starting point for Schlegel's narrative is his treatment of India, which immediately follows the brief lecture on natural history. The philological references are kept to a minimum in this lecture, but they clearly inform the decision to place Indian civilization at the

³⁶ "An und für sich mag diese Nation wohl merkwürdig sein, aber nicht in Beziehung auf das *Ganze*, und in der Geschichte kann nur auf solche Völker und Begebenheiten Rücksicht genommen werden, die auf das *Ganze des Menschengeschlechts* Einfluß gehabt haben." *Ibid.*, p. 18.

beginning of history; on account of the antiquity of Sanskrit, which Schlegel suggested was the parent language from which all major modern European languages derived, the Indians, the bearers of this language, are the appropriate starting point for what will turn out to be a story of the emergence of modern Europe. On the basis of further linguistic evidence, Schlegel denies the existence of a single original people from which all others are descended and even casts doubt on the theory of the monogenesis of the species. Through this conflation of language and race, he reinforces the significance of philology and his own philological expertise in addressing ethnological and anthropological questions.

But the invocation of language as “the absolute” of historical research does not prevent him from drawing conclusions about historical connections without adequate linguistic evidence when it suits his general argument.³⁷ His claim for an Egyptian connection to India appears to be at odds with his reliance on linguistic evidence since the language of ancient Egypt was not, by his own admission, genetically related to Sanskrit. It was only with Jean-François Champollion’s decoding of the Rosetta stone in 1822 that the reading of hieroglyphics became possible; even before this time, however, it was clear to Schlegel that the Egyptian script recorded a language of an altogether different linguistic family from that of the Europeans.³⁸ So whereas the ethnic ties between Indians, Greeks, and Romans was substantiated through the propinquity of Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin, the differences between these languages and that of the Egyptians compelled Schlegel to propose an alternative form of historical relation.

Schlegel’s explanation of Egypt’s Indian origins rests on the speculation that it was an Indian colony acquired by conquest. He contends that a relatively small contingent of Brahmin priests colonized the less cultivated Egyptians and imparted to them their customs and superior

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

civilization; since they were a minority, though, the language that they brought with them never gained currency and was absorbed into the tongue of the natives.³⁹ More interesting than the dubious reasons that Schlegel adduces for this connection is the fact that it even occurred to him. The resemblances between Egypt and India were not sufficiently pronounced to lead his scholarly contemporaries to similar conclusions. Still, by virtue of this thesis, he was able to find a unitary point for the beginnings of all subsequent history. At the same time, the fact that Schlegel found yet further evidence of Indian influence in Japan, Kamchatka, and even Peru did not lead him to conceive of history in terms of the global interaction of different peoples and cultures; rather, all these curious instances fall outside of the later treatment of universal history since they have little effect on Europe.

The difficulties that Schlegel encounters in attempting to explain the dissemination of Indic civilization, particularly the reasons for the emigrations from the homeland, expose the tensions within his idealization of the Orient; given his image of India as “the most beautiful and richest land of the Earth”, he cannot avoid posing the question of why the original inhabitants would have ever been inclined to leave their Edenic *Heimat*.⁴⁰ Apart from forced expulsions as a result of religious wars and caste conflicts, the principal reason that Schlegel provides for this mass migration is the Indian reverence for the north, the quasi-religious longing to strive northwards, a deeply spiritual impulse that cannot be reduced to material conditions or causes. Here Schlegel cites the fact that within Hindu mythology Mount Meru, the most holy of mountains and the veritable *axis mundi*, was located in the north.⁴¹

In this narrative, Schlegel’s own attraction to the Orient finds its appropriate correspondence in the supposed attraction of Europe’s ancient Indian ancestors for Germania.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

Indeed, a considerable portion of the lecture devoted to India actually deals with the problem of the descent and movement of the ancient Germanic peoples, in which Schlegel seeks to find analogues between nations referred to in ancient Indian epics and certain Germanic tribes. The curious appearance of Goths and Scandinavians in a purported disquisition on ancient India illustrates the extent to which Schlegel's concern with the Orient was deeply imbedded in questions about European and German identity.⁴² Already in the first volume of *Europa*, references to ancient India mix indiscriminately with observations on the Germans during the medieval period. By drawing Germany and India closer together, Schlegel upset a narrative of European history that overemphasized the role of Romans and Frenchmen. His own counter-narrative offered an implicit, and often explicit, critique of the French Revolution and the priority accorded to modern French culture.⁴³ Compared to the Latins, the Germans, whose migratory patterns through Asia so occupied Schlegel, remained truer to their Oriental roots.

In spite of the importance Schlegel assigned to these ancient westward and northward migrations, they are relegated to a "dark history" that he distinguishes from the emergence of "known history", beginning in the fourth century before Christ.⁴⁴ The fact that classical Greece,

⁴² Sheldon Pollock notes that "in the German instance, however, orientalism as a complex of knowledge-power has to be seen as vectored not outward to the Orient but inward to Europe itself, to constructing the conception of a historical German essence and to defining Germany's place in Europe's destiny." "Deep Orientalism? Notes on Sanskrit and Power Beyond the Raj," in *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia*, ed. Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), p. 83.

⁴³ Chélin states that a sense of German spiritual superiority, coupled with a recognition of the political powerlessness of the German states against France, deepened Schlegel's animosity towards the French. pp. 35-41. For a more sympathetic reading of Schlegel's relationship to France and French culture, which accentuates its more open dialogic aspect, see Ernst Robert Curtius, "Friedrich Schlegel und Frankreich," in *Kritische Essays zur europäischen Literatur* (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1963). It is also necessary to distinguish between Schlegel's initial reception of the French Revolution and his later stance; on the basis of this distinction, Richard Brinkmann strongly disputes the characterization of the early Schlegel as "conservative", "antirevolutionary", or "reactionary". "Deutsche Frühromantik und Französische Revolution," in *Deutsche Literatur und Französische Revolution* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1974), p. 176. See also Frederick C. Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism: The Genesis of Modern German Political Thought, 1790-1800* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

⁴⁴ "Alexander der Große und die punischen Kriege bezeichnen die Epochen, welche die dunkle und bekannte alte Geshichte trennen." *KFSA*, XIV, p. 72.

along with its historians Herodotus and Thucydides, is also excluded from this period derives from Schlegel's conviction that the conquests of Alexander the Great usher in a new historical epoch. In regard to the Orient, Alexander's entry into northwestern India marks the point at which India actually becomes historically irrelevant; Schlegel does not draw a causal connection between these occurrences, but the idea appears to be that it was during this time that India happened to exhaust itself. The strange coincidence that the moment when India ceases to be of historical interest occurs precisely when it enters the European historical consciousness does not receive explanation or even explicit acknowledgement. In a sense, Europe has arrived too late; Alexander's armies reach the Indus at a time when they are not even capable of recognizing, in this seemingly foreign land, the roots of their own languages, institutions, ideas, and cultural practices. It belongs to the nineteenth-century philologist to raise this to the level of historical consciousness.

Following the initially extravagant claims that Schlegel makes for India's originary priority, it completely recedes from the later lectures, which are wholly occupied with Europe. In a brief section on "the discovery of the New World", he refers in passing to the Portuguese acquisition of India and England's later supremacy there as a result of the Seven Years War.⁴⁵ Even apart from a discussion of India, Schlegel provides hardly any reflections on contemporary European colonialism, its causes or its impact, whether on natives or Europeans. The quest for colonies, in which Schlegel's own elder brother had perished, finds hardly an echo here.⁴⁶ The omission of further details about India cannot be excused as merely a product of the times, a general lack of concern with the contemporary Orient in favour of Europe. After all, half a

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 221-225.

⁴⁶ Carl August Schlegel, Friedrich's eldest brother, travelled to India with the Hanover Regiment under Sir John Dalling; he died in Madras in 1789. Dietmar Rothermund, *The German Intellectual Quest for India* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1986), p. 33.

century earlier, Voltaire had already differentiated universal history from its older Eurocentric variants on account of this very inclusion; he too speculated on the great antiquity of India and entertained theories about civilization's Indic origins, but he did not neglect India's later history; indeed, Voltaire cited the expansion of the subject matter of history as distinguishing his work from its parochial predecessors that hardly extended beyond the borders of Christendom.⁴⁷ Schlegel was not only well acquainted with Voltaire's *Essay on Manners*, but even cites it, at times favourably, in his own lectures.⁴⁸ Yet his emphasis on "the whole", which implies a unifying and organizing narrative, excludes all those peoples who cannot be subsumed under it; an acknowledgement of non-European historical trajectories would overturn this unitary vision, leaving a confused plurality of competing narratives. In order to salvage the universality of universal history, the countless non-universal particulars must be denied.

The attempt to grasp the universal in history invariably leads to its identification with the European particular; but since history defines itself through movement, the contours of the universal need to be continually re-articulated. The problem of finding an equivalence between concepts, or between concepts and entities, without surrendering to a static interpretation of them, constitutes an abiding problem within Schlegel's thinking. In the *Athenäum Fragments*, the frequent equivalences drawn between philosophy and poetry illustrate the impulse to discern an underlying identity between things without giving up their autonomy. A similar tendency, but with much less self-reflexive irony, can also be seen at work in Schlegel's unpublished notebooks on philology and history, where he frequently identifies ancient tribes or ethnic groups with contemporary peoples. For example, in one of many representative equivalences, he

⁴⁷ Voltaire, *Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations et sur les principaux faits de l'histoire depuis Charlemagne jusqu'à Louis XIII, Tome I* (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1963), p. 196.

⁴⁸ *KFSA*, XIV, pp. 30, 32.

considers whether the ancient Scythians were Turks or Germans.⁴⁹ Such equations appear to presuppose the relative transparency or intelligibility of certain groupings, which are then used to clarify others; they also tend to conflate race, language, and culture. Ultimately, this attempt at a genealogical tracing of peoples founders on the uncertainty as to what extent later-day peoples can be identified with their ancestors; the problem only becomes compounded when it is recalled that numerous descendents share a common ancestry.

Thus, in spite of Schlegel's repeated claims for the familial relations between Europe and Asia, he displays next to no interest in his contemporary eastern "cousins"; his attention is almost exclusively confined to eastern ancestors. And while his representation of India as a land of origins makes apparent Europe's originary debts to the Orient, it also erases all of Indian history that does not fulfill this originary function; the later historical occurrences in the subcontinent fall outside the purview of universal history because India has lost its originary impulse and exhausted its historical role. To become historically consequential once again, it requires the intervention of Europe.

2. History as Philology: *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians*

Schlegel found his way to Indological studies through philology, and it is thus no surprise that "the language of the Indians" came to be one of his principal concerns. His notion of an Indo-European linguistic family, which proved to have such a decisive influence on the future of German comparative linguistics, was deeply indebted to the work of British philologists such as Sir William Jones.⁵⁰ In his third anniversary discourse to the Asiatick Society, delivered in 1786,

⁴⁹ *KFSA*, XV/I, p. 4.

⁵⁰ Schlegel did not use the term "Indo-European" though he may fairly be claimed as the primary author of the concept. Thomas Young first introduced the expression in 1813; it was taken up by many German philologists,

Jones praised Sanskrit for possessing “a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar than could possibly have been produced by accident”.⁵¹ This blend of linguistic analysis and aesthetic judgement characterizes much of eighteenth-century philology, and Schlegel’s work illustrates this tendency still more strongly. In his role as literary critic, he had always understood the task of criticism as demanding both historical and aesthetic sensitivity, and this was transferred to his assessment of languages.

The culmination of these considerations was his pioneering monograph *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians*, which was published in 1808, half a decade after Schlegel began his labours on learning Sanskrit. Because of the impetus it gave to subsequent research in Oriental studies and comparative linguistics, it marks a watershed in German scholarship. Schlegel adopted the notion that Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin had a “common source”, as Jones maintained, though he was also more inclined to believe that Sanskrit, at least in its oldest variant, was closer to a parent language of the latter two.⁵² Jones, who was reluctant to identify any existing language with the *Ursprache*, speculated that even the most apparently dissimilar languages shared a hidden heritage; but for Schlegel, the division between the Indo-European linguistic family and all others was decisively marked by the “organic” nature of the former and the “agglutinative” character of the latter. Organic languages were distinguished by a greater degree of inflexion, a more elaborate system of conjugation and declension that resulted in less reliance on prepositions, pronouns, and particles. By contrast, the agglutinative languages suffered from

including Franz Bopp, though others still preferred Heinrich Julius Klaproth’s more narrow and nationally inflected designation “Indo-Germanic”. Schwab, pp. 184-185.

⁵¹ William Jones, *The Collected Works of Sir William Jones, Volume III*, ed. Garland Cannon (New York: New York University Press, 1993), p. 34.

⁵² *KFSA*, VIII, p. 115.

an excessive recourse to particles, especially the use of suffixes and prefixes.⁵³ The words of the organic languages were like living germs, the roots of which would themselves undergo modification through internal changes in being conjugated or declined; but in the agglutinative languages, the root would remain unchanged and lifeless, a mere stub on to which additions were glued. In speaking of the “fertility” of languages in this fashion, Schlegel stretched the organic metaphor of the “root” of a word to its limits.⁵⁴

The romantic exaltation of the organic, and the corresponding denigration of the mechanistic and mechanical, indicates a twofold concern that is continually at work in Schlegel’s reflections on both language and history; the first is with the whole, which cannot be reduced to its parts; the second is with the dynamic, the process of transformation, growth, and internal development. As a result of its holistic character, exhibited in its lack of structural irregularities, and its dynamism, evinced in its inordinately high degree of inflexion, Sanskrit enjoys “a philosophical profundity and serene clarity” that make it, along with ancient Greek, one of the two most eminently philosophical languages.⁵⁵ It unites in itself the loftiest attributes which, in a diminished form, can be found in younger members of the same linguistic family, including the modern Indian, Germanic, and Romance languages. Schlegel substantiates the claim for the genetic relationship between Sanskrit, Persian, Greek, Latin, and German through a lexical comparison; the similarities between seemingly different words of these languages suggest a historical and not an accidental relation. But more important than a common lexical stock that they share, which could be accounted for through a mere haphazard mixing, are the resemblances

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 155-157.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 171-173.

in grammatical structure; the dichotomy between organic and agglutinative grammar finds its confirmation in differences of inflexion and syntax.⁵⁶

Yet if it was on the basis of comparative grammar that Schlegel formulated these categories, grammar was certainly not the end of the matter; unlike the tradition of synchronic linguistics, epitomized by twentieth-century structuralism, Schlegel's approach was dominated by a concern for descent and genealogy. And these reflections and valuational judgements about language were themselves so deeply intertwined with a certain understanding of history that any attempt to disentangle or divorce them would be to fail to appreciate the historical nature of his interpretation. According to Schlegel, the perfect simplicity and regularity of Sanskrit belied the theory that language emerged from a state of rude animality; moreover, the absence of onomatopoeic sounds indicated that it was not derived from a crude imitation of the sounds of nature.⁵⁷ On the contrary, languages actually lost their original high inflexion with the passage of time, undergoing a process of gradual degradation. Yet this assessment did not apply to all languages, but only those related to Sanskrit. The grammatical division between organic and agglutinative languages finds its correspondence in the genetic division between languages of quasi-Edenic origin and all others, which are the product of mimesis. Since the various agglutinative languages began as a subjective imitation of natural sounds, the majority of them sprang up independently of one another; they do not partake of a common history.⁵⁸ Among the agglutinative languages, Schlegel counts those of the Native Americans, the Semites, and the Chinese; in spite of the cultivatedness of the Chinese in other respects, their language belongs to

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 137-139.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 157-159.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

“the lowest stage”.⁵⁹ Whereas the organic languages descended from Sanskrit, including the modern Germanic and Romance languages, thus form a proper family with traceable lines of descent, the agglutinative ones merely consist of an enormous remainder of languages that stand outside of this grouping.⁶⁰ Consequently, Sanskrit and its European off-shoots are not only organic in their modes of conjugation and declension, but in their historical and genealogical aspect. They form an interconnected whole, unified by a shared history and a common, underlying structure.⁶¹

Given the importance that Schlegel accords to language, the existence of linguistic familial relations serves as a springboard to investigate further aspects of cultural proximity between Europe and India. Still, after expressing such ardent enthusiasm for “the language of the Indians”, his discussion of Indian “wisdom” seems rather tepid. Unlike the treatment of Indian languages, the overview of Indian religion and philosophy has fewer pretensions to establishing a genetic approach. Instead of searching for precise historical relations between Indian and European mythology, Schlegel points out the perils of such an approach and contents himself

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 158. A commitment to “organicism” did not necessarily imply that some languages were organic and others were not; arguing against the binary opposition between organic and agglutinative, which Schlegel had introduced, Wilhelm von Humboldt rather more consistently maintained that all languages were organic, and he perceived in the ostensible “formlessness” of Chinese, a deeper “inner form”, which Schlegel had ignored. Heinrich Nüsse, *Die Sprachtheorie Friedrich Schlegels* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1962), pp. 46-47. For a broader treatment of the organic in Romanticism, see Robert Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

⁶⁰ In regard to the structural opposition between these two types of languages, Jeffrey Librett explains that “because continuity implies life, it is considered good, whereas discontinuity is bad because it means death.” “Figuralizing the Oriental, Literalizing the Jew: On the Attempted Assimilation of Letter to Spirit in Friedrich Schlegel’s *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier*,” *The German Quarterly* 69, no. 3 (1996), p. 265. The same logic informs Schlegel’s notion of historical lineage and descent.

⁶¹ Léon Poliakov argues that Schlegel’s linguistic classification was decisive in the formation of “the Aryan Myth”. While he admits that Schlegel never referred to “Aryans” or “Indo-Germans” in his monograph on India, he claims that “his vague generalities were enough to stimulate his readers to the boldest of speculations.” *The Aryan Myth: A History of Racist and Nationalist Ideas in Europe*, trans. Edmund Howard (London: Sussex University Press, 1971), p. 192. Still, Schlegel’s relative lack of interest in racial anthropology and typology, and the priority that he always attributed to language, must be remembered when considering his relation to later racialist and racist ideologies. A more subtle treatment of the Aryan legacy can be found in Figueira, *Aryans, Jews, Brahmins: Theorizing Authority through Myths of Identity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).

with determining the principal stages of India's religious development.⁶² Circumspection in such matters seems intended to give his work a scientific appearance; the refusal to make overhasty generalizations or unverifiable conclusions indicates an appropriate respect for the available evidence. But Schlegel's apprehension to identify deeper connections also reveals a distancing from India; while his unmeasured praise of Sanskrit points to the persistence of his early idealization, the reflections on religion and philosophy betray a growing dissatisfaction with India and a shift towards Catholicism, a re-orientation that is evident in the schematic presentation of Indian history.

Schlegel divides this history into four stages, corresponding not to developments in politics, but in accordance with various religious teachings; the four periods are the theory of emanation and transmigration, astrology and nature worship, cosmic dualism, and pantheism. He treats these different religious doctrines as distinct periods, not as competing interpretations of the world that existed simultaneously in conjunction and tension with one another. Even on the limited evidence available to him, such a periodization of Indian religion into these four distinct stages was hardly tenable. This tendency to divide history into a linear pattern of successive stages can already be seen at play in Schlegel's earlier works, and it only became more pronounced in the later writings and lectures. Part of the impulse behind formulating this schema was that it enabled Schlegel to make sweeping claims about general patterns of historical change and to draw correspondences between the past and the present. If Indian religion actually consisted of a diversity of schools, dogmas, and practices that existed concurrently and in complex relation with one another, it would not be possible to extract a straight-forward theory of their developmental relation.

⁶² *KFSA*, VIII, pp. 193-195.

Later scholars have tended to characterize Schlegel's portrayal of Indian religious history as one of "continuous degeneration", which sits well with the image of Schlegel as a historical pessimist and enemy of modern theories of progress.⁶³ But while Indian religion follows a general pattern of decline, it is by no means continuous; the third stage offers a decisive moment of temporary interruption to this trajectory. If not as sublime in its sentiments as the older theory of emanation, the cosmic dualism of the third stage shows, according to Schlegel, a great improvement over the previous era of crude nature worship, which descends to the degrading worship of beasts and the adoption of the most vicious superstitions. In "the doctrine of the two principles", Schlegel sees an anticipation, however flawed, of the Christian teaching of the struggle between good and evil.⁶⁴ This too-often neglected moment needs to be emphasized since it points to a faith in the possibility of later regeneration, an arresting of the movement of decline through a partial, if ultimately inadequate return, to original revelation. The insertion of this stage appears all the more striking when Schlegel confesses the paucity of Indian sources substantiating its existence in a pure form; rather, it is the writings of the Persians, particularly the sacred writings of Zoroastrianism, that express the pinnacle of cosmic dualism.

Schlegel imagined his own work as contributing to a spiritual renaissance through the reactivation of an originary legacy, and the existence of prior periods of rebirth gave confirmation to the ever-existent possibility of future regeneration. The fact that present concerns about the state of religion and philosophy were uppermost in Schlegel's mind when constructing his historical schema becomes more than evident in the transition to the fourth and final stage of Indian religious history, that of pantheism. The polemical tone of the concluding section reflects

⁶³ Chen Tzoref-Ashkenazi, "India and the Identity of Europe: The Case of Friedrich Schlegel," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67, no. 4 (2006), p. 729. In spite of this inaccurate description, Tzoref-Ashkenazi offers an otherwise astute account of the relationship between Schlegel's attitude towards India and his changing conceptions of European identity.

⁶⁴ *KFSA*, VIII, p. 229.

the high stakes at play and the contemporary relevance that Schlegel assigned to this portion of his work. Whereas there was little danger that his contemporaries would revert to the theriolatry of the second era, pantheism continued to be a source of great attraction to German thinkers in the early nineteenth century, and Schlegel's intervention was a challenge to those that identified God with the world and elevated reason above revelation.⁶⁵ It was also a moment of critical reflection, the repudiation of his own early flirtation with pantheistic ideas, dating back to the late 1790s.⁶⁶ His incisive attacks on Indian pantheism are as much a critique of his own previous philosophical convictions and those of his German contemporaries as a polemic against Oriental religion.⁶⁷ He disparages it not only for its metaphysical consequences, namely its erasure of the distinction between being and nothingness, but for its corrupting influence on morality.⁶⁸ The connection between the political turmoil of the time and the undermining of religious belief with the rise of an excessively worldly philosophy lies at the foundation of this condemnation.

The doctrine of pantheism, which concludes the narrative of Indian history, also marks the transition from eastern to western history and thought. But instead of finding in this moment the overcoming of Oriental superstition by western science, Schlegel saw it as a further lapse into a sterile rationalism. He writes that "the highest philosophy of the Europeans, the Idealism of Reason" appears, when set beside Oriental Idealism, like "a weak, Promethean spark against the full heavenly glow of the sun".⁶⁹ The movement of philosophy, wherein the concept of infinity becomes increasingly lost until idealism degenerates into skepticism and empiricism, does not

⁶⁵ Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988), pp. 77-79.

⁶⁶ In 1799, Schlegel invoked Spinoza's pantheistic philosophy as a necessary component for the creation of a modern mythology. *KFSA, II*, pp. 317-322.

⁶⁷ This was readily noted by Schlegel's contemporaries who felt slighted by the critique. Schelling specifically addressed what he considered to be Schlegel's false portrayal of pantheism and its association with a freedom-destroying fatalism. *Über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1964), pp. 47-48, 59-60.

⁶⁸ *KFSA, VIII*, p. 253.

⁶⁹ "nur als ein schwacher prometheischer Funke gegen die volle himmlische Glut der Sonne erscheinen". *Ibid.*, p. 305.

simply occur in the first stages of western thought; rather, the cycle continually repeats itself in smaller circuits. A recognition of the fact facilitates the overcoming of this pernicious movement; it also suggests philosophy's limitations and the necessity of religion. If the virtue of the Oriental tradition was its recognition of divine revelation, in this respect, it was also completely superseded by the revealed truths of Christianity.

Within months of the work's publication, Schlegel and his wife Dorothea converted to Roman Catholicism, a change in religious affiliation to which both had been moving steadily at least since Schlegel's arrival in Paris half a decade earlier.⁷⁰ Contemporaries and later scholars alike have rightly inclined to see Schlegel's study on India in light of this conversion; in a more dismissive vein, Heinrich Heine carped that the work was primarily an apology for Catholicism.⁷¹ However, the connections between Schlegel's religious and political convictions run so deep that an exclusive emphasis on Catholicism as a motivating factor in Schlegel's Oriental studies obscures their equally consequential political character.⁷² A dismay at the excesses of the French Revolution manifested itself in a return to the Church, but also to a sympathy for the older estates-based social structure of the Middle Ages.⁷³ This form of social organization offered the image of a harmonious, organic whole against the disintegrative atomism of the revolutionary period; likewise, the Indian caste system, with its structured division of society, initially appealed to Schlegel for its holistic character. The strange

⁷⁰ *Friedrich Schlegel in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten*, pp. 93-102.

⁷¹ Heine, *Die romantische Schule* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1976), pp. 62-63.

⁷² As Tzoref-Ashkenazi notes, "Schlegel's theology and politics are in fact hardly separable." "The Nationalist Aspect of Friedrich Schlegel's *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians*," in *Sanskrit and 'Orientalism': Indology and Comparative Linguistics in Germany, 1750-1958*, ed. Douglas T. McGetchin, Peter K.J. Park, and Damodar SarDesai (New Delhi: Manohar, 2004), p. 117. For a greater emphasis on the religious dimensions of Schlegel's attitudes towards India, see, in the same collection of essays, Peter K.J. Park, "A Catholic Apologist in a Pantheistic World: New Approaches to Friedrich Schlegel."

⁷³ Elizabeth Höltenschmidt provides a comprehensive account of the Schlegel brothers' work and views on medieval literature, religion, politics, and culture. *Die Mittelalter-Rezeption der Brüder Schlegel* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2000).

confluence of medievalism and Indophilia in Schlegel's work was largely a product of a critical stance towards contemporary European politics and religion. At the time when Schlegel was conducting research on and composing *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians*, the various German states and kingdoms were in a state of disarray. Between 1805 and 1806, Napoleon's armies delivered crushing blows to Prussia and Austria, and the Holy Roman Empire, which had Schlegel's deepest sympathy, was dissolved. Under these adverse political conditions, Schlegel's Indological and medieval researches both partook of the same urge to vindicate Germany and German culture in the face of French hegemony.

In the third and final book concerning "Historical Ideas", the current relevance of Indological studies is made explicit. Schlegel here explores the origin of poetry, ancient migrations of Oriental peoples, India's political constitution, and the overall utility of Oriental studies. The concluding chapter of the work, entitled "On Indian and Oriental Studies, and their Value and Purpose", provides the most complete, if highly equivocal, account of Schlegel's thoughts on the significance of the study of ancient India for modern Europe. He writes,

After we have indicated and shown the fruitfulness of Indian Studies for language research, philosophy and ancient history, nothing more remains than to determine the relationship between the Oriental and the European way of thinking; to portray the influence that the first had or should have upon the second in order to make clear from this perspective the importance of Indian Studies, which was the purpose of this whole work.⁷⁴

In describing the interactions between Asia and Europe, Schlegel stresses the connection between classical and Oriental studies, and he even derides the excessive attention paid to

⁷⁴ "Nachdem wir die Fruchtbarkeit des indischen Studiums für Sprachforschung, Philosophie und alte Geschichte gezeigt und angedeutet haben, bliebe nichts mehr übrig als noch das Verhältnis der orientalischen Denkart überhaupt zur europäischen zu bestimmen, und den Einfluß darzustellen, welchen die erste auf die letzere gehabt hat oder haben soll, um auch von dieser Seite die Wichtigkeit des indischen Studiums deutlich zu machen, welches der Zweck dieser ganzen Abhandlung war." *KFSA*, VIII, p. 295.

Greece at the expense of the Orient.⁷⁵ This judgement must give us pause when it is recalled that Schlegel's own early work was wholly occupied with ancient Greek literature and philosophy, an obsession that marks so much of the *Goethezeit*.⁷⁶ Given the incomparably high regard for ancient Greece within German scholarship and philosophy at the time, such an association and elevation was bound to disturb classicists intent on preserving Greece's primacy.⁷⁷ But even as German Hellenists prepared to defend their scholarly territory from foreign encroachment, Schlegel undermined the artificial distinction set up between Greece and the Orient. He writes, "In the history of peoples, the inhabitants of Asia and the Europeans are to be considered as members of one family, whose history may not be separated if one wishes to understand the whole."⁷⁸ And this understanding does not confine itself to the past or simply ensure more accurate historical knowledge, but offers a new impulse and direction for the future. Schlegel does not advocate a reversion to a past era, something which is neither possible nor desirable, but the reanimation of "the wonders of antiquity" so as to give new life to the present. Since "the truly new has never arisen without, in part, being stimulated and called forth by the old", a historical appreciation of the Orient becomes indispensable for guiding the future of Europe.⁷⁹ A revolution, such as the French Revolution, that imagines itself to utterly break with the past has severed its own living roots.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 317.

⁷⁶ E.M. Butler's *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935) gives a good indication of the nature and extent of German Hellenophilia during the late eighteenth and nineteenth century.

⁷⁷ Like Poliakov, Martin Bernal considers Schlegel a forerunner of "the concept of an Aryan race"; he criticizes Schlegel's denigration of Egypt, which he rather tendentiously portrays as racially-motivated. *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classic Civilization. Volume I: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece, 1785-1985* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), pp. 230-231. As a result, Bernal does not acknowledge how the Schlegelian notion of an Indo-European connection profoundly upset established notions of European identity vis-à-vis the Orient, particularly in regard to the supposed cultural purity of ancient Greece.

⁷⁸ "In der Völkergeschichte sind die Bewohner Asiens und die Europäer wie Glieder einer Familie zu betrachten, deren Geschichte durchaus nicht getrennt werden darf, wenn man das Ganze verstehen will." *KFSA*, VIII, p. 311.

⁷⁹ "Denn niemals entstand noch ein wahrhaft Neues, das nicht durch das Alte zum Teil angeregt und hervorgerufen... wäre." *Ibid.*, p. 309.

But there remains much about the Orient that cannot and does not deserve to be preserved; much has also been supplanted. Even after identifying the linguistic connections between India and Europe, Schlegel asserts that “the actual bond” that draws together the Oriental and European way of thinking can be found only in the holy scriptures.⁸⁰ Christianity teaches truths that are higher than those accessible to mere reason, and Oriental religion, at best, merely foreshadows these truths in an incomplete fashion. In contrast to his earlier idealization of Indian origins, Schlegel now asserts that “the documents of the Indians show us the origin of error”, the first aberrations which become magnified with time.⁸¹ India still retains its importance as an originary moment, but it is no longer the origin of pure revelation, but of revelation’s first great distortion. Once the prospect of finding uncontaminated divine origins in India was abandoned, the new task became the identification of the incursion of error.

This approach to history derived primarily from an emphasis on the philological analysis of ancient texts. In attempting to reconstruct the oldest works, the task of the philologist was to differentiate between the original text and later interpolations, addenda, and modifications. The project of distinguishing between the pristine *Urtext* and its corrupted later variants, which the modern European philologist had to work through to reconstruct the desired original, both presupposed and reinforced the primacy accorded to the most ancient works.⁸² This methodological approach thoroughly informs Schlegel’s Indological writings, and it also decisively shaped later German Sanskrit studies.⁸³ In Germany, research on comparative

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

⁸¹ “so zeigen uns die indischen Urkunden die Entstehung des Irrtums”. *Ibid.*, pp. 295-297.

⁸² Robert P. Goldman, “Indologies: German and Other,” *Sanskrit and ‘Orientalism’: Indology and Comparative Linguistics in Germany, 1750-1958*, pp. 31-32.

⁸³ The importance given to the study of ancient languages in the emergent post-Humboldtian university system further contributed to the growth of German Indology, which rapidly overtook its French and even British counterparts. Todd McGetchin, *The Sanskrit Reich: Translating Ancient India for Modern Germans, 1790-1914* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 2002), pp. 129-137.

linguistics and Vedic studies, which examined the oldest surviving Indian documents, were especially advanced in comparison to other national scholarships.⁸⁴

In contrast, British Indologists devoted greater attention to more politically relevant contemporary matters of jurisprudence and ethnology, areas of study that were necessary for the control, governance, domination and conquest of the sub-continent.⁸⁵ Not surprisingly, the complicity of these studies with British imperialism profoundly shaped, and often warped, the interpretation of Indian culture.⁸⁶ However, the British also displayed an attentiveness to present concerns in India that proved to be sorely lacking in the case of later German scholarship. For the British Orientalists, it was the reception history of texts, particularly legal writings such as *The Law Book of Manu*, that was most instructive and useful for administrative purposes. The absence of such interests in Schlegel's work can largely be explained as a consequence of the philological commitment to uncovering the most ancient sources in the original form. Within this framework, in which all subsequent reception and reinterpretation becomes synonymous with corruption, Schlegel's notion of India's historical degeneration becomes intelligible; the conflation of India's past with its written records not only conferred tremendous power upon philological expertise in interpreting this past, but it also transformed Indian history into a text that was subject to constant deformation. Schlegel's own philological endeavours exhibit the power of European scholarship to both correct Indian sources and to deploy them for contemporary purposes. Whereas Indian history here assumes the form of a passive text that can,

⁸⁴ Thomas Trautmann observes that "well before the middle of the nineteenth century the Indo-European concept had come to seem essentially foreign to Britons, identified with the continent generally and German scholars in particular." *Aryans and British India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 28.

⁸⁵ Goldman, pp. 30-31.

⁸⁶ For an account of the interaction between British imperial power and Indological studies, see Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

at best, be preserved from the ravages of time, modern Europe undertakes the role of an author who enjoys the prerogative of writing the future.

3. “A Prophet Facing Backwards”: Schlegel’s Lectures on the Philosophy of History

As a result of its narrative of India’s historical decline, *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians* has frequently been interpreted as a work of disillusionment. And Schlegel’s subsequent lack of sustained interest in Indological studies has even led to the hyperbolic description of a later “revulsion” from all things Indic.⁸⁷ Certainly, there is a great distance between Schlegel’s initial enthusiasm and his later critical stance, but it remains necessary to recognize the ways that this disaffection was imbedded in questions that extended far beyond Indological studies in the narrow sense.⁸⁸ A pronounced tendency towards increasingly grandiose and encompassing treatments of life, language, and history not only prevented sustained engagements with India, but also with ancient Greece, to which Schlegel devoted so much of his youth. In his lectures on the philosophy of history, he recounts this intellectual development to his audience, and notes the movement in his work from highly specialized researches to more universal studies, spurred on by a desire to grasp the whole.⁸⁹

On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians marks a moment of critical transition in Schlegel’s career, which partly accounts for its internal tensions and equivocations. Shortly after its publication Schlegel converted to Catholicism and took up residence in Vienna, where he

⁸⁷ Said, p. 150. Figueira tends to agree with this characterization, but takes Said to task for not further questioning “the crucial issue of enchantment versus disenchantment as a cornerstone of cross-cultural reception”. *The Exotic*, p. 57. Ursula Struc-Oppenber, however, calls the very fact of Schlegel’s disillusionment into question, and dismisses it as an unproven, but frequently repeated claim; she points to both Schlegel’s continuing interest in India as well as broader changes in his intellectual outlook that had little to do with India specifically. *KFSA*, VIII, pp. ccxiii-ccxvii.

⁸⁸ Otherwise, there is a danger in simply repeating Hegel’s explanation that the better acquainted one becomes with the Orient, the less impressive and more inferior it appears. *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1976), p. 393.

⁸⁹ *KFSA*, IX, p. 13.

resided with only few interruptions until the end of his life. He here took a much more active role in politics and even briefly served under Metternich in a diplomatic capacity, for which the Catholic Church rewarded him with the Order of Christ.⁹⁰ During the last two decades of his life, he continued to write prolifically and frequently gave public lectures to the upper crust of Viennese society. More ambitious in its scope than the earlier philological and literary pieces of his youth, this work culminated in a cycle of lectures on the philosophy of life, the philosophy of language, and the philosophy of history. The eighteen lectures that comprise the *Philosophy of History* were presented in 1828, the year before Schlegel's death, and constitute his most comprehensive narrative of world history.

Schlegel begins the preface to the lectures with the assertion that “the nearest object and the first task of philosophy” is the “restoration” (*Wiederherstellung*) of the divine image in man, a term overloaded with political connotations.⁹¹ The goal of the philosophy of history, in particular, is the tracing of the movement of restoration through the various past eras. Despite the conversions, ruptures, and disavowals that characterize Schlegel's tumultuous intellectual development, this abiding commitment to the recovery of origins announces itself at the start of the lecture series. At the same time, the Christian underpinnings of Schlegel's narrative, somewhat muted in the earlier historical studies, are here made explicit. Following *Genesis*, Schlegel repudiates the naturalist thesis that the state of savagery is the original state of man; “the beginning of history” signals not the emergence of man from the state of nature, but a

⁹⁰ In 1815, he was nominated First Secretary of the Austrian Legation to the Diet at Frankfurt, but his diplomatic career, notwithstanding the support of the Church, was not a successful one. According to his superiors, “he neglected his official duties and propagated views of such eccentricity as to cause embarrassment to his employers”. Hans Eichner, *Friedrich Schlegel* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1970), p. 125.

⁹¹ *KFSA*, IX, p. 3. For an assessment of the political and religious imbrications of Schlegel's notion of restoration, see Klaus Peter, *Stadien der Aufklärung: Moral und Politik bei Lessing, Novalis, und Friedrich Schlegel* (Wiesbaden: Akademische Verlagsgesellschaft, 1980) and Gerd Peter Hendrix, *Das politische Weltbild Friedrich Schlegels* (Bonn: H. Bouvier, 1962).

“sinking” into it after divine beginnings.⁹² Even his insistence that one must not want to explain everything, which partakes of a sincere acknowledgement of the limits of historical understanding, bolsters a reliance on scriptural authority.⁹³ But while Schlegel’s narrative utilizes Christian language and dogma, it does not reproduce the old-fashioned sacred history of Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, which confined itself almost wholly to the biblical Orient and neglected the greater part of Asia. Instead, Schlegel identifies more than a dozen different “lands of culture” that, to varying degrees, have had consequential historical roles.⁹⁴ He admits that the majority of cultures and most of the human population remain outside the scope of his study, but justifies this exclusion on the grounds that history can only be grasped as a whole, which necessitates leaving out much that is insignificant. Whereas the story of every individual immortal soul has importance in its relation to God, the same is not true for every human being or every people in relation to history.⁹⁵

Since Schlegel believed that the earliest historical records were to be found outside of Europe, special attention is devoted to China, India, Egypt, and the Hebrews. But unlike the lectures on universal history, the order in which these nations are presented does not imply any temporal priority. Schlegel explicitly states that his organization of this portion of the work was motivated not by chronological but geographical considerations; in the movement from east to west, China, which was excluded from the previous lectures, offers the appropriate starting point and is discussed first.⁹⁶ In regard to the relative antiquity of these nations, he abstains from judgement, a far cry from the earlier insistence on India’s pre-eminence. While Schlegel’s newfound circumspection on such matters may be commended, the emphasis on geography

⁹² *KFSA*, IX, p. 30.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

strangely deprives the Orient of the historical role that Schlegel appears to attribute to it.⁹⁷ Instead of a narrative of historical interactions, influences, and developments, these lectures present a portrait of static cultures imprisoned in their own geographical confines.

Schlegel introduces the lecture on Indian history with a description of Alexander the Great's arrival in northwestern India; in spite of his own acquaintance with older Sanskrit sources, his narrative begins with a Greek account of this encounter. Such a framing served to draw Schlegel's European audience into the Orient, imaginatively accompanying the armies of Macedon; but it also subtly reinforced the conviction that India's historical reality was contingent upon the presence of Europe, whether in the form of European scholars or conquerors. Even compared to the schematic overview of Indian history offered in the monograph of 1808, the lecture on India lacks historical nuance and specificity. The description of India's political constitution evokes a sense of timelessness that obviates the need of further distinctions; in a work purporting to be about Indian history, all meaningful change and development is effaced. Tellingly, the lecture ends much as it had begun; making reference to the ancient Greeks' description of ancient Indian ascetic and self-denying practices, Schlegel notes that, as fantastic as many of these accounts initially appear, they have been confirmed by contemporary European eye-witnesses.⁹⁸ The circuit between the ancient and the modern European observer is closed; as for India, the interval of two millennia has not resulted in any noteworthy historical alteration, either in its political structure or its religious rituals.

The relevance of India, for Schlegel, no longer lies in the originary impulse that it gives to subsequent history. Instead, India, like the other Oriental nations, primarily serves a symbolic

⁹⁷ Johannes Fabian notes that "in the study of 'unchanging' primitive culture, temporal relations can be disregarded in favor of spatial relations". *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 18. In Schlegel's lectures, the emphasis on geography reinforces transhistorical claims about the nature of Oriental cultures.

⁹⁸ *KFSA*, IX, p. 105.

function in its embodiment of a particular essence. The most ancient Indian records do not present a moment of harmony, as Schlegel fantasized when he first undertook the study of Sanskrit, but the lapse into discord. The fall from paradise destroys “the inner harmony of the soul”, and a state of conflict ensues that gives rise to the proliferation of different peoples and languages.⁹⁹ Schlegel identifies four faculties as comprising the harmonious soul, namely reason, imagination, understanding, and will; these faculties are in turn identified respectively with the four great ancient Oriental nations, the Chinese, the Indians, the Egyptians, and the Hebrews.¹⁰⁰ In this reduction of different peoples to different spiritual faculties, India has retained its former association with the imagination, but the power of imagination has undergone a devaluation in favour of an ideal of psychic wholeness.¹⁰¹ To be sure, such a longing for wholeness had always been a constitutive feature of the romantic enterprise, but the younger Schlegel had also imagined that imagination itself could bring about the realization of this very ideal. In the historical vision of the 1820s, the integration and subordination of the faculties to a higher principle corresponds to the transition from the ancient Oriental world to the emerging Occident. Only with the rise of Persia, the first world-conquering nation, is a new era inaugurated that marks, through its unification of diversity, the passage from eastern to western history.

Schlegel’s reduction of Oriental nations to spiritual faculties, and the accompanying denial of their internal diversity, points to their fundamental incompleteness. Given his commitment to the principles of harmony, wholeness, and synthesis, a deficiency in this respect necessarily had to be overcome. In his early *Athenäum* writings on poetry and the novel, Schlegel himself attempted to bring about this overcoming, at least in the realm of literature and aesthetics, through the concept of “a progressive universal poetry” that unabashedly brought

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 109-110.

together seemingly incongruent styles, themes, and modes of address.¹⁰² The romantic apotheosis of the novel derived, in part, from the novel's potential to combine and unite diverse genres; ideally, such a synthesis was not a matter of caprice or chaos, but an imaginative organic integration. The novelistic ideal of universal poetry was predicated upon its ceaseless striving, its progressiveness, which pointed to the future even in its incorporation of the past. In a similar fashion, history displays not a mechanical or haphazard concatenation of peoples and events, but the organic unfolding of a meaningful narrative. But what Schlegel's history of the Orient cannot abide is precisely what earns his affection for the novel, the simultaneity and mixing of radical differences.¹⁰³ The precondition of the European novel is the earlier division into genres, which must then be brought together and overcome. Likewise, European history, which draws together all that preceded it, or at least that which deserves preserving, requires a state of prior division and disunity. In reducing different Oriental cultures to fractured faculties or essences, Schlegel makes possible the representation of modern Europe as uniquely historical, universal, and progressive. In the process, he surrenders his earlier commitment to the destabilizing and self-questioning practice of irony.¹⁰⁴

If the different Oriental nations seem to be homogeneous wholes or rather undifferentiated parts, the danger posed to modern Europe is an excessive heterogeneity and differentiation, a chaotic dispersal of forces and disintegration into an atomistic mass. Deploying the language of organicism, Schlegel even speaks of an "infection" that threatens all of

¹⁰² "Die romantische Poesie ist eine progressive Universalpoesie." *KFSA*, II, p. 182.

¹⁰³ The endorsement of such novelistic free play finds less and less room in the later writings after Schlegel "exchanges the aesthetic sociality he has extolled through the period of the *Athenäum* and *Lucinde*... for the organic community of faith in the established Church." Librett, p. 261.

¹⁰⁴ Paul de Man's highly influential interpretation of Schlegelian irony in terms of "permanent parabasis" tends to focus almost exclusively on the writings from the late 1790s; as a result, he does not discuss the surprising lack of irony in Schlegel's later historical writings. However, Schlegel's lapse in the employment of irony and the absence of parabasis in his historical narratives reveal the limits of irony's applications and uses in his thought. See de Man, "The Concept of Irony," in *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

contemporary Europe; although France was the centre of the catastrophe, Schlegel warns that it would be wrongheaded to consider the French Revolution the source of all problems; rather, the revolution was a symptom of “a political sickness”, “an epidemic” that terribly marked an entire historical era.¹⁰⁵ The healing of Europe, its restoration to health, thus demands more than a political solution; and the needed spiritual revitalization that must accompany the establishment of political freedom and order can only be provided by Christianity. Schlegel’s call for an Oriental Renaissance dissolves under a mission of Christianization; in fact, he points to certain corrupting esoteric influences, derived in part from the Oriental tradition, that have contributed to the woes of the present.¹⁰⁶ The always tenuous alliance between Catholicism and India against the deleterious influences of revolutionary French politics and culture has completely unraveled here. Meanwhile, the deepening identification of Europe, or at least its most noble and enduring aspects, with Christianity leads to the suppression of other sources of European culture, which Schlegel was once so keen on emphasizing. Since, according to Schlegel, “Christianity is the history of the liberation of humanity”, the lectures on the philosophy of history appropriately conclude with a rhapsody on the spreading and the deepening of the Christian faith throughout the world.¹⁰⁷ Europe’s universality is once again confirmed since it is the principal bearer of the only truly universal religion.

While this vision of a European Christian mission found a welcome reception, particularly among the conservative forces of restoration, the lectures on the philosophy of history ultimately proved to be less consequential in shaping later historical practice and interpretation than Schlegel’s earlier philological research. With the rising popularity of the

¹⁰⁵ *KFSA*, IX, p. 403.

¹⁰⁶ According to René Gérard, the move to a “Catholic universalism” not only undermined the prior fantasy of a rejuvenation of the Occident through the Orient, but marked the abandonment of Schlegel’s “occidental-oriental humanism”. *L’Orient et la pensée romantique allemande* (Paris: Georges Thomas, 1963), p. 127.

¹⁰⁷ “Das Christentum ist die Geschichte von der Befreiung des Menschengeschlechts.” *KFSA*, IX, p. 426.

Hegelian philosophy of history, on the one hand, and Rankean positivism, on the other, Schlegel's views, at least as laid out in the 1828 lectures, were eclipsed throughout the nineteenth century.¹⁰⁸ Conversely, the impetus that *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians* gave to comparative linguistics and German Oriental studies was immense; and even when Schlegel's contribution was not specifically acknowledged, his writings on ancient Greece and medieval European literature were decisive in shaping the ways that past texts came to be assessed as objects of historical inquiry.

In one of the most famous fragments of the *Athenäum*, Schlegel imputes an almost mystical power to the historian, whom he compares to "a prophet facing backwards."¹⁰⁹ In the case of his own historical writings, the historian not only faces, but also writes backwards. The origin of his narrative, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, is not the ancient Orient, whether in the form of India or a more respectably Christian site for the Garden of Eden; if it were, the multiple offshoots of this originary point would have to be traced in all of their countless ramifications. Rather, the modern European, or the nineteenth-century German philologist to be more precise, constitutes the actual beginning, whose history must be traced back through a confusing and misleading maze of detours and dead-ends. The oft-repeated metaphor of the thread of history, which Schlegel employs in the earliest and latest works alike, is used most often in a philological context when establishing connections between distant words or languages.¹¹⁰ But the metaphor is also transposed to refer to other forms of historical tracing and reconstruction; in all its diverse applications, it recalls the myth of Theseus wandering

¹⁰⁸ Dilthey drew attention to Schlegel's contributions to history and criticism though he tended to interpret them in their relation to Schleiermacher's work rather than assess them in their own light. Writing in the first decade of the twentieth century, F. Lederbogen complained that, even after the work of Dilthey and Rudolf Haym, Schlegel's philosophy of history had still not received the attention it deserved. *Friedrich Schlegels Geschichtsphilosophie: Ein Beitrag zur Genesis der historischen Weltanschauung* (Leipzig: Dürr, 1908), pp. 5-9.

¹⁰⁹ "Der Historiker ist ein rückwärts gekehrter Prophet." *KFSA*, II, p. 176.

¹¹⁰ *KFSA*, VIII, pp. 157-159.

through the labyrinth, an impression heightened by Schlegel's repeated warnings that the historian must beware of becoming lost in innumerable particulars. The lectures on the philosophy of history make this fact still more apparent; in the beginning, history presents us with different Oriental peoples, who are themselves fractured faculties; the restored, harmonious human being, who brings these diverse strands together into a unifying thread, finds its realization only in modern Europe. If Europe itself remains in a state of unrest, division, and uncertainty, it still contains within itself the possibility of future restoration.

Nonetheless, it would be a simplification to claim that Schlegel's concern with India was merely a concern for Europe in disguise; such an assertion presupposes that one already knows what Europe was and is. Rather, in attempting to think through the identity of Europe, Schlegel needed to take account of its origins and its contours; such an exercise demanded an engagement with both Europe's antecedents and its others, and in Schlegel's presentation of history, India assumed both of these roles. The fantasy of an Oriental Renaissance depended upon this contradiction; a radical difference between India and Europe was necessary for the former to be able to contribute something transformatively new to the latter; at the same time, if India were too foreign or bore no historical relation to Europe, it would not be possible for it to be assimilated or adapted to contemporary European culture. The changing importance that Schlegel ascribed to Indian origins in the course of his intellectual career, both in terms of their historical influence and contemporary relevance, expresses this tension. His quest for origins was not a search for historical causes or causal connections, but a retrieval of a past that was alive to the concerns of the present.

Chapter 4

Hegel's Vision of India: A Prelude to History

Hegel describes the course of history as moving westwards, a trajectory that he explicates not only with the aid of historical evidence, but through a systematic theory of the nature of reality. The direction and parameters of the process are succinctly captured in his assertion that “world history goes from east to west, for Europe is simply the end of world history, Asia the beginning.”¹ The movement of the sun, a natural phenomenon that Hegel uses as a metaphor for illumination and consciousness, here finds its analogue in the realm of the spirit. After the first glimmers of history in Asia, Europe progresses further towards self-consciousness and comes to recognize that freedom derives from the light of reason within. And with the onset of historical twilight, western man erects a building “formed from his own inner sun”, which he learns to esteem more highly than the “external sun” that was once wrongly exalted above the human spirit.² This narrative, the story of spirit’s overcoming of nature and the realization of human freedom, lies at the heart of the Hegelian system. Although its most detailed exposition appears in Hegel’s lectures on the philosophy of world history, which have a decidedly political orientation in their treatment of nations and states, the problem of the historical is not confined to matters of politics, but animates Hegel’s lectures on art, religion, and philosophy, to which he devoted himself in the 1820s, the last decade of his life.³

¹ “Die Weltgeschichte geht von Osten nach Westen, denn Europa ist schlechthin das Ende der Weltgeschichte, Asien der Anfang.” Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Werke 12. Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), p. 134.

² *Ibid.*, p. 134.

³ “Not only does Hegel’s work include a philosophy of history and a history of philosophy, but his entire system is historically oriented to an extent which is true of no previous philosophy.” Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Thought*, trans. David E. Green (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), p. 29.

This conceptualization of history bears the marks of the tumultuous era in which Hegel came of age. With Friedrich Schlegel, his contemporary and rival, he shared a sense of living through a transformative period in human history. The French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, and the resulting reforms of the Prussian state deeply impressed themselves upon his sense of the contemporary world-historical moment. It was a moment upon which Hegel not only reflected, but that he shaped through the teaching of the next generation of German thinkers and the widespread dissemination of his ideas. After years of struggling to find a stable academic position, Hegel was called to the University of Berlin in 1818, where he attained an almost celebrity status.⁴ And though his loyalty to the state that employed him did not waver, his relationship to it was seldom free from tension; he utilized his position of authority to both sanction and question the powers that be, a complex relationship, the nature of which continues to be a matter of scholarly contention.⁵ But whatever the exact character of his attitude towards the Prussian state, he was fully cognizant of the fact that his own historical position was not incidental to his philosophizing. In fact, his recognition of the subject position of the historical observer, the fact that our understanding of the past cannot be divorced from our own context, constitutes one of his principal insights into the nature of historical understanding. The recognition that the historian “brings his categories” to bear upon the data under scrutiny gives the lie to a facile objectivism, which imagines that the acquisition of truth consists in a merely passive and disinterested reception of the given facts.⁶ The result is neither skepticism nor relativism, both of

⁴ “Prussia was the ‘focal point’ of German culture, Berlin was Prussia’s ‘focal point’, the University was the ‘focal point’ of Berlin, and philosophy – *Hegel’s* philosophy – was the ‘focal point’ of the University.” Terry Pinkard, *Hegel: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 605.

⁵ In the mid-nineteenth century, Rudolf Haym referred to the “elective affinity [Wahlverwandschaft] and inner connection between Hegelian doctrines and the Prussian state”, an association that continues to this day. *Hegel und seine Zeit* (Berlin: Rudolph Gaertner, 1857), pp. 357-58. For a critique of the characterization of Hegel as a political lackey, see T.M. Knox, “Hegel and Prussianism” in *The Hegel Myths and Legends*, ed. Jon Stewart (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996), pp. 70-81, and Avineri, “Hegel and Nationalism,” in *Ibid.*, pp. 109-128.

⁶ Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), p. 11.

which Hegel combatted vigorously, but a self-consciousness that is attentive to the particularity of historical contexts. Accordingly, the mature Hegel did not withdraw into an arid, unempirical metaphysics, but showed an increasing attentiveness and awareness for historical matters.

Indeed, for Hegel, the immersion in the empirical world was taken to be a distinction not only of the philosopher in pursuit of truth, but marked, more generally, the modern European consciousness – “Here, therefore, there prevails this infinite thirst for knowledge which is alien to the other races. The European is interested in the world, he wants to know it, to make this Other confronting him his own.”⁷ The “infinite thirst for knowledge” demands more than a disconnected body of facts about the “Other”; rather, it can only find its satisfaction in a philosophical system wherein the relationship between self and other, and the corresponding process of appropriation, is itself explicated. The resulting system, on account of its historical character, does not possess the rigidity of a static truth, but shows itself to be dynamic in its unfolding of new forms of historical being. The system legitimates itself through a narrative of its own movement and becoming wherein prior stages of development are conceptually recapitulated. In the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel explains the procedure as follows:

Since the Substance of the individual, the World-Spirit itself, has had the patience to pass through these shapes over the long passage of time, and to take upon itself the enormous labour of world-history, in which it embodied in each shape as much of its entire content as that shape was capable of holding, and since it could not have attained consciousness of itself by any lesser effort, the individual certainly cannot by the nature of the case comprehend his own substance more easily.⁸

The historical reconstruction of the different shapes that the world spirit has assumed requires an account of the emergence and development of consciousness within both the individual and the species, a narrative in which the parameters between ontogeny and phylogeny are not easily

⁷ Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, trans. W. Wallace and A.V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), §393, pp. 43-44.

⁸ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), §29, p. 17.

disentangled. The Hegelian interpretation of world history consequently offers more, and less, than a summary overview of the histories of the various peoples and cultures on the planet; in an attempt to comprehend the movement of spirit's consciousness of itself, it seeks a unified progression, which is justified not by virtue of its universality, understood in the sense of universal inclusiveness, but on account of its internal purposiveness. In his taxonomy of the varieties of history, Hegel thus makes a clear distinction between "universal history" and his own philosophy of history. He states that within universal history, "it is the aim of the investigator to gain a view of the entire history of a people or a country, or of the world", and mentions, as examples of the genre, Livy, Diodorus Siculus, and Johannes von Müller's *History of Switzerland*.⁹ In refusing to differentiate these historians' accounts of national history from world history, Hegel indicates that the geographical scope of a historical narrative does not affect its substance. He thereby distinguishes his brand of "philosophical history" from other accounts of world history, which might otherwise be confused with it or considered as possible alternatives. Unlike "reflective history", of which universal history is a species, the guiding principle of philosophical history is that reason governs the world and "the history of the world, therefore, presents us with a rational process."¹⁰ While Hegel concedes that this last judgement is an assumption in regard to history, it is, within the realm of philosophy at least, no mere hypothesis, but proven by speculative cognition.¹¹

To the philosophical observer who looks upon world history rationally, it reveals itself to be not merely the product of efficient causes or haphazard contingency, but purposeful and rational in turn. Causal explanations enable us to describe events, but since a solely mechanistic

⁹ *Philosophy of History*, p. 4. Sibree's translation often uses gratuitous capitalizations of certain words; here, as elsewhere, these have been altered without noting the specific changes.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

perspective does not take account of human freedom and proves inadequate in apprehending the meaning of history, mechanism must ultimately be sublated in teleology.¹² Hegel's own teleological interpretation of historical movement rests upon an understanding of the end as both purposive and implicitly present in the beginning. The problem of the beginning is also a problem of the determination of the concept; Hegel describes the concept not primarily as an instrument of thought, but as constitutive of reality.¹³ In its initial manifestation, the concept remains indeterminate and incomplete but acquires further determinacy with the enrichment of history. As a result, it is only retrospectively that its true nature can be properly known. Nonetheless, the concept and its beginning are so deeply implicated that the identification of its beginning and the definition of the concept itself cannot be divorced from one another – “what spirit is it has always been essentially; distinctions are only the development of this essential nature.”¹⁴ The beginning of history, which first appears in the Orient, is impoverished and incomplete when compared to history's later manifestations, but it also contains, in a latent form, the history to come. In this sense, the Orient is, at once, superseded and ever-present, negated and definitive.

For Hegel's latter-day apologists, his pronouncements on the Orient are among his more embarrassing and gladly forgotten. And yet, they cannot be easily dismissed as incidental to the philosophy of history given the attention that Hegel accorded to China, India, Persia, and Egypt. Although Hegel consigns the Orient to the periphery of history – he even denies that China and India possess history at all – that is not because the Orient is peripheral to his historical interests.

¹² Burleigh Taylor Wilkins, *Hegel's Philosophy of History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), p. 90.

¹³ According to “common sense”, “the concept is a tool of our knowing, a way of grasping reality. Our use of it is, as it were, without prejudice to the nature of reality itself. For Hegel, on the other hand, the Concept is an active principle underlying reality, making it what it is.” Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 298. On the theorization of the beginning in Hegel, particularly in his *Phenomenology* and *Logic*, see Karin Schrader-Klebert, *Das Problem des Anfangs in Hegels Philosophie* (Vienna: R. Oldenbourg, 1969).

¹⁴ *Philosophy of History*, p. 79.

After a lengthy excursus on the nature of history and the methods of historical inquiry, the lectures on the philosophy of history proceed to explicate, in great detail, the place of China and India in Hegel's world historical schema. The same procedure is at work, with varying degrees of explicitness, in the lectures on art, religion, and philosophy; a general overview of the subject matter under consideration is followed by an account of their manifestation in the Orient. The fact that Hegel's remarks on the Orient are frequently derogatory makes the attention he shows it all the more striking. In the first year that he delivered his lectures on the philosophy of history, Hegel devoted more attention to the Orient than to ancient Rome and modern Europe combined; and among the lands and peoples treated under the rubric of "the Oriental world", India was discussed in the greatest detail. Eduard Gans, who collated the first published version of Hegel's lectures in 1837, reduced the size of the sections on the Orient considerably since he felt that they were disproportionately large in relation to the parts pertaining to later western history. Although this underemphasis was corrected in subsequent editions, the sense that China and India were marginal to Hegel's historical concerns continued. Karl Hegel, the philosopher's son, presented his own edition of the lectures three years after Gans' version, and offered much more material on the Orient, drawn largely from Hegel's first lecture course on the topic, given in the winter semester of 1822-23.¹⁵ But Karl also downplayed the importance of this work in confining its worth to an expository function.

¹⁵ The attempts to synthesize the lecture series, though useful, also lead to distortion since they tend to give the false impression of a single work and do not take account of the important modifications that Hegel made to the lectures over the years. Hegel presented the lecture course five times, in 1822-23, 1824-25, 1826-27, 1828-1829, and 1830-31; student notes, upon which later textual reconstructions are primarily based, are extant for all five courses. With Karl Heinz Ilting, Karl Brehmer, and Hoo Nam Seelmann's critical edition of the first lecture course, published in 1996, a clearer sense of the development within Hegel's thought has emerged. Karl Hegel's version has reached the widest audience in the English-speaking world through J. Sibree's translation of it; the present paper frequently draws on Karl Hegel's text, but occasionally departs from Sibree's translation, in which case the translations provided are my own. In addition, Georg Lasson's version from 1919, which contains material on the Orient not available in the other edited lectures, has also been consulted.

In preceding to treat of China and India, he [Hegel] wished, as he said himself, only to show by example how philosophy ought to comprehend the character of a nation; and this could be done more easily in the case of the stationary nations of the East, than in that of peoples which have a *bona fide* history and historical development of character.¹⁶

If this were Hegel's sole purpose, then the choice of China and India as illustrative examples of a certain philosophical procedure seems quite arbitrary; other stationary cultures would have served equally well to this end. Karl's assessment consequently makes little sense of the complexities of China's and India's historical position within the Hegelian schema. After all, the East, to which Karl refers, is not uniformly "stationary", but divided between countries that manifest historical development and those that do not; the relation between them is itself a matter of the utmost importance for an understanding of history's beginnings.¹⁷

In this regard, Hegel drew a sharp line of division between "hither and farther Asia", a distinction that has often been acknowledged, but the importance of which has seldom been fully appreciated; the latter consists of China and India, the former encompasses Persia and Egypt. Within the Hegelian schema, the diverse peoples of both regions are classified as belonging to "the Oriental World", which constitutes the first stage of world history. However, the rift between hither and farther Asia is so pronounced that the former bears more resemblance and a closer historical relationship to Europe than to China or India. Hegel notes that the European traveler discovers a disconcerting contrast when crossing from Persia into India: "Whereas in the former country he finds himself still somewhat at home, and meets with European dispositions, human virtues, and human passions – as soon as he crosses the Indus... he encounters the most repellent characteristics, pervading every single feature of society."¹⁸ This ethnographic evidence

¹⁶ *Philosophy of History*, p. xi.

¹⁷ On the logic of Hegel's exclusion of certain cultures from world history, and the extent to which this exclusion is justified even according to his own criteria, see Ranajit Guha, *History at the Limit of World-History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

¹⁸ *Philosophy of History*, p. 173.

of the pronounced differences between the various types of Orientals, confirmed by eye-witness accounts, finds further confirmation in racial anthropology. Hegel prefaces his lecture on Persia with a brief reference to the Caucasian race, which includes Europeans and the peoples of “hither Asia”, such as Persians.¹⁹ In his division of the races, only the Caucasians possess history proper; the African “Negroes” possess no history whatsoever, while “the Mongolian race” (the Chinese and Indians) remain in an ambiguous stage of pre-history.²⁰

Still, despite the racist undertones of his assessment of foreign cultures, for Hegel, the spirit of a people is by no means reducible to race; in fact, an excessive emphasis on nature, or biology, would run counter to his avowed understanding of the human spirit as the activity of free self-determination. The decisive difference remains historical and finds its expression in a people’s political constitution, state structure, and consciousness of freedom.²¹ The deepening recognition of human freedom, in particular, corresponds to the westward movement of history – “The East knew and to the present day knows only that *one* is free; the Greek and Roman world, that *some* are free; the Germanic world knows that *all* are free.”²² The “*one*”, to whom Hegel here refers, is the Oriental despot, whose subjects are merely chattel that he uses as means to his own ends; the “*some*” of the Greco-Roman world are those citizens of the polis, the Republic, and the Empire who share in political action and possess some form of legal rights. As for those peoples who have no inkling whatsoever of human freedom, they remain immersed in nature and

¹⁹ Hegel, *Sämtliche Werke, Band VIII. Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*, ed. Georg Lasson (Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1919), pp. 414-15.

²⁰ Robert Bernasconi rightly points out the importance of race and racial divisions to Hegel’s narrative, but he overstates the case in asserting that it has a “racial basis”. “With What Must the Philosophy of History Begin? On the Racial Basis of Hegel’s Eurocentrism,” *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 22 (Sep. 2000), pp. 171-203.

²¹ Although the concept of the state is crucial to Hegel’s political and historical thought, an excessively statist interpretation of his philosophy diminishes the complexities of his theory of spirit and freedom. As Walter Jaeschke explains, “world history for Hegel is closely tied to the existence of states, nevertheless it is not, in the last analysis, the state in which history is grounded, but rather in the concept of spirit.” “World History and the History of Absolute Spirit,” in *History and System: Hegel’s Philosophy of History*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), p. 103.

²² *Philosophy of History*, p. 104. Translation modified.

have not yet entered into history at all. According to Hegel, “the first historical people” are the Persians, whose appearance “constitutes strictly the beginning of world-history”.²³ With Persia’s decline and the world-historical mission of Alexander the Great, the role of the Orient in subsequent history diminishes, but the impetus that it provides continues to be at work in what follows. The Persian wars bring the nations bordering the Mediterranean Sea, “the centre of world-history”, into conflict with one another and bind their historical destiny.²⁴ The resulting history of “hither Asia” and Europe forms a coherent drama, the continuity of which extends from antiquity to the present.²⁵

Conversely, “China and India lie, as it were, still outside the world’s history, as the mere presupposition of elements whose combination must be waited for to constitute their vital progression.”²⁶ China’s relative isolation and lack of influence on Europe prevent it from participating in the formation of world history. The position of India is more ambiguous since the subcontinent shows a record of intermittent contact with Persians and Europeans; the armies of Alexander even cross the Indus and briefly engage in battle with the natives. But the passivity of India, the fact that it has always been conquered and never conquered in turn, shows that it remains a mere object and not a truly historical actor. Hegel claims that both nations continue to be “stationary” and “perpetuate a natural vegetative existence even to the present time”.²⁷ However, this emphasis on their stationary nature sits rather uncomfortably with the decision to

²³ *Philosophy of History*, pp. 173-74.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

²⁵ Hayden White describes Hegel’s narrative of Oriental history as a plot, which is “itself analyzable into four stages”. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), pp. 128-130. White argues that the four Oriental cultures (the Chinese, the Indian, the Persian, and the Egyptian) correspond to four tropes (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony respectively). The unity of this plot shows that the Orient forms a coherent whole in its expression of tropological stages; however, White does not address the abrupt rupture within the Orient that marks one half of these cultures as properly historical, and the other half as not.

²⁶ *Philosophy of History*, p. 116.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

begin the lectures on the philosophy of history with a detailed treatment of both. Whereas Hegel had little compunction about banishing Africa and pre-Columbian America from history, his pronouncements on “farther Asia” reveal an uncertainty about its precise historical position, notwithstanding the boldness and self-certainty of isolated pronouncements. The case of India is especially noteworthy in this respect. Its geographical proximity to Persia places it at the very moment in which the transition to true history is effected, when static principles give way to progressive dynamism. In the Hegelian narrative, India forms a prelude to history, which stands outside of the ensuing drama and yet remains intimately related to it. And although India fails to participate in subsequent historical action, the western supersession of the past does not erase history’s indelible Oriental beginnings, but preserves them, sometimes even in forms which Hegel himself was loathe to acknowledge. “The grades which spirit seems to have left behind it, it still possesses in the depths of its present.”²⁸

1. The History of “so-called” Oriental Philosophy

In the summer semester of 1819, Hegel delivered a lecture course at the University of Berlin on the history of philosophy, a survey that moved beyond mere summary and unveiled a logical progression of ideas within the development of philosophy itself.²⁹ In his brief commentary on the existing literature in the field, Hegel noted that previous treatments had been largely confined to overviews of past thinkers, which lacked thematic coherence and organic unity. Hegel was dissatisfied with these accounts since they simply strung together a list of prominent figures without explaining the importance of a historical, as opposed to a merely

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

²⁹ Hegel first lectured on the history of philosophy in Jena in 1805, but without attracting much attention. Following his course of 1819, he lectured on the topic in the winter semesters of 1820-21, 1823-24, 1825-26, 1827-28, and 1829-30.

synoptic, perspective; against this excessively abstract approach, he sought to demonstrate that philosophy could not be separated from its own history.

A guiding principle of Hegel's lecture series is that "the history of philosophy is a progression impelled by an inherent necessity, one which is implicitly rational", and the task that Hegel set for himself was to make this implicit rationality explicit, to elucidate the unfolding of thought expressed in the works of philosophers from antiquity to the present.³⁰ What Hegel refers to as history is not merely the past as an object of study; this is, rather, one of the forms of historiography that he condemns for its abstractness and lack of organic unity. For Hegel, the history of philosophy, like world history more generally, means teleological development. His assertion that philosophy can only be understood through its history does not simply mean that it is necessary to understand the particular historical period in which thought arises to understand thought itself; rather, it indicates that the study of philosophy reveals, to the eye of the rational observer, a coherent and continuous narrative of development which moves towards absolute knowledge. Hegel even judges that without this internal purposiveness, intellectual history would be a vain and useless object of study, a mere piece of antiquarianism.³¹

In opposing the skeptics and relativists, who see in the history of philosophy only an accumulation of dogmas and opinions that are in contradiction with one another, he strives to show their profound interrelation and even necessary connection within a greater sequential narrative. Whereas the skeptics appeal to history to draw attention to the lack of progress and consensus in philosophy, Hegel's historical delineation safeguards the autonomy of philosophical knowledge and its inherent rationality. In fact, skepticism itself is not banished from the history of philosophy, but incorporated into it as a necessary moment and stage of

³⁰ *Lectures on the History of Philosophy I*, trans. E.S. Haldane and Frances H. Simon (New York: Humanities Press, 1974), p. 36.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

development.³² The quest to preserve philosophy from the threat of historical relativism, on the one hand, and from religion and the non-philosophical sciences, on the other, are among the primary justifications of the lectures. The ensuing narrative achieves its resolution with Hegel's own philosophy, which offers the proper culmination of all thinking that had preceded it.

Such a procedure necessitates the exclusion of much that has been perceived as philosophy, but actually bears only a superficial or tangential relation to it. Hegel thus begins his discussion of "so-called" Oriental philosophy with the caveat that this body of eastern thought "does not enter into the substance or range of our subject as represented here."³³ In fact, he affirms that the only reason to treat Oriental philosophy at all in this context is "to account for not treating it at greater length" and to illustrate its relationship to "true Philosophy".³⁴ Oriental thought comes into consideration not in its own right, but as part of the greater task of defining and determining philosophy's parameters. The discussion of China and India is both a prelude to the subsequent lectures on the Greeks and a continuation of Hegel's earlier treatment of the definition of philosophy, with which the lecture series commenced. Here, Hegel explores the relationship between philosophy, religion, and the other sciences in an attempt to identify philosophy's distinguishing characteristics and to prevent the encroachment of religion and the other sciences onto philosophical territory.

The place of the Orient within this discussion points to its Janus-faced character, at once degraded and dangerous. The Orient is degraded to the stage of the pre-philosophical; it shows, at best, a false start in the inception of thinking. At the same time, the possibility of confusing Oriental philosophy with philosophy proper was serious enough to warrant a discussion of it to

³² Tanja Staehler, "The Historicity of Philosophy and the Role of Skepticism," in *Hegel's History of Philosophy. New Interpretations*, ed. David A. Duquette (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), pp. 117-19.

³³ *Lectures on the History of Philosophy I*, p. 117.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

prevent Hegel's listeners from making this misstep. The fact that Hegel self-consciously undertook a project of marginalizing foreign traditions (or, to be more precise, of recognizing their intrinsically marginal nature) can only be made sense of given the conditions under which he was writing and working. It derived, in large measure, from his conviction that the Romantics, in their misguided Indophilia, had drawn the Orient and Occident excessively close together, thereby losing sight of their crucial differences.³⁵ The Romantic fascination with India, which had found resonance outside a narrow scholarly circle, and the accelerated developments within recent German Indology and Sanskrit studies made some reference to the Orient almost obligatory given the nature of the Hegelian project. The remarks on Indian philosophy were both a reaction to current scholarly and cultural trends in Hegel's immediate milieu and a function of a strategy that preempted possible criticisms of its neglect. Whereas Friedrich Schlegel argued that Indian and western philosophy formed an organic whole, Hegel was much more skeptical of the historical connection between India and Greece, the true homeland of philosophy in his eyes. And because he conceived of the history of philosophy as a continuous and unified narrative, the absence of a historical connection with Europe condemned India to the margins.³⁶

The exposition of Oriental philosophy, which Hegel puts forward, also represents a struggle to preserve philosophy's universality in the face of cultural and historical relativism. In the Enlightenment, the French *philosophes* had consciously referenced the alternative beliefs and worldviews of non-European peoples to batter down the walls of western provincialism, particularly in the form of dogmatic Christianity. These polemics could easily shade into the

³⁵ In part because his contemporaries did not greet China with as much attention or enthusiasm as India, Hegel himself devoted less attention to it. For an account of the world-historical position of China in German historiography, see Andreas Pigulla, *China in der deutschen Weltgeschichtsschreibung vom 18. bis zum 20. Jahrhundert* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1996). In regard to Hegel's interpretation of Chinese philosophy, see also Günter Wohlfart, "Hegel und China. Philosophische Bemerkungen zum Chinabild Hegels mit besonderer Berücksichtigung des Laozi," *Jahrbuch für Hegelforschung* 3 (1997), pp. 135-55.

³⁶ Bernasconi, "With What Must the History of Philosophy Begin? Hegel's Role in the Debate on the Place of India within the History of Philosophy?" in *Hegel's History of Philosophy: New Interpretations*, pp. 37-38.

questioning of the universal validity of certain beliefs, practices, and customs that Europeans accepted to be right or true. Against this relativizing tendency, Hegel reaffirmed western philosophy's claims to universality through the construction of a unified narrative of purposeful development.³⁷ He explained the appearance of misguided notions and incomplete truths in the past as necessary moments towards modern Europe's attainment of absolute knowledge. It was consequently no longer possible, he claimed, to be a Platonist, an Aristotelian, a Stoic, or an Epicurean in the modern age, because these philosophies had succumbed to a process of supersession; the truths which they once contained had been preserved and transformed leaving their untenable content behind.³⁸

Obviously, because the Orient did not even possess authentic philosophy, it offered an even less viable alternative to contemporary thought than ancient Greece. Hegel's principal argument against Indian philosophy was that it was identical with Indian religion, and since Hegel had already explained the necessity of separating philosophy from religion at the outset of his lecture course, this charge was in itself sufficient to exclude India from further mention.³⁹ Hegel self-identified as a Lutheran and he explicitly described his philosophy of history as a "theodicy", but despite his high regard for religion, particularly Christianity, his work also sought to extricate philosophy from religion and to establish its autonomy against it.⁴⁰ Hegel believed that philosophy and religion did, in fact, share the same object of study, namely "the universal reason existing in and for itself", but the form of their encounter with reason

³⁷ Michael Hulin points out that, unlike the *philosophes*, Hegel's initial interest in the Orient was not the result of an attempt to refute Christianity, but to preserve it through achieving a better historical understanding of the land of its origin and development. His youthful reflections consequently centred on Palestine rather than China or India. *Hegel et l'Orient* (Paris: Vrin, 1979), pp. 18-19.

³⁸ *Lectures on the History of Philosophy I*, pp. 46-47.

³⁹ *Lectures on the History of Philosophy 1825-6. Volume I: Introduction and Oriental Philosophy*, trans. R.F. Brown and J.M. Stewart (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009), p. 111.

⁴⁰ For an account of the intersection between Christian eschatology and Hegel's philosophy of history, see Daniel Berthold-Bond, "Hegel's Eschatological Vision: Does History have a Future?" *History and Theory* 27, no. 1 (Feb. 1988), pp. 14-29.

demarcated the one from the other.⁴¹ It was on this account that he could deny that the Orient possessed philosophy even as he conceded that “in the Persian and Indian Religions, very deep, sublime and speculative thoughts are even expressed.”⁴²

The greater part of Hegel’s summary of Indian philosophy in the lectures was indebted to Henry Thomas Colebrooke’s essay “On the Philosophy of the Hindus”, published in 1824 in the *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*.⁴³ Hegel read the essay later that year and drew on it extensively for his description of the main doctrinal schools within Hindu theology; however, his assessment of their intellectual worth and their position within the history of thought was very much the product of his own conception of philosophy. Notwithstanding the differences between the various factions of Indian religious thought, he maintained that they were, “whether atheistic or theistic”, united in their common goal to teach the means of achieving “eternal happiness” in this life and beyond.⁴⁴ The ultimate end of the different schools is unification with the one universal substance, wherein the individual loses all personality and sense of separation from the divine. This positing of substance as the goal of thinking marks “a great discovery on the part of the Orient”.⁴⁵ At the same time, the Hindu’s attempt to immerse himself in the divine substance betrays a lack of appreciation for the human individual, the dignity of the subject, and the nature of true freedom. Freedom requires some

⁴¹ *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, p. 63.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁴³ The extent and depth of Hegel’s knowledge about the Orient remains a matter of some contention. Ignatius Viyagappa asserts that Hegel “had an enormous factual knowledge about the Orient in general and India in particular”, and presents a survey of the French, English, and German sources on India with which Hegel was acquainted. *G.W.F. Hegel’s Concept of Indian Philosophy* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1980), pp. 11-60. Carmen Dragonetti and Fernando Tola dispute the claims for Hegel’s command of Indological scholarship and argue that his reading of Colebrooke was incomplete; at the very least, he did not refer to Colebrooke’s writings on Mimamsa, Vedanta, Jainism, and Buddhism, which were published in the *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society* in 1829. *On the Myth of the Opposition between Indian Thought and Western Philosophy* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 2004), p. 29. For the source of Hegel’s information, see H.T. Colebrooke, *Essays on the Religion and Philosophy of the Hindus* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1858), especially pp. 143-87.

⁴⁴ *Lectures on the History of Philosophy I*, p. 129.

⁴⁵ *Lectures on the History of Philosophy 1825-6*, p. 131.

form of separation of subject from substance; in the Orient, however, “individuals have no inherent worth and cannot gain any” since “only the one substance as such is what truly is”.⁴⁶ The resulting failure of the Indians to attain a proper understanding of subjective freedom is integrally related to India’s absence of history, which rests upon the recognition of the importance of free subjects as shapers of their own history. Hegel notes that no cultured people is “as incapable for history” as the Indians, and this inability to faithfully and objectively record the events of the past finds a correspondence in the poverty of Indian philosophy.⁴⁷ The Indians do not possess a history of philosophy, then, on two counts; they possess neither philosophy nor history.

Despite this damning assessment, which seems to relegate India to a bygone era, the Orient does not vanish from Hegel’s later account of western thought, but resurfaces in his discussion of Spinoza and the emergence of continental rationalism. Hegel declares that Spinoza’s notion of “the identity of the finite and infinite in God” is “an echo from eastern lands”.⁴⁸ This characterization, which ties Spinoza to ancient non-western traditions, sits somewhat uneasily with another image of the philosopher as a forerunner of German Idealism, whose ideas were far in advance of their time. In fact, Hegel claims that one of Spinoza’s contributions was to introduce “the Oriental theory of absolute identity” into Cartesianism and modern European thought.⁴⁹ The claim is intimately related to his further acknowledgement that

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁴⁷ *Lectures on the History of Philosophy I*, p. 126.

⁴⁸ *Lectures on the History of Philosophy III*, p. 252. “Diese tiefe Einheit seiner Philosophie, wie sie in Europa sich ausgesprochen, der Geist, Unendliches und Endliches identisch in Gott, nicht als einem Dritten, ist ein Nachklang des Morgenlandes.” *Werke 20, Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie III*, pp. 157-58. Hegel refers to Spinoza’s Jewish origins, but as Birden Güngören notes, the Orient which he associates with Spinozism is not the Jewish Orient, but rather India and China. “Hegels Auffassung von Spinoza und der orientalischen Philosophie: Eine Parallele,” *Hegel-Jahrbuch*, 2009, pp. 114-15.

⁴⁹ *Lectures on the History of Philosophy III*, p. 252.

it is necessary for a philosopher to begin as “a follower of Spinoza”.⁵⁰ Hegel states that “when man begins to philosophize, the soul must commence by bathing in this One Substance, in which all that man has held as true disappears”, a negation of particularity that is common to Spinoza, the Eleatics, the Chinese, and the Hindus.⁵¹ In the final analysis, however, on account of the failure of Spinoza to adequately account for the presence of difference and particularity, Hegel concludes that his theory of absolute identity, like those theories of the ancient Orient, was too one-sided and in need of subsequent correction. It failed to give due consideration to self-consciousness and “the principle of spiritual freedom”.⁵² Still, the admission of some sort of affinity between Spinoza’s pantheism and Oriental pantheism reinscribes the Orient into the heart of modern western philosophy’s inception. Perhaps it even inscribes itself into Hegel’s own philosophy, which at times seems to synthesize an Oriental commitment to substance with an Occidental recognition of subjectivity. Of course, in his own time, Hegel defended himself vigorously against charges of pantheism as a gross misrepresentation of his work.⁵³ He even leveled similar charges in turn against rival post-Kantian thinkers. Most famously, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel made a thinly veiled reference to the identity philosophy of Schelling and his disciples as “a night in which... all cows are black”, an allusion that shares much with his characterization of Indian religion as dissolving everything into an

⁵⁰ “It is therefore worthy of note that thought must begin by placing itself at the standpoint of Spinozism; to be a follower of Spinoza is the essential commencement of all Philosophy.” *Ibid.*, p. 257.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 257-58.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 289. Hegel does not draw out the differences between Spinoza and Oriental philosophy in these lectures, but in his lectures on the philosophy of world history, he distinguishes Spinoza’s pantheism of thought from the Indian “Pantheismus der Vorstellung”. *Vorlesungen: ausgewählte Nachschriften und Manuskripte, Band 12. Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte. Berlin 1822/1823*, ed. Karl Heinz Ilting, Karl Brehmer, and Hoo Nam Seelmann (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1996), p. 169.

⁵³ The charge of pantheism has been most common among Hegel’s more orthodox Christian critics. C.S. Lewis writes that “the view that thinks God beyond good and evil – is called Pantheism. It was held by the great Prussian philosopher Hegel and, as far as I can understand them, by the Hindus.” *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1956), p. 30.

undifferentiated, unified substance.⁵⁴ And while Hegel was usually careful to distinguish between the ideas of the ancient Indians and those of his modern rivals, in his more polemical moments, he also blurred the distinctions between them.

This confusion can be explained as the product of a rhetorical manoeuvre employed to highlight the differences between Hegel's philosophy and those of his competitors. More curious, however, is his denigration of the Orient by way of comparison to Europe. For example, in criticizing Indian philosophy for failing to liberate itself from religion, he refers to the similarities, in this respect, with scholasticism, which, for all the scorn that Hegel pours upon it, still has a necessary place within his history of philosophy. More surprising still, in discussing the Orientals' methods of abstract reasoning, he states that "We thus find only dry understanding among the Easterners, a mere enumeration of determinations, a logic like the Wolffian of old."⁵⁵ Here, in order to belittle the philosophical disposition and acumen of the ancient Chinese and Indians, Hegel compares their method to that of the most influential German thinker of the previous century prior to the appearance of Kant. Indeed, this senescent logic, "the Wolffian of old", was young enough to still have some presence at Tübingen, where Hegel and Schelling began their youthful philosophical musings. In a later lecture on Wolff, Hegel even affirms that "great and immortal praise is especially due to him; before all others he may be termed the teacher of the Germans. We may indeed say that Wolff was the first to naturalize philosophy in Germany."⁵⁶ The comparison between the philosophizing of the Orientals and that of "the teacher of the Germans" reveals the tension within Hegel's stringent division between West and

⁵⁴ *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §16, p. 9. "Der Gegensatz des Okzidents zum Orient beruht für Hegel letztlich auf gleichen prinzipiellen Unterschieden – nur auf niederer Ebene – wie sein eigener Gegensatz zu Schelling: erst im Okzident und – auf höherer Ebene – erst in Hegels Philosophie wird das Subjekt seiner selbst bewußt." Ernst Schulien, *Die weltgeschichtliche Erfassung des Orients bei Hegel und Ranke* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1958), pp. 54-55.

⁵⁵ *Lectures on the History of Philosophy I*, p. 119.

⁵⁶ *Lectures on the History of Philosophy III*, p. 349.

East, philosophy and non-philosophy. In the midst of his most concentrated attempts to mark the insuperable line of difference, he makes comparisons which themselves call this separation into question.

Clearly, in defining philosophy, Hegel's demarcation of it was not always drawn so sharply in the sand. And as a result of a deeper acquaintance with Orientalist scholarship during his time in Berlin, his judgements about Oriental thought underwent certain modifications.⁵⁷ But while Hegel altered his position on some points of Indian philosophy, due in large part to an increasing body of Indological scholarship that was produced in the 1820s, he continued to deny to it the dialectical tension necessary for historical movement. Whereas western philosophy is described in roughly chronological order in the lectures, Chinese and Indian thought is organized along ideological lines, a treatment that diminishes the sense of temporal development or progression. In this categorization, the particularities of Oriental systems of thought are submerged in an abiding unity. "In Oriental intuition the particular just whirls about; for the Indians it is specifically to be disregarded."⁵⁸ Whatever the truth of the characterization, this peculiarly "Oriental" way of understanding the world strangely mirrors Hegel's own mode of understanding the Orient.

2. History in Translation: Rival Readings of the *Bhagavad Gītā*

Hegel's essay on the *Bhagavad Gītā* contains his most extensive treatment of problems pertaining to the interpretation of Oriental thought. Published in two installments in the *Jahrbücher für wissenschaftliche Kritik* in 1827, the review took the form of a response to

⁵⁷ Walter Jaeschke draws attention to the important changes in Hegel's different lecture courses on the philosophy of religion, including changes in his ideas about eastern religions. *Reason in Religion: The Foundations of Hegel's Philosophy of Religion*, trans. J. Michael Stewart and Peter C. Hodgson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 273-75.

⁵⁸ *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* 1825-6, p. 132.

Wilhelm von Humboldt's essay *On the Episode of the Mahābhārata known by the name of the Bhagavad-Gītā*, which appeared the previous year. The sense that the *Gītā*, one of the most popular and venerated texts within Hinduism, encapsulated Indian religion, raised the stakes of Hegel's intervention; here was no trifling work, of interest only to a handful of Sanskritists, but a text that promised insights into the depths of the Oriental spirit. Although nominally about the *Gītā* and Humboldt's interpretation thereof, Hegel's discussion ranged far beyond the text itself and explored the different schools of Indian religious thought, ascetic practices within Hinduism, and the nature of the Indian caste system. In regard to all of these topics, there are numerous points of convergence between his observations in the essay and the more copious lecture notes from the 1820s; still, this piece remains significant as the lengthiest work on the Orient that Hegel published in his lifetime.

August Wilhelm Schlegel's Latin translation of the *Gītā*, published in 1823, was the occasion for the ensuing debate. Schlegel, who held a chair in Sanskrit studies at the University of Bonn, was one of the most accomplished and versatile translators of his time; his German translations of Shakespeare, Dante, and Calderón achieved widespread acclaim.⁵⁹ However, his version of the *Gītā* suffered a much more critical and conflicted reception. In an article of his *Indische Bibliothek*, from 1826, Schlegel discussed the challenges he faced in translating the *Gītā*, particularly the difficulty of rendering Indian philosophical concepts into Latin terminology. He noted that the term “yoga” was especially daunting to translate not only because it had no exact equivalent in Latin or any modern European language, but because the word's different connotations encompassed a wide range of complex meanings. Schlegel characterized it as “a true Proteus”, whose “intellectual metamorphoses compel us to use cunning and force to tie

⁵⁹ Antoine Berman characterizes Schlegel's practice as expressing the romantic “will to translate everything”. *The Experience of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany*, trans. S. Heyvaert (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 129-40.

it down”.⁶⁰ Instead of finding a single corresponding term, Schlegel opted to use multiple translations for the word depending upon its meaning in a given context; these included *applicatio*, *destinatio*, *devotio*, *disciplina activa*, *facultas mystica*, *exercitatio*, *maiestas*, and *mysterium*. Of course, the danger of this procedure was that the foundational concept might be lost in the midst of the various imperfect synonyms. A year after the appearance of Schlegel’s *Gītā*, the French philologist and Sanskritist Simon Alexandre Langlois raised this very concern in a critical review, published in the *Journal Asiatique*. Langlois proposed that the translator ought to aim for consistency even in the face of ambiguity; it was therefore more desirable to use one term to translate “yoga” – his preference, in French, was “*dévotion*” – and to adhere to it throughout.⁶¹ In defending Schlegel’s method of translation, Humboldt pointed out that Langlois’ suggested solution was far more contextually insensitive than the procedure for which Schlegel had opted.⁶² Humboldt admitted that he was not in full agreement with all of Schlegel’s translation choices, but the general procedure took account of the fact that there was no perfect synonymy between words in different languages, something that Langlois failed to acknowledge.

Prior to the completion of his translation, Schlegel had already sent a copy of the original Sanskrit text to Humboldt, who wrote in response that “while reading I was overwhelmed more than once by the emotional feeling of genuine gratitude towards destiny for granting me the opportunity to listen to this poem in the original language.”⁶³ Humboldt, who in his capacity as minister of education was instrumental in the reforms of the Prussian school system, gave pride

⁶⁰ Helmut Gipper, “Understanding as a process of linguistic approximation: The discussion between August Wilhelm von Schlegel, S.A. Langlois, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and G.W.F. Hegel on the translation of the *Bhagavadgita* and the concept of ‘yoga’,” in *Studies in the History of Western Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 119.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 111-12.

⁶² Bradley L. Herling, *The German Gita: Hermeneutics and Discipline in the German Reception of Indian Thought, 1778-1831* (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 209-210.

⁶³ Hegel, *On the Episode of the Mahābhārata known by the name of the Bhagavad-Gītā by Wilhelm von Humboldt*, ed. and trans. Herbert Herring (New Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical Research, 1995), p. xiv.

of place to the study of languages, a field that was not only deemed indispensable for students' intellectual and spiritual development, but was also close to his own heart. Following the cessation of his administrative and diplomatic duties in 1819, Humboldt intensified his study of comparative philology and non-European languages, including Sanskrit, and participated in the intellectual exchanges between the leading Orientalists of the time. In his two-part essay, *On the Episode of the Mahābhārata known by the name of the Bhagavad-Gītā*, the first part of which was delivered as a lecture at the University of Berlin, Humboldt compared the *Gītā* to a painting that could only be understood when taken as a whole; it needed to be appreciated as both a philosophical treatise and a work of poetry simultaneously.⁶⁴ Any attempt to extract a body of religious dogma from it, without an attentiveness to the integral relation between the language and ideas of the poem, would inevitably lead to distortion. One of the great insights that Humboldt achieved from his thorough and wide-ranging philological studies was that language and thought were inseparable; the former could not be reduced to an instrument of the latter. This fact applied even more to the *Gītā* than to many other works of literature on account of its deft synthesis of poetry and philosophy; unlike Lucretius' *De rerum natura*, for example, the poetic form of the *Gītā* did not primarily serve an instrumental or didactic function, but was integral to its philosophical content.⁶⁵ In fact, according to Humboldt, the *Gītā* was "the most beautiful, perhaps even the only truly philosophical poem" known to literature.⁶⁶

Needless to say, Hegel's assessment of the *Gītā*'s philosophical worth was much less favourable. Still, after the first installment of Hegel's two-part review, Humboldt wrote a terse, but polite letter suggesting a future conversation on the matter under consideration. No such

⁶⁴ Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Wilhelm von Humboldts Gesammelte Schriften, Band V*, ed. Albert Leitzmann (Berlin: B. Behr's Verlag, 1906), pp. 325-26.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 336-37.

⁶⁶ "das schönste, ja vielleicht das einzige wahrhaft philosophische Gedicht". *Ibid.*, p. 159.

friendly response followed the much lengthier second installment of Hegel's piece, which made the stark differences between the thinkers' assessment of the *Gītā* strikingly apparent. Although his tone towards Humboldt remained respectful throughout, Hegel's sense that the latter was lacking in philosophical acumen simmered beneath the surface of the text.⁶⁷ Still, his critique of Schlegel's and Humboldt's preferred methods of translation was far-removed from Langlois'; indeed, Hegel maintained that there was neither a single adequate term for the translation of *yoga*, nor a western conceptual equivalent to it at all.⁶⁸ However, this had little to do with the richness, polyvalence, or profundity of the idea of *yoga*, as Schlegel and Humboldt seemed to imagine; rather, the poverty of Indian concepts was the source of the difficulty. In employing Latin terms, which were integral to western religion and philosophy, Schlegel had imported a rich philosophical content that was foreign to the *Gītā*; the problem with this procedure of translation was not that it gave an incomplete presentation of Indian religion, but that it attributed more to it than was deserved. Hegel argued that Schlegel and Humboldt ennobled Indian religion as a result of interpreting its impoverished, abstract concepts as somehow equivalent to the substantive concepts of the western tradition. His fear was less for the integrity of the original text, which was being subjected to distortion, and more for the dignity of western philosophy, whose vocabulary and concepts were degraded through association with the *Gītā*. The general reader of Schlegel's translation was consequently in danger of attributing excessive philosophical worth and depth to primitive religious teachings.

Hegel's assessment of the nature of Indian religion showed that Schlegel and Humboldt had both wrongly evaluated the *Gītā* and wrongly interpreted it. The charge of misinterpretation

⁶⁷ Clemens Menze, "Das indische Altertum in der Sicht Wilhelm von Humboldts und Hegels," in *Welt und Wirkung von Hegels Ästhetik*, ed. Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert and Otto Pöggeler (Bonn: Bouvier, 1986), p. 285.

⁶⁸ "Our language is hardly in possession of a word which corresponds to such a characteristic because the matter is not part of our culture and religion." *On the Episode of the Mahābhārata known by the name of the Bhagavad-Gītā*, p. 43.

was considerably audacious given Hegel's lack of competence in Sanskrit. Why, then, did Hegel not rest content with merely calling into question the value that had been ascribed to Indian thought? In part, the drawing of sharp conceptual distinctions between Indian and European modes of being and thinking was necessary to safeguard the integrity of Hegel's division between East and West. While Humboldt himself was careful to acknowledge the distinctiveness of Indian philosophical concepts, his interpretation of foreign traditions was far less oppositional than Hegel's and more inclined to see points of convergence. For example, in regard to the translation of *yoga*, Humboldt suggested that the German word "*Vertiefung*" (meditation, absorption) was particularly apposite in expressing the primary meaning of the original.⁶⁹ Hegel did not deny the relative acceptability of Humboldt's choice, but he added that if the term were used, it had to be accompanied by the qualification that the Indian concept of *yoga* did not possess the character of *Vertiefung* that Germans associated with the word, since *yoga* was not "meditation about a thing at all" but "rather a meditation *without any contents*".⁷⁰ Hegel, in turn, asserted that the word "*Andacht*" (devotion) was a permissible translation if it were accompanied by the attributive adjective "*abstrakt*", a term both descriptive and pejorative that marked *yoga* as a contentless and incomplete form of European devotion rather than a form of devotion in its own right.⁷¹

Hegel's translative approach here departs from the interpretive methods of his predecessors and contemporaries, such as Herder, Schleiermacher, Humboldt, and the Schlegel brothers. For Herder, in investigating a text or statement, the recovery of the author's original

⁶⁹ *Wilhelm von Humboldts Gesammelte Schriften, Band V*, pp. 221-22.

⁷⁰ "Yoga in jener Eigentümlichkeit ist weder Vertiefung in einen Gegenstand überhaupt, wie man sich in die Anschauung eines Gemäldes oder in einen wissenschaftlichen Gegenstand vertieft, noch die Vertiefung in sich selbst... Yoga ist vielmehr eine Vertiefung *ohne allen Inhalt*," *On the Episode of the Mahābhārata known by the name of the Bhagavad-Gītā*, pp. 42-45.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45

meaning is the principal task of interpretation; consequently, the imposition of the interpreter's own concepts and judgements must be held in check lest they distort the original meaning. There are occasional moments in which Hegel too seems to incline towards this procedure; for example, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, he writes that "we do not need to import criteria, or to make use of our own bright ideas and thoughts during the course of the inquiry; it is precisely when we leave these aside that we succeed in contemplating the matter in hand as it is *in and for itself*."⁷² But this strand is subordinated to Hegel's conscious tendency to assimilate foreign thought to his own system.⁷³ Notwithstanding his suspicion of the untranslatability of Indian religious terms into Latin and German, Hegel does not attempt to stay as close to these terms as possible, but explicates them in his own philosophical language, which lays claim to apprehending the foundational concepts at work in foreign thought more clearly than can be found in the original texts themselves. Hegel believed that the system of categories that he developed in his *Logic* overcame cultural relativism since these categories, however poorly articulated or exemplified in other cultural contexts, were the very conditions of thought.⁷⁴ And while acknowledging the importance of language as a vehicle of thought, he maintained that the categories constituted the basis of linguistic activity without which neither description nor understanding of the world was possible.⁷⁵ Through the deployment of his own philosophical

⁷² *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §84, p. 54.

⁷³ Michael N. Forster, "Hegel and Hermeneutics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel and Nineteenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. Frederick Beiser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 176-79. Forster sees this interpretive method as exercising a pronounced influence on Gadamer and contemporary hermeneutics, against which he calls for a return to the tradition of Herder and Schleiermacher. See also John D. Caputo, "Firing the Steel of Hermeneutics: Hegelianized Hermeneutics versus Radical Hermeneutics," in *Hegel, History, and Interpretation*, ed. Shaun Gallagher (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

⁷⁴ "As impulses the categories are only instinctively active. At first they enter consciousness separately and so are variable and mutually confusing; consequently they afford to mind only a fragmentary and uncertain actuality; the loftier business of logic therefore is to clarify these categories and in them to raise mind to freedom and truth." Hegel, *Hegel's Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969), p. 37.

⁷⁵ This did not, however, prevent Hegel from privileging certain languages at the expense of others; in the preface to the second edition of the *Science of Logic*, he praised the "speculative spirit" of the German language, which he contrasted with the conceptual inadequacy of Chinese. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

concepts, Hegel sought to unearth the basic ideas implicit in past thought. Although this method informs his reading of all philosophy and religion, non-European and European alike, it appears in a much more aggressive form in his interpretations of Oriental cultures; this derives, in part, from his belief that these cultures are lacking in self-consciousness, a deficiency that necessitates the imposition of western concepts to make sense of them.⁷⁶ The accompanying belief that the modern European can understand the Oriental better than the Oriental himself informs Hegel's reading of the *Gītā* throughout.

On account of these issues, Hegel's intervention in the debate over the *Gītā* has been characterized as both a matter of hermeneutics and a question of philosophy of religion.⁷⁷ Both were certainly relevant to Hegel's concerns, but they do not adequately account for the extent to which his assessment of the *Gītā* was also informed by a historical interest, a concern with defending his own philosophy of history. Because Hegel devoted much more attention to the religious content of the *Gītā* than to Indian history within the review, such a claim appears to find little confirmation in the text itself. However, it must be recalled that, according to Hegel, India has no history in any substantive sense; the scant, unreliable record of events on the subcontinent shows us only the tedious succession of dynastic rulers and fruitless squabbles between petty princes, occurrences that bring about no meaningful political transformation or development; indeed, he argues that the essence of Indian history must be found, not in any

⁷⁶ In reference to Hegel's "epistemography" of cultures, Gayatri Spivak writes that the art forms of the Orient "cryptically carry a secret – the Spirit's itinerary – that they have not chosen and cannot know." *Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 41.

⁷⁷ Wilhelm Halbfass tends to emphasize the philosophical dimensions of the *Gītā*'s German reception. *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988). But Dorothy M. Figueira counters that "It is misleading to see (as does Halbfass in his recent study) this initial reception of the *Gītā* as a purely philosophical debate. Rather, the discussion revolved in large part around issues of a philological nature—namely, the problems of translation, artistic commensurability, and value." *The Exotic: A Decadent Quest* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 65. Herling adds that Hegel's participation in the debate can also be interpreted as a "not so thinly veiled attack on Romanticism". *The German Gītā*, pp. 235-36.

particular event or sequence of events, but in its religion and the static social structure inextricably tied to it.

Invoking the importance of contextualization, Hegel explains that the concept of duty within the *Gītā* cannot be understood apart from the social relations and political structure in place at the time of the poem's composition. The poem itself describes a brief moment in the protracted war between two related families, the Pandavas and Kauravas; before the epic battle on the field of Kurukshetra, Arjuna expresses his doubts about the rightness and meaning of engaging in such an internecine struggle. Krishna, who is both Arjuna's charioteer and a divine incarnation, reminds Arjuna of his duty, or *dharma*, which demands that Arjuna engage in battle against his preceptors and relatives. Humboldt read this exhortation to disinterested action as expressing an ethical commitment to the good in-itself, without consideration of one's own particular interests and passions. But in Hegel's judgement, the call to the disinterested fulfillment of duty is only valid in relation to the obligations of a particular caste, here the *kshatriya* or warrior class, and therefore does not possess universal validity; though Hegel never refers to Kant by name, his point makes it clear that Krishna's exhortation is in no way analogous to the Kantian categorical imperative and bears no resemblance to what Europeans designate as morality. He even affirms that the deeds performed in accordance with Krishna's teachings do not deserve to be described as "actions" ("*Handlungen*"), since this term conveys, for the Christian European, a sense of subjectivity and morality which is utterly alien to the theology of the *Gītā* and the structure of the Indian caste system.⁷⁸

Within Christianity, all believers, regardless of their social position, are equal before God, but in India the Brahmin priests are considered superior by virtue of birth, and members of all other castes must undergo severe austerities in order to attain the blessing of being re-born

⁷⁸ On the Episode of the *Mahābhārata* known by the name of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, pp. 52-53.

into the higher orders. According to Hegel, the assumed naturalness of the caste structure, the belief that it is the product of the timeless order of things, prevents the Indians from recognizing that the essence of man is not to be found in nature, but in the free activity of the spirit. The form of duty celebrated in the *Gītā* is then, contrary to all superficial appearances, not spiritual, but fully determined by nature.⁷⁹ And given that this notion of duty remains confined to the caste structure, it is unable to teach modern Europeans anything about ethics or moral responsibility. Since an antiquated form of social organization underlies the religion and philosophy of the Indians, there can be no question of its contemporary relevance for a society that superseded such pre-political arrangements long ago. Such an assessment stands far removed from Humboldt's interpretive method, which combined a sensitivity for the *Gītā*'s historical context with an openness to its teachings, for which he felt a deep personal affinity.⁸⁰

These rival readings of the *Gītā* show themselves to be rooted not only in conflicting assessments of the worth of Indian religion and culture, but in divergent understandings of history. Hegel's belief in the supersession of the past, the process by which incomplete and contradictory manifestations of the spirit yield to higher forms of spirit's embodiment, diminishes the relevance of past thought, especially where some form of historical connection with present thought is lacking. For Hegel, the process of supersession demonstrates history's underlying rationality, and the explication of this rationality calls for the formulation of concepts capable of apprehending the essence of peoples and eras, which are often not readily apparent to historical actors themselves. In *On the Task of the Historian*, a lecture delivered to the Prussian Academy of Sciences in 1821, Humboldt himself explained, in not un-Hegelian fashion, that

⁷⁹ Hegel writes that Krishna's pronouncements "do not have the Christian meaning that in every class the pious and right-doer pleases God, for there is no affirmative link between a spiritual God and duties and thus no inner right and conscience, since the *contents* of duty is not determined in a spiritual but in a natural way." *Ibid.*, p. 53

⁸⁰ Menze, pp. 261-63.

“everything that happens is governed by an idea that is not immediately perceptible”; however, he also warned the historian “not to persuade himself of the reality of his own ideas”, nor “to sacrifice the rich and enlivening particulars” that constitute the past in “his search for the coherence of the whole”.⁸¹ Humboldt took explicit issue with “philosophical history” on this score, which he characterized as tending to impede, rather than enrich, historical understanding.

In general historical fidelity incurs much more risk from philosophical than from poetic treatment, since the latter is at least used to treating the matter freely. Philosophy prescribes a goal for events. This searching for final causes, even if they have been derived from mankind’s nature and essence, obscures and falsifies any unobstructed perspective on the peculiar action of the forces. For the same reason teleological history never attains the living truth concerning the fate of the world.⁸²

3. Spirit Awakens: Hegel’s Lectures on the Philosophy of History

The lectures on the philosophy of world history, which Hegel first delivered in the winter semester of 1822-23 and expanded upon until his death in 1831, outline his most comprehensive defense of a teleological interpretation of history. His description in these lectures of the progression of the world spirit, from its rude beginnings in Asia to its culmination in modern Europe, illustrates the fashion in which the non-European world is rendered increasingly obsolescent. The resulting portrayal of the Orient offers a sharp rebuttal to the idealistic vision of the Romantics, who saw in India a potential source for a new European renaissance. But rather than put forward a point-by-point refutation of the romantic idealization, Hegel adopted and even incorporated fundamental aspects of it. This adoption has sometimes been read as indicating Hegel’s proximity to the Romantics, but it is less suggestive of a closeness than of an argumentative strategy in which the opponent’s position is incorporated in order to better refute

⁸¹ Humboldt, “On the Task of the Historian,” in *German Essays on History*, ed. Rolf Sältzer and trans. Joanna Sheldon (New York: Continuum, 1991), p. 52. Benedetto Croce later described this piece as articulating the foundational principles of historicism.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 44.

it.⁸³ As has already been shown, the strategy is at work, not only in Hegel's discussion of his contemporaries, but in his reading of the history of philosophy. Against the skeptical view of philosophy as a series of unsubstantiated ideologies, Hegel salvages prior philosophies by integrating them within his own grand narrative; this attempt to appropriate past thinkers to a modern project appears, simultaneously, as a refutation and a justification of his philosophical forebears. In regard to Hegel's clash with Friedrich Schlegel and the Romantics, two points of convergence are noteworthy; first, echoing Schlegel, he acknowledged that India was "the source of emigration for the entire western world"; second, he opined, in seemingly romantic fashion, that India "has always been the land of longing, and appears to us still as a kingdom of wonders, an enchanted world."⁸⁴ Both of these ideas bear not only on Hegel's interpretation of India, but also on his philosophy of history; and in both cases, his ideas show themselves, upon closer scrutiny, to have far different implications than those drawn by Schlegel.

The proof that Hegel adduced for India's position as a centre of western migration was primarily philological, the same evidence which Schlegel brought forward and which was later expanded upon by Bopp and others. The fact that there was a genetic relationship between the Indian and European languages was taken to be sufficient proof of some form of cultural connection between East and West. But Hegel conceded this philological point, out of which Schlegel sought to spin an entire philosophy of history, only in order to undermine its importance. After acknowledging that India was the source of large-scale westward migrations, Hegel went on to add that these migrations were "prehistorical" (*vorgeschichtlich*), a designation

⁸³ A. Leslie Willson, for example, reads Hegel's portrayal of India as reflecting "a pale imprint" of the romantic image. *A Mythical Image: The ideal of India in German Romanticism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1964), p. 121. On Hegel's relation to the Romantics, particularly Friedrich Schlegel, see Otto Pöggeler, *Hegels Kritik der Romantik* (Bonn: H. Bouvier, 1956), and Ernst Behler, "Friedrich Schlegel und Hegel," *Hegel-Studien*, 2 (1963), pp. 203-50.

⁸⁴ "Indien ist ferner der Ausgangspunkt für die ganze westliche Welt," *Werke 12. Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, pp. 171-78. "Es ist immer das Land der Sehnsucht gewesen und erscheint uns noch als ein Wunderreich, als eine verzauberte Welt." *Ibid.*, p. 174.

that deprived them of all significance and saved the philosopher the trouble of bothering further about the movements of strange peoples shrouded in the mists of antiquity.⁸⁵ And since Hegel did not valorize the origin in romantic fashion, the antiquity of these peoples and events suggested their insignificance rather than their abiding importance. But even though the spread of Indian culture resulted in no political action or transformations of note, Hegel nonetheless claims that in its capacity as an object of desire, India forms an essential moment in later history; he explains that “all peoples have directed their wishes and desires to gaining access to the treasures of this wonderland, the most precious which the earth possesses”, among which he includes both “treasures of nature” and “treasures of wisdom”.⁸⁶ This characterization reduces India to utter passivity since its historical existence is confined to being the object of desire for foreign conquerors. It remains in-itself and not for-itself, an object lacking in self-determination destined to be dominated by active subjects.

The emphasis on India’s passivity is reinforced in the introduction to Hegel’s lectures on India, which begin with a comparison of the beauty of the Indian spirit to a languorous woman. Hegel notes that “there is a beauty of a peculiar kind in women, in which their countenance presents a transparency of skin, a light and lovely roseate hue, which is unlike the complexion of mere health and vital vigor”; this “almost unearthly beauty” is specifically attributed to two types of women, namely those who have just recently given birth and “women during the magical somnambulatory sleep”.⁸⁷ After indulging in an uncharacteristically lyrical description of passive femininity, Hegel adds that “such a beauty we find also in its loveliest form in the Indian world; a beauty of enervation in which all that is rough, rigid, and contradictory is dissolved, and we

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

⁸⁶ “Seit den ältesten Zeiten haben alle Völker ihre Wünsche und Gelüste dahin gerichtet, einen Zugang zu den Schätzen dieses Wunderlands zu finden, die das Köstlichste sind, was es auf Erden gibt,” *Ibid.*, p. 178.

⁸⁷ *Philosophy of History*, p. 140.

have only the soul in a state of emotion”.⁸⁸ This passive state of the soul, wherein the spirit unreflectively immerses itself in nature, transfigures the world into “a garden of love”, a world populated with flowers and distinguished by a closeness to the vegetative state. Hegel acknowledges “the charm of this flower-life”, but he also admonishes his listeners that if it is examined “in the light of human dignity and freedom”, it will reveal itself to be undeserving of our admiration and much less attractive than it initially appeared.⁸⁹ Almost two decades earlier, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel had already expressed his condescension for the “flower religion” that has not yet attained the spirit of conflict that is the precondition of all historical movement.⁹⁰ For Hegel, history is no garden for lotus-eating loafers, but “a slaughter-bench” upon which the happiness of individuals and the welfare of nations are sacrificed in order to facilitate the progress of the world spirit.⁹¹ The historical development of human dignity and freedom demands a movement and activity that is wholly incompatible with the vegetative quality that India supposedly embodies.

Following his brief allusion to the beauty of the female somnambulist, Hegel does not offer further commentary on the relationship between this uncanny figure and the Indian spirit.⁹² Without an explanation of its bearing on the question of India’s history, the image contributes little to our historical understanding, yet it creates an atmosphere of strangeness and a sense for the other-worldly, appropriate to the supposed peculiarity of the subject matter under consideration. It is also difficult to assess to what extent Hegel’s somnambulist is even ambulatory since he inclines to emphasize, in this passage, the passivity, rather than the activity,

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

⁹⁰ *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §689, p. 420.

⁹¹ *Philosophy of History*, p. 21.

⁹² The variations on the image in the different lecture editions are relatively minor. Compare *Werke 12*, pp. 175-76, with *Sämtliche Werke, Band VIII*, p. 350, and *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte. Berlin 1822/1823*, p. 168. In all three versions, Hegel refers to a similar type of beauty portrayed in a painting of the dying Maria, attributed to Jan van Scorel.

which is shared in common with India.⁹³ Still, the activity of the somnambulist, such as it is, suggests that the appearance of external movement should not be assumed to indicate the presence of self-consciousness. Elsewhere, Hegel explains that sleep-walkers are guided by feeling and hearing, but do not possession vision; as a result, they are wholly absorbed in their environment, a state in which “the *separation* of the subjective and objective is *not present*.”⁹⁴ Hegel expresses a certain wonder at the “clairvoyance” which allows people in such a state to navigate through space, but he also balks at the notion that this represents a higher stage of consciousness.⁹⁵ Rather, the somnambulist’s movement remains unconscious and unfree, without a sense of the proper distinction between consciousness and the world external to it. As Hegel goes on to argue in the lectures, where this division has not yet been apprehended, as in India, which subsumes the subject under substance, there can be no appearance of history. The events of India’s past, which present the aspect of external movement in the form of battles and dynastic struggles, are not accompanied by true self-consciousness or free political action. The world spirit has not yet awoken in India; it remains a historical somnambulist.

Unlike the dreamless sleep of nature, however, the Hindu principle is described by Hegel as possessing “the character of spirit in a state of dream”, a portrayal that harkens back to the writings of the Jena Romantics, especially the fiction of Novalis.⁹⁶ In *The Novices of Sais*, Novalis narrates the story of a young man, Hyacinth, who travels to the Orient, driven by a profound yearning for its ancient mysteries. At the end of his journey, he falls asleep and dreams that he beholds the goddess Isis standing before him, but when he draws back her veil, he finds,

⁹³ The issue of somnambulism is treated at some length in the *Philosophy of Mind*, §406, pp. 95-114. Hegel here refers to both “somnambulism” (Somnambulismus) and “sleepwalking” (Schlafwandeln), but does not always clearly differentiate between them; the former is the more general term.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, §406, p. 101.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, §406, pp. 96-97.

⁹⁶ *Philosophy of History*, p. 140.

instead of the visage of some Egyptian deity, the face of his beloved, who awaits him in his native country. He then realizes that what he longed for and sought out in a distant land was that which was always nearest to his heart and closest to home. The story concludes with the observation that “only a dream could take him to the holy of holies.”⁹⁷ Hegel adopts Novalis’ association of the Orient with a land of dreams, but he places much less credence in the truth of its dreamlike revelations. In dreaming, there is no return of the self to the spirit’s true home, as Novalis’ tale intimates, but a confusion between self and other that partakes of a pronounced homelessness. A dream, whatever truths or revelatory insights it may contain, also contains much that is false and confused. The mixture of Hegel’s admiration and contempt for India is partly due to his impression of this confusion within Indian thought, which offers deep insights contaminated by uninhibited fantasy.⁹⁸ In the final analysis, the haphazardness of these insights prevents them from even deserving to be acknowledged as true since they lack the systematic coherence which is necessary for any philosophy worthy of the name. For the systematic philosopher, an isolated truth disconnected from a greater totality is hardly a truth at all. Whereas the dream was thus emblematic, for the Romantics, of a symbolic truth too rich to be captured by concepts, it becomes for Hegel, representative of the confusion of conceptual thought that threatens to halt the advance of philosophy. The truth that the dream contains is even more pernicious than unadulterated falsehood since it seduces with its appearance of profundity.

Furthermore, a dream does not exhibit a proper narrative movement which shows a progression of meaningful development; rather, the wild alternation between fantastic scenes and images in dreams offers the antipode to the rationality of historical development that Hegel

⁹⁷ Novalis, *The Novices of Sais*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Curt Valentin, 1949), p. 67.

⁹⁸ “Man kann sagen, daß in den Träumen sich auch die tiefste Tiefe der Seele ausspricht, wenn sie anderseits auch aberwitzig sind. So findet sich wohl bei den Indern auch dies Bewußtsein der höchsten Idee, aber vermisch mit den willkürlichsten Wolkengestalten.” *Sämtliche Werke, Band VIII*, pp. 352-53.

attempts to uncover. With its innumerable aeons in the form of *kalpas* and *mahakalpas*, its hundreds of millions of deities, with their plethora of whirling appendages and ever-changing *avatars*, Indian mythology represents the dangers of an imagination unbounded by reason. It was this same boundlessness that attracted Goethe's revulsion towards Indian sculpture; the attempt to capture the infinity of the divine in the form of plastic art leads to grotesque monstrosity, the very antithesis of the Apollonian balance attained by the ancient Greeks.⁹⁹ But such revulsion expresses more than an aesthetic response; it indicates an anxiety that certain conceptual limits and borders are in danger of being violated. In its ceaseless incorporation of the other, the Indian embrace of infinity, both cosmologically and mystically, threatens to encompass and obliterate the concrete reality of truth. Hegel's depiction of India here seems far removed from the passive and tranquil "garden of love", to which he referred at the beginning of his lecture. Instead of sweetness and light, Hindu mythology, in its lack of differentiation between high and low, "takes us abruptly from the meanest to the highest, from the most sublime to the most disgusting and trivial."¹⁰⁰ Yet notwithstanding Hegel's unconcealed aversion for Hinduism, in its capacity to subsume everything within its expansive framework, its embrace of opposites, and its immunity to refutation, it shows an uncanny resemblance to Hegel's own systematic philosophy.¹⁰¹ But whereas, for Hegel, the all-subsuming nature of the Indian spirit derives from its dreamlike

⁹⁹ For an account of Hegel's treatment of Indian sculpture and architecture, placed within the broader framework of their European reception, see Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 208-19.

¹⁰⁰ *Philosophy of History*, p. 155.

¹⁰¹ In reference to Hegel's reflections on India, J.N. Findlay asserts that Hegel "held a singularly ill-informed and unsympathetic view of one of the most Hegelian of peoples and religions." *Hegel: A Re-examination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 134. Stuart Harten suggests two possible reasons for Hegel's refusal "to acknowledge the validity of a Hindu dialectic"; first, it did not bring about a proper reconciliation or reintegration of that which was negated; second, India functions, for Hegel, as "a convenient scapegoat, an image of the dialectic run amuck". *Raising the Veil of History: Orientalism, Classicism, and the Birth of Western Civilization in Hegel's Berlin Lecture Courses of the 1820's* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1994), pp. 233-34. A third possibility should also be considered here, namely that a recognition of a genuine dialectic in India would have completely overturned Hegel's own narrative of historical development.

quality, which erases conceptual distinctions, his own philosophy's totalizing tendency is avowedly grounded in reason and rational self-consciousness.

The separation of the conscious individual from the rest of existence is the condition for recognizing that the world is not simply an imaginary representation, but an objective and rationally structured "system of relations" that is conceptually intelligible.¹⁰² Unlike objective reality, however, in dreams it is only our "representational thinking" that comes into play and these "representations are not governed by the categories of the intellect".¹⁰³ Representational thinking, which expresses itself in pictures and images, cannot lead to the apprehension of the concept because it is unable to grasp the universal and the relationship between the universal and the represented particular. Instead of a proper sense for this relationship, there persists in India, on the one hand, an abstract substance worshipped as the supreme being, and, on the other, a tumult of wild and bizarre images. The lack of mediation between substance and image, or universal and particular, finds reflection in the extremes of Indian asceticism and hedonism, where the renunciation of selfhood and the striving for dissolution in the absolute appears alongside depraved sensuality. The explanation of India's essence in terms of the unmediated opposition of extremes helps to explain Hegel's own animus towards it. One of the principal concepts of the Hegelian system is mediation, without which there can be neither rational comprehension nor historical movement. Without mediation in China and India, the world spirit must await for Persia before static Asiatic principles come into interaction with one another and history proper commences.

Although India belongs to the *Morgenland* ("morning land"), it is, within the Hegelian schema, not the land of the rising sun, but a nation shrouded in the night of prehistory. Hegel

¹⁰² *Philosophy of History*, p. 140.

¹⁰³ *Philosophy of Mind*, §398, pp. 66-67.

explicitly employs the metaphor of the passage of the sun to describe the movement of history, but the journey begins, not in China or India, but in Persia. The Persians are the progenitors of the religion of light, a religion that expresses a sense for the universal dignity of the human person, something which remains unknown in the far East.¹⁰⁴ In its antithesis to darkness, light opens up the possibility of activity and life, the self's recognition of and overcoming of the other. Hegel further explains that the antithesis between darkness and light corresponds to the opposition between sleeping and waking.

Now the distinguishing carried out by the soul, on awaking, between itself and the world is, owing to the soul's naturalness, connected with a physical distinction, namely with the alternation of day and night. It is natural for man to wake by day and sleep by night; for as sleep is the state of the soul's undifferentiatedness, so night obscures the difference between things; and as waking displays the soul's distinguishing-itself-from-itself, so the light of day lets the differences of things emerge."¹⁰⁵

In Hegel's narrative of wakefulness, Persia represents the moment at which undifferentiatedness yields to vision, whereas India is cast as the land of dreaming sleep that has failed to see itself. Its charm inevitably pales when set against the sun of the spirit. And in the light of reason, it becomes clear that the greatness that has sometimes been attributed to India does not derive from any intrinsic worth, but from the inventions of the foreign imagination. India thus proves to be doubly dreamlike – it is a land in which the natives are lost in dreaming and a land which foreigners dream about. It therefore requires a twofold awakening; in the transition from the Indian dream to the light of Persia's dawning sun, spirit awakens to self-consciousness and the idea of freedom; and, with Hegel, the spirit awakens a second time in its realization that the Indian dreamworld delivers not wisdom, as his Romantic contemporaries imagined, but a derailment from truth and reason.

¹⁰⁴ *Philosophy of History*, pp. 173-75.

¹⁰⁵ *Philosophy of Mind*, §398, p. 64.

Not surprisingly, then, Hegel was highly skeptical of Indians' own pronouncements about their history, religion, and culture. In regard to the claims for India's great antiquity, for example, he thought that the Brahmins either fabricated these large numbers in order to exalt themselves or believed in them as a result of an unrestrained imagination that had no sense of proportion or factual accuracy.¹⁰⁶ The unreliability of the natives, who, in their most serious philosophical reflections, were not even capable of properly discriminating between dream and reality, legitimated the dismissal of their opinions. Such unreliability was also grounds for believing in the mendacity of the Indians and the comparative truthfulness of its conquerors. Hegel declares that, among the Hindus, "cheating, stealing, robbing, murdering" are habitual, and he identifies "deceit and cunning" as their defining character traits.¹⁰⁷ In his unqualified affirmation of British reports on Indian immorality, Hegel did not even entertain the possibility that the colonizers' judgement might be skewed in the service of their own political and economic interests. In fact, his reformulations of British reports are frequently more negative than those found in the original accounts; his reading thus cannot simply be attributed to an uncritical reliance on faulty or tendentious sources.¹⁰⁸ Rather, there is an overriding tendency to distance India from Europe as much as possible even where the sources might suggest more ambiguous readings.

At times, Hegel appears to ascribe even an intrinsic deficiency to the Indians, and suggests that their incapacity for rationality might be due to their nervous constitution.¹⁰⁹ Nonetheless, it would be a misrepresentation to describe Hegel as a biological determinist; the

¹⁰⁶ *Sämtliche Werke, Band VIII*, p. 358.

¹⁰⁷ *Philosophy of History*, p. 158.

¹⁰⁸ Bernasconi has documented a similar procedure at work in Hegel's use of sources on Africa, in which Hegel modified the available materials in order to exaggerate the savagery of the natives. "Hegel at the Court of the Ashanti," in *Hegel After Derrida*, ed. Stuart Barnett (New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 41-63.

¹⁰⁹ Regarding their incapacity for history, he writes, "We may explain this deficiency partly from that excitement and debility of nerves, which prevent them from retaining an object in their minds, and firmly comprehending it, for in their mode of apprehension, a sensitive and imaginative temperament changes it into a feverish dream; – partly from the fact, that veracity is the direct contrary to their nature." *Philosophy of History*, p. 162.

appeal to nature, including race and racial constitution, as an explanation of the nature of human being violates his commitment to conceptualizing the human primarily in terms of spirit and self-determination. In fact, Hegel's contempt for the Orient derives, in large part, from its failure to recognize the truth of freedom, to wrongly imagine that man is in thrall to nature. As evidence of this lack of self-consciousness, he refers to both Hindu theriolatry and the Indian caste system. For Hegel, the worship of animals within Hinduism reveals the absence of a consciousness of man's separation from and superiority to the realm of nature.¹¹⁰ Likewise, since the Hindus assume the naturalness of the caste system, its pre-givenness from on high, they wrongly imagine a particular social formation, which is a product of history, to be an expression of the natural order of things. Hegel's critique thereby appears to reduce the significance of nature and externality and to elevate spirit and freedom. But the actual description of Indians as immersed in nature curiously reinforces the racist argument for their intrinsic inferiority.

The naturalization of the historical condition of non-Europeans gains further justification from his claims that their ultimate subjugation by Europeans is a foregone conclusion. Of course, Hegel's admirers have not failed to commend the philosopher for refraining from engaging in prognostications about the future; his circumspection on this score has been used to emphasize, sometimes rather invidiously, the shortcomings of Marx, who did not shy away from predicting the ultimate victory of the proletariat in the world-historical class struggle. However, this generous reading tends to focus almost exclusively on Hegel's pronouncements on Europe, in which he was much more cautious in publicizing judgements on current political affairs. In his presentation of the future of the Orient, however, Hegel not only abandons his much praised circumspection, but ascribes an almost apodictic certainty to his judgements on the future of non-

¹¹⁰ "The self-consciousness of spirit is what alone makes respect for the dark and dull inwardness of animal life disappear." *Hegel's Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 445.

Europeans. After describing the East India Company's domination of India, he adds that "it is the necessary fate of Asiatic empires to be subjected to Europeans; and China will, some day or other, be obliged to submit to this fate."¹¹¹

But despite his faith in the future successes of European imperialism and his endorsement of the views of European colonizers, it has been maintained that "Hegel is no crude apologist for western expansionism."¹¹² And this is quite true – he is no crude apologist; he is a sophisticated one. What lies behind some later scholars' denial of the intrinsic Eurocentrism of the logic of Hegel's philosophy of history, however, is the conviction that his specific pronouncements on non-European cultures can be divorced from the narrative of freedom that informs them.¹¹³ Accordingly, the Hegelian interpretation of history can be refashioned to take account of the non-European world less prejudicially without surrendering Hegel's principal concepts and categories. But the attempt to purge Hegel's thought of its empirical content is at loggerheads with his own opposition to abstraction. The history of the unfolding of the idea of freedom is a story in which the concept is ceaselessly enriched by its accumulated and continuously modified historical content; and Hegel was fully cognizant of the historical and cultural specificity of the kind of freedom that he wished to exalt. Redemptive readings which purport to rescue Hegel from his cultural prejudices actually obscure the coherence and unity of his philosophy.¹¹⁴

In his commitment to presenting history as a meaningful process, Hegel did not simply impose an *a priori* schema onto the past without consideration of the available historical

¹¹¹ *Philosophy of History*, pp. 142-43.

¹¹² Andrew Buchwalter, "Is Hegel's Philosophy of History Eurocentric?" in *Hegel and History*, ed. Will Dudley (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), p. 95.

¹¹³ After explaining that he does "not dispute the presence of a centrally Western or even Eurocentric focus to Hegel's conception of history", Buchwalter adds that he challenges "the assumption that Hegel's idea or 'logic' of world history is itself Eurocentric, at least in the pejorative sense commonly associated with the term." *Ibid.*, p. 87.

¹¹⁴ Of course, for those scholars who are primarily interested in mobilizing Hegel to certain ends, the charge of selective appropriation of his thought may not be considered a terrible objection. For an account of the ongoing "dilemma between antiquarianism and anachronism" in Hegel scholarship, see Frederick Beiser, "Introduction: The Puzzling Hegel Renaissance," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel and Nineteenth-Century Philosophy*.

material. Although not as flexible as some of his apologists have contended, his philosophy of history was the product of a complex interaction between the study of history and the attempt to articulate the categories of thought that were constitutive of it. In determining history's limits, Hegel grappled with the problem of its beginnings, an investigation that did not simplistically seek out a chronological starting point, but asked after the concept of history itself. And the attention that he devoted to India derived, in large measure, from the interrelation between the task of determining history's beginnings and elucidating this concept; through the determination of what lay immediately outside of history, history was to find its precise delineation. For Hegel, India thus constituted a prelude to history, externalized and degraded, but also integral to the drama that followed and decisive for its conceptualization.

Chapter 5

Schopenhauer's Reversal: From History to Nirvana

In the preface to the first edition of his magnum opus, *The World as Will and Representation*, published in 1818, Schopenhauer suggested that a proper understanding of his philosophy would be greatly facilitated by an acquaintance with three sources, namely Kant, Plato, and the *Upanishads*.¹ This reference to the *Upanishads*, here placed in the company of two of the Occident's most eminent philosophers, not only indicates the importance of Indian thought for Schopenhauer's own philosophizing, but also marks, more generally, a turn in the status of this thought within western intellectual discourse. While earlier French and German thinkers had exhibited a strong curiosity towards India, they seldom incorporated insights gleaned from Indian philosophy into their own world-views or metaphysical systems. For Schopenhauer, however, India was no longer a mere object of inquiry as it was for Hegel or even the Romantics; rather, he accorded the composers of India's sacred texts the status of fellow subjects engaged in the same, perennial philosophical quest. Within this interpretive framework, cultural and historical differences were effaced in favour of a concept of philosophy as transcultural and transhistorical. Schopenhauer's devaluation of history, in stark opposition to the philosophers of history who preceded him, more than contributed to his receptivity to Indian thought; and his belief in the affinity between his own transhistorical perspective and the teachings of Hinduism and Buddhism was integral to his critique of contemporary historical narratives. His work thus represents not only a departure from previous interpretations of the Orient, but a decisive moment in the dissolution of systematic philosophies of history.

¹ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation I*, trans. E.F.J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), p. xv.

Schopenhauer first became acquainted with Indian thought in his early twenties through Friedrich Majer, an amateur Indologist and pupil of Herder, who frequented the Weimar salon of Schopenhauer's mother, Johanna.² It was during this period that the nucleus of Schopenhauer's philosophy was formed, and the realization, or at least the belief, that his ideas had a correspondence with Indian religious thought powerfully impressed itself on his thinking. Given the little resonance that his philosophy initially found among his contemporaries, and the low regard in which he held the German university philosophers of the time, a sense of an affinity with a venerable foreign tradition was a source of much consolation in the face of loneliness and adversity. In 1813, with the completion of his dissertation, *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*, he attempted to find a teaching position, but following a brief and unsuccessful stint as an unpaid lecturer at the University of Berlin in 1820, he abandoned academic life and comfortably lived off his inheritance.³ From 1833 until his death in 1860, he resided in Frankfurt-am-Main and left the city only on a few occasions, usually for less than a day. This sedentary existence, which has led one commentator to remark that there were "decades" "during which nothing noteworthy happened to him at all", was decisive to his own self-conception as a philosopher and solitary thinker.⁴ Completely devoted to the ideal of the *vita contemplativa*, he looked down upon his philosophical contemporaries, such as Fichte and

² Arthur Hübscher, *Denker gegen den Strom. Schopenhauer: Gestern-Heute-Morgen* (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag Herbert Grundmann, 1973), p. 49. The extent of Majer's influence on Schopenhauer has been the source of some dispute; Urs App contests the excessive importance that has often been attributed to Majer in this respect. "Schopenhauer's Initial Encounter with Indian Thought," *Schopenhauer Jahrbuch* 87 (2006), pp. 35-76.

³ In Berlin, Schopenhauer deliberately held his lectures at the same time as Hegel's; when only a handful of students attended his class, he refused to change the hours of the course. Rüdiger Safranski, *Schopenhauer and the Wild Years of Philosophy*, trans. Ewald Osers (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 252.

⁴ R.J. Hollingdale, "Introduction," in Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms*, trans. and ed. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 33.

Hegel, who were invested in the politics of the time.⁵ He condemned these university scholars for their service in the interests of the state and nation as an instrumentalization and degradation of philosophy.⁶ Living in an era in which Europe underwent profound political transformations and nationalism was decisively shaping the German intellectual landscape, he proudly held himself aloof from such worldly concerns. Only with the sudden and widespread acclaim that his philosophy found in the 1850s was his solitary existence somewhat disrupted. This indifference to contemporary events also accounts, in part, for the lack of substantial development within his philosophical thinking. Before the age of thirty, he had already completed the first volume of *The World as Will and Representation*, which contains the fundamental principles of his philosophy. While these underwent elaboration, they suffered no serious alteration in the remaining four decades of his life. Having once imagined that he had resolved the greatest problems of philosophy, at least within the bounds of which a human intellect was capable, he adhered to his youthful solutions with frighteningly little deviation.⁷

The fact that Schopenhauer's encounter with and enthusiasm for Indian thought predated the formulation and publication of *The World as Will and Representation* has generated much speculation on the nature of this encounter's influence on his early thinking.⁸ And the extent to which his readings on India actually engendered and shaped, rather than simply reinforced, basic

⁵ His animus towards Hegel was particularly unrestrained; he refers to him as "an intellectual Caliban" and a "scribbler of nonsense and destroyer of minds". *Parerga and Paralipomena I*, trans. E.F.J. Payne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 178.

⁶ His most sustained broadside against academic philosophy is the lengthy essay, "On Philosophy at the Universities," contained in *Parerga and Paralipomena I*.

⁷ "Die Menschheit hat von mir etwas gelernt, was sie nie vergessen wird, und ich habe den Schleier der Wahrheit weiter gelüftet, als irgend ein Sterblicher vor mir." Schopenhauer, *Der handschriftliche Nachlass. Vierter Band, Erster Teil: Die Manuskriptbücher der Jahre 1830 bis 1852*, ed. Arthur Hübscher (Frankfurt am Main: Waldemar Kramer, 1974), pp. 291-292.

⁸ Jean W. Sedlar, *India in the Mind of Germany: Schelling, Schopenhauer and their Times* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982); Lakshmi Kapani, "Schopenhauer et l'Inde," *Journal Asiatique* 290, no. 1 (2002), pp. 163-292.

principles of his philosophy continues to be a matter of scholarly debate.⁹ But even as Schopenhauer himself insisted on his originality in such matters, he also admitted that his teachings could never have arisen “until the *Upanishads*, Plato, and Kant were able simultaneously to cast their rays into one man’s mind.”¹⁰ And his longstanding attempts to find equivalences between his own concepts of “will” and “representation” with the Hindu concepts of “*Brahma*” and “*Maya*” respectively, indicate the importance that he ascribed to such points of convergence.¹¹ Spurred on by a search for such resemblances, he quickly began reading the available current scholarship on Hinduism, including writings by the Schlegel brothers, Henry Thomas Colebrooke, and A.H. Anquetil-Duperron.¹² It was through Anquetil-Duperron’s *Oupnek’hat*, a Latin translation of a Persian edition of the *Upanishads* first published in 1801, that Schopenhauer’s interest in India was solidified. In his explanatory notes to the *Oupnek’hat*, Anquetil-Duperron had pointed to the affinities between Kant’s philosophy and Brahmanism, a similarity that no doubt intrigued the young Kantian.¹³ In the last decade of his life, Schopenhauer even lauded the *Oupnek’hat* as “the most profitable and sublime reading that is

⁹ Brian Magee argues that while “there is nothing controversial in saying that of the major thinkers in western philosophy Schopenhauer is the one who has the most in common with Eastern thought”, it is a “mistake” to imagine a decisive formative influence here; rather, he insists that “much of what it is that the two [Schopenhauer and Eastern thought] have in common was taken by Schopenhauer from Kant.” *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983). However, Moira Nichols examines in some detail how Schopenhauer’s notion of the thing-in-itself underwent significant changes as a result of his increasing acquaintance with eastern religion. “The Influences of Eastern Thought on Schopenhauer’s Doctrine of the Thing-in-Itself,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer*, ed. Christopher Janaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 171-212.

¹⁰ “Ich gestehe übrigens daß ich nicht glaube daß meine Lehre je hätte entstehn können, ehe die Upanischaden, Plato und Kant ihre Strahlen zugleich in eines Menschen Geist werfen konnten. Aber freilich standen (wie *Diderot* sagt) viele Säulen da und die Sonne schien auf alle: doch nur Memnons Säule klang. *Rameau’s Neffe*.” *Der handschriftliche Nachlass. Erster Band, Frühe Manuskripte (1804-1818)*, ed. Arthur Hübscher (Frankfurt am Main: Waldemar Kramer, 1966), p. 422.

¹¹ Giok Son, *Schopenhauers Ethik des Mitleids und die indische Philosophie: Parallelität und Differenz* (Freiburg: Verlag Karl Alber, 2001), pp. 173-192.

¹² Apart from translations from Indian texts, his early reading, especially between 1814 and 1818, was drawn particularly from *Asiatick Researches*, the British journal founded by Sir William Jones. See Jochen Stollberg, “Arthur Schopenhauers Annäherung an die indische Welt,” in “*Das Tier, das du jetzt tötest, bist du selbst...*”: *Arthur Schopenhauer und Indien*, ed. Jochen Stollberg (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2006), pp. 12-14.

¹³ Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India, and “The Mystic East”* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 119.

possible in the world; it has been the consolation of my life and will be that of my death.”¹⁴ This veneration for Hindu philosophy was later accompanied by an even higher estimation of the Buddhist religion, which he dubbed “the most excellent on earth”.¹⁵ Through the efforts of I.J. Schmidt, R. Spence Hardy, and Eugène Burnouf, works about Buddhism, its different schools and doctrines, became widely available in the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁶ As a result of a deepening acquaintance, Schopenhauer felt the affinities between his own thinking and Indian thought all the more strongly.¹⁷ Unlike Schlegel and the German Romantics, who distanced themselves from India after an initial idealization, Schopenhauer’s admiration intensified over time.

Part of the attraction of Indian religious philosophy for Schopenhauer was its subjective idealism, the notion that the phenomenal world has no reality apart from its representational existence in the mind of the knowing subject.¹⁸ Schopenhauer championed this form of idealism, as expressed also by George Berkeley and, in a more sophisticated form, by Kant, in opposition to materialism and objective idealism.¹⁹ But in addition to its idealistic metaphysics, for which Schopenhauer found contemporary European analogues, it was the apparent pessimism of Indian religion that exercised the greatest fascination. Against the dominant tendency of ancient Greek,

¹⁴ *Parerga and Paralipomena II*, p. 397.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 225. Stephan Atzert provides a good account of Schopenhauer’s earliest acquaintance with sources on Buddhism, dating from 1815 and 1816. “Schopenhauer und seine Quellen. Zum Buddhismusbild in den frühen *Asiatick Researches*,” *Schopenhauer Jahrbuch* 88 (2007), pp. 15-27.

¹⁶ See Raymond Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe’s Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680-1880*, trans. Gene Patterson-Black and Victor Reinking (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

¹⁷ Urs App, “Schopenhauers Begegnung mit dem Buddhismus,” *Schopenhauer Jahrbuch* 79 (1998), pp. 35-56.

¹⁸ Schopenhauer relies on Sir Williams Jones’ interpretation of Vedanta philosophy, according to which “existence and perceptibility are convertible terms.” This idea is further identified with Berkeley’s conflation of *esse* (being) and *percipi* (being perceived). *The World as Will and Representation*, p. 4.

¹⁹ The characterization of Kant as a subjective idealist has certainly not been without its detractors. In the second edition of *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant even edited certain passages in order to disassociate himself from Berkeley’s empirical idealism, an act which Schopenhauer decried as a mutilation of a work of genius and partly attributed to Kant’s creeping senility. For a dense and thorough comparison of the Kantian and Schopenhauerian approaches, see Paul Geyer, “Schopenhauer, Kant, and the Methods of Philosophy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer*, pp. 93-137.

modern Christian, and even secular Enlightenment philosophies to justify either God or the world, he categorically repudiated all theodicies and cosmodicies in favour of an unabashed metaphysical pessimism. In this endeavour, he believed to have found allies in the different mystical traditions, particularly as expressed in Brahmanism and Buddhism. Although the western Orientalists, whom Schopenhauer relied on as sources, often disparaged Oriental religions precisely on account of their life-denying character, Schopenhauer reinterpreted this denial of the world as a mark of philosophical insight and sophistication. Rather than contest their prejudicial characterization, he accepted it and gave it a positive valuation.²⁰

1. “There is no System of History”

The rejection of the world as an instantiation of goodness and reason led Schopenhauer to reject not only a belief in traditional religious theodicies, but also the modern theory of progress. A reduction of the phenomenal world to mere *Maya* precluded the possibility of an alteration or progressive transformation of it in its essence; since ignorance and suffering were not external accidents, but profoundly imbedded in existence, it followed that no historical process could overcome or even substantially alleviate them. It also suggested that the knowledge which history provided was condemned to be superficial, however accurate the particular historical interpretation might be. Instead, a transhistorical view of the world, as found in Hinduism and Buddhism, was deemed to be the only legitimately philosophical perspective since it did not allow itself to be entangled in the net of phenomenal illusion.

²⁰ The question of the accuracy of Schopenhauer’s interpretation of Hinduism and Buddhism goes beyond the confines of the present study. See Ram Adhar Mall, “Wie indisch ist das Indienbild Schopenhauers?” *Schopenhauer Jahrbuch* 76 (1995), pp. 151-172, and Johann Joachim Gesterling, *German Pessimism and Indian Philosophy: A Hermeneutic Reading* (New Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1986). On the presence of actual affinities, see also Douglas L. Berger, “*The Veil of Māyā*”: *Schopenhauer’s System and Early Indian Thought* (Binghamton: Global Academic Publishing, 2004), and *Schopenhauer und die Philosophien Asiens*, ed. Matthias Kossler (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2008), a collection of essays by philosophers and Orientalists.

In this sense, Schopenhauer maintained that mythology and poetic fiction conveyed deeper truths than those contained in history books, even if the latter had the advantage of a certain factual accuracy. Citing Aristotle's *Poetics*, he thus asserts that "more is achieved for knowledge of the true nature of mankind by poetry than by history".²¹ And because "there is no system of history, as there is of every other branch of knowledge", he also disputes history's scientific status.²² History's excessive concern with the particular prevents it from apprehending the universal, which is the proper object of both poetic art and scientific inquiry. This deficiency does not simply reflect the failings of a particular school of historical thought, but points to the nature of history in general. The inexhaustibility of the past defeats every attempt to systematize it or subject it to universal laws and concepts. Moreover, when historians do attempt to formulate universal concepts, as expressed in the division of the past into distinct epochs or discrete events, these concepts remain mere inventions that simply reveal the subjectiveness of historical knowledge and the arbitrariness of categorization. Schopenhauer therefore concludes that historical writing bears more resemblance to the writing of fiction than to scientific practice. At the same time, he concedes the utility of knowledge of history, and he even asserts that a nation that does not know its own history does not properly understand itself.²³ Still, this understanding of the past, which gives insight into the present historical situation, is too time-bound to warrant proper philosophical consideration.

With direct reference to the Hegelian philosophy of history, which attracts his unqualified disdain, he patronizingly refers the Hegelians to Plato, who taught that the philosopher ought to concern himself with the eternal and universal, not the transient and particular.²⁴ This denial of

²¹ *The World as Will and Representation II*, p. 439.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 440.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 445.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 443.

the importance or even reality of historical difference finds its correspondence in Schopenhauer's insistence on the identity of human character and existence through time and across cultures. Although elsewhere denying the very possibility of a philosophy of history, Schopenhauer maintains that "the true philosophy of history" consists of the recognition of "the identical in all events, of ancient as of modern times, of the East as of the West, and should see everywhere the same humanity, in spite of all difference in the special circumstances, in costume and customs."²⁵ The appeal to an immutable human nature is indicative of Schopenhauer's proximity to the French Enlightenment, particularly the thought of Voltaire. Whereas German Idealists and Romantics considered Voltaire superficial and lacking in philosophical seriousness, Schopenhauer found in him a fellow pessimist, who rightly ridiculed both Christian theology and philosophical optimism. Not surprisingly then, among Voltaire's works, it was *Candide* that most appealed to him, a work that he set beside Byron's *Cain* as exemplary in exposing the weaknesses of optimism and demonstrating the inadequacy of traditional theodicies.²⁶ But while Schopenhauer shared Voltaire's assessment of the immutability of human nature, he expressed much less interest in the *philosophe's* historical works.

The reduction of the historically particular to a costume that conceals an immutable, transhistorical essence derives from Schopenhauer's post-Kantian metaphysics. Adopting Kant's distinction between the phenomenal world and things-in-themselves, Schopenhauer consigns all history to the former and reserves all inquiry into the latter to philosophy. The Hegelian attempt to overcome this dualism offends his philosophical sensibilities precisely because it neglects Kant's distinction between these two domains of reality. For Schopenhauer, this lack of conceptual clarity was also at work in the philosophizing of Herder, whom Kant had taken to

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 444.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 585. After praising Voltaire and Byron, Schopenhauer refers disparagingly to Friedrich Schlegel as an "obscurantist".

task on these same grounds in the 1780s. In his published and unpublished writings, Schopenhauer pays scant attention to Herder's philosophy of history and his ideas on the Orient. Since Herder's thought was fundamentally historical, it appeared shallow to Schopenhauer, who felt that important questions of religion, morality, and metaphysics gained little from a historical approach. In an essay, "On Thinking for Yourself", he draws a sharp contrast between Herder and Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, where he identifies the latter as a true "philosopher", who thinks for himself, and the former as a "sophist", who is more interested in appearing to be a thinker than in being one. In this same work, he describes Kant as the greatest of the modern philosophers and portrays his own thought as operating within the true Kantian tradition.

However, Schopenhauer's interpretation of history is at odds not only with Herder's, but also with Kant's.²⁷ Although he abstained from making pronouncements about history within his works comprising the critical philosophy, Kant was more forthcoming in his briefer, more essayistic pieces. In his *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose*, he entertained the possibility that history, like nature, moved towards a goal; although human actors were seldom aware of this greater purpose, they advanced this movement nonetheless, furthering a process in which the contradictions of social life were increasingly resolved through free political organization. Kant proposed that the result of this process would be a just political constitution in the form of a world-wide federation of free states. His progressive vision of future political life was grounded in the faith that "all the natural capacities of a creature are destined sooner or later to be developed completely and in conformity with their end", a belief that

²⁷ Bernhard Heitmann, *Pessimismus und Geschichte in der Philosophie Schopenhauers* (Berlin: 1969), pp. 107-120.

demanded human beings' ultimate realization of their rational faculties and the resulting administration of universal justice.²⁸

Such optimistic convictions, which stressed human beings' capacity to know and to shape the world, were a driving force in Enlightenment thought. The events of the French Revolution gave a further impetus to the belief in the transformative power of politics and collective action. Even those thinkers who ultimately became disillusioned with the more violent and authoritarian turn of the Revolution were inclined to admit that these events had indicated the possibility of introducing something radically new into history.²⁹ But whereas his contemporaries, particularly those slightly older thinkers who retained a lively memory of the early days of the Revolution, imagined themselves to be living through an axial period, Schopenhauer felt detached from these political disturbances. And yet, he was not so far removed from them; his father's success as a merchant in Hamburg enabled him to travel throughout Europe during the time of its greatest convulsions. Between 1797 and 1799, on the cusp of adolescence, Schopenhauer attended school in Le Havre, which was the scene of some of the most violent counter-revolutionary activity during the time of the Directorate.³⁰ On a later trip to Paris in 1803, he even caught sight of Napoleon at the *Théâtre de Français*, where the emperor was greeted with a rousing ovation. During the same year, he had the opportunity to see the imperial couples of Britain and Austria; in a journal he kept at the time, he described the English Queen as "ugly without any bearing" and the Austrian Emperor as having "a markedly stupid face".³¹ This contempt for governing

²⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Kant's Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss and trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 42.

²⁹ The admission was also made by some of its most extreme critics. Joseph de Maistre, though appalled by the monstrosity of the Revolution, acknowledged its diabolical novelty; "the French Revolution and everything now happening in Europe is just as marvellous in its own way as the instantaneous fructification of a tree in the month of January." *Considerations on France*, trans. and ed. Richard A. Lebrun (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 4.

³⁰ Safranski, pp. 27-28.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

elites was supplemented with an even lower opinion of the common people. His lack of faith in both their good will and their intellectual capabilities led him to conclude that neither heads of state nor those whom they governed were capable of bringing about positive social or political change.

Notwithstanding his firsthand witnessing of decisive historical moments and his avid reading of contemporary newspapers, he thus found in these events merely a confirmation of certain transhistorical truths. Instead of the unfolding and fulfillment of a purpose, he saw only the pointlessness of suffering and the vanity of human endeavours. Since we are, according to Schopenhauer, not the masters, but the slaves of our desires, the intellect is inefficacious in the final analysis and cannot lead to the betterment of the world. This stress on the insatiability of our willing and the impotence of the intellect in overcoming suffering have given rise to the characterization of Schopenhauer as some sort of irrationalist.³² And yet he was far less inclined than the Romantics to celebrate these irrational forces, either in the form of the creative powers of the unconscious or some world-shaping Promethean act of will. On the contrary, the will does not liberate us, but binds us to the world. Reiterating the second noble truth of Buddhism, Schopenhauer affirms that suffering is the consequence of desire.

This recognition of the ubiquity of suffering carried a strong ethical imperative, the need to be compassionate towards all fellow sufferers and to attempt to alleviate their pain. Schopenhauer believed that a simple ethic of compassion, rather than some formalized categorical imperative in Kantian fashion, constituted the true basis of morality, one that was

³² Karl Popper describes Schopenhauer as an irrationalist in spite of himself; even though “he was genuinely opposed to irrationalism”, Schopenhauer’s attempted solution to Kantian problems led necessarily to irrationalist results. *Conjectures and Refutations* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 2002), pp. 270-271. On Marxist-Leninist grounds, Georg Lukács makes a somewhat similar, but much stronger claim for the intrinsic irrationalism of Schopenhauer’s metaphysics. *The Destruction of Reason*, trans. Peter Palmer (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1981). However, in assessing the validity of these characterizations, Julian Young stresses “the essentially favourable attitude towards reason expressed in Schopenhauer’s philosophy.” “Is Schopenhauer an Irrationalist?” *Schopenhauer Jahrbuch* 69 (1988), p. 99.

preached by all the major world religions, especially Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism.³³ But while the message of Christianity, as embodied in the Sermon on the Mount, admirably conveyed this ethic in a manner that was intelligible to all, it did not provide a proper philosophical grounding or justification of it; it was only in the eastern faiths that the metaphysical foundations of ethics were made explicit. In the Vedantic maxim “*tat tvam asi*”, which suggested the underlying unity of all beings, Schopenhauer found a confirmation of his own insight that the essence of the world existed outside of space and time.³⁴ Through an act of compassion, this too often concealed unity comes to light; one being identifies with another as its fellow sufferer, a process that almost miraculously overcomes the principle of differentiation and distinction that ordinarily prevents us from apprehending our undivided unity. And since “all plurality is only apparent”, the abolition of the differentiation of the ego and the non-ego brought about by compassion further reveals the phenomenal world’s illusory character, the unreality of *Maya*.³⁵

2. Indian Philosophy and the Overcoming of History

Within Schopenhauer’s metaphysical framework, the world in general and history in particular come to be identified with *Samsara*, the interminable cycle of birth, death, and re-birth as described in Hindu and Buddhist cosmology.³⁶ While certain historical movements or eras may thus give a semblance of uniqueness to the superficial observer, these mask rather than

³³ In regard to Schopenhauer’s critical stance towards Kantian ethics, see Margot Fleischer, *Schopenhauer als Kritiker der Kantischen Ethik* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2003).

³⁴ “The readers of my *Ethics* know that with me the foundation of morality rests on the truth that has its expression in the *Veda* and Vedanta in the established mystical formula *tat tvam asi* (This thou art) which is stated with reference to every living thing, whether man or animal, and is then called the *Mahavakya* or Great Word.” *Parerga and Paralipomena II*, p. 219.

³⁵ Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, trans. E.F.J. Payne (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1995), p. 209.

³⁶ “This is *Samsara* and everything therein denounces it; yet, more than anything else, the human world, where morally depravity and baseness, intellectually incapacity and stupidity, prevail to a fearful extent.” *Parerga and Paralipomena II*, p. 218.

reveal the true nature of temporality. Speaking to his complacent Christian contemporaries, Schopenhauer writes, “You laugh at the aeons and *kalpas* of *Buddhism*! *Christianity*, of course, has taken up a standpoint, whence it surveys a brief span of time. *Buddhism*’s standpoint is one that presents it with the infinity of time and space, which then becomes its theme.”³⁷ The theme is also Schopenhauer’s own. The belief that the universe is without beginning and end informs his transhistorical interpretation of existence and leads him away from both the idea of a purposive cosmic process and the notion of some teleological endpoint to history. Whereas Hegel derided the large spans of time referred to within Hindu and Buddhist cosmology as indicative of an excessive imaginative zeal unrestrained by reason, Schopenhauer here saw an insight into the nature of temporality. Of course, one of the characteristics of Christianity that Hegel most esteemed was its historical consciousness, the recognition of the historical nature of the incarnation and an eschatological vision which found an analogue in his own philosophy. But it is largely the overvaluation of history that marks Christianity, for Schopenhauer, as philosophically inferior to the more transhistorical eastern faiths. And India’s supposed lack of history, which Hegel had disparaged as one of its principal deficiencies, is reinterpreted by Schopenhauer as a mark of its metaphysical sophistication. As a Kantian, Schopenhauer considers time, along with space, to be ideal rather than real in any objective sense; and since he is more interested in the world of the timeless thing-in-itself rather than the time-bound phenomenal world, he attaches little value to either ancient origins or future purposes. India’s lack of a strong historiographical tradition, as can be found among the Chinese, the Greeks, and the Romans, thus appears to him to be only proper. History is a mere report of the mutability of things; the sages of India rightly transcended the historical concern for the transient and ephemeral, and devoted themselves to the contemplation of that which is timeless and

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 400.

immutable. Since, according to Schopenhauer, time itself only has an ideal existence as a form of our subjective cognition, any attempt to find an objectively rational structure within it, in the fashion of Hegel, is condemned to failure at the outset. Instead, an analysis of its subjectively phenomenal character offers the appropriate beginning of philosophical inquiry.

In his various musings on the ideality of time, Schopenhauer consistently describes existence as a ceaseless scuttling back and forth between pain and boredom. The fact that the duration of time is felt most strongly in moments of intense agony or insurmountable ennui leads him to conclude that these experiences better capture the nature of time than moments of happiness, which always appear to pass so fleetingly. This almost banal observation is integrally related to his assessment of history, in which the past likewise appears as a monotonous repetition occasionally punctuated by tragedy.³⁸ Moments of seemingly significant change cannot mislead the astute philosophical observer; rather, it is precisely the task of the philosopher to rise above this insubstantial pageantry, to tear back the veil of phenomenal illusion, and to behold the timeless and unchanging reality of the thing-in-itself. However, the thing-in-itself is not, in contrast to the phenomenal world, the true and the good as it was for Plato; on the contrary, in opposition to the dominant tradition of western philosophy, Schopenhauer identifies this fundamental reality with a ceaseless and insatiable striving, which he designates “the will” or the “the will-to-live”, the source of all suffering that deserves to be negated.³⁹

Although his negative characterization of the world has certain affinities with gnosticism, his pessimism also radically departs from previous world-denying forms of Christianity on

³⁸ Georg Simmel suggests that the experience of boredom, more than that of intense pain, colours Schopenhauer’s worldview and his musings on temporality; this interpretation helps to explain the lack of historical differentiation within Schopenhauer’s philosophy. *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche*, trans. Helmut Loiskandl, Deena Weinstein, and Michael Weinstein (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), pp. 8-9.

³⁹ “As what the will wills is always life, just because this is nothing but the presentation of that willing for the representation, it is immaterial and a mere pleonasm if, instead of simply saying “the will,” we say “the will-to-live.” *The World as Will and Representation I*, p. 275.

account of its atheism. And yet, he insists that the negation of the will, as accomplished in various forms of asceticism, can lead to a life of holiness and even redemption. Though his own life was hardly a paradigm of saintliness, he yet saw in the practice of asceticism the possibility of spiritual liberation from the world. The combination of a denial of a personal God and a profound admiration for a life of self-renunciation accounts, in large measure, for Schopenhauer's great sympathy for eastern religion. In Buddhism especially, but even in certain schools of Vedanta, namely the Advaita tradition, Schopenhauer believed to have found allies in his struggle against monotheistic optimism. A respect for eastern mysticism was also extended to certain Christian thinkers and the New Testament, which he claims "must somehow be of Indian origin, as is testified by its thoroughly Indian ethics, which carries morality to the point of asceticism, by its pessimism and its avatar."⁴⁰ Still, despite his approval of the world-denying strand within the Christian tradition, he also objected to Christianity's belief in a personal god, its doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, its intolerance towards other faiths, its lack of respect for animal life, and, of course, its excessive reliance on history. These failings are attributed to the persistence of Jewish elements within Christianity, errors which are not to be found in Brahmanism or Buddhism.

But even when Schopenhauer makes allowances for the admirable aspects of Christianity, his polemic against the optimistic prejudice that being is preferable to nothingness makes him an implacable critic of all theodicies, Christian and otherwise. In a sense, his critique of the various philosophies of history is largely an extension of his critique of preceding theodicies.⁴¹ An identification of history with *Samsara* offers a point of convergence between the attack on

⁴⁰ *Parerga and Paralipomena II*, p. 380.

⁴¹ The connection between these is explored more thoroughly in Andreas Dörpinghaus, *Mundus pessimus: Untersuchungen zum philosophischen Pessimismus Arthur Schopenhauers* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1997), pp. 108-140.

traditional theistic religion and contemporary interpretations of history alike. The extent to which the modern belief in universal progress is itself a vestige or a secularization of an older narrative of divine providence continues to be a matter of scholarly debate.⁴² At the very least, for Schopenhauer, both were guilty of a shallow optimism that had its roots in the Old Testament, exemplified in the passage after the sixth day of creation when God beheld the world and saw that “it was very good.” Schopenhauer’s polemic against Judaism derives largely from what he perceived to be an affirmation of life and attempted justification of the world. He finds these failings in a still more exaggerated form in Islam, which he dubs “the worst of all religions”.⁴³ Ironically, the one “redeeming feature” of Judaism that he identifies is the doctrine of original sin, which allegorically captures the truth of our inner nature.⁴⁴ But unlike Leibniz and Kant, he certainly does not interpret this fall from grace as a *felix culpa*.

Against Leibniz’s classic thesis that ours is “the best of all possible worlds”, since God could not have done better than he did in creating all things, Schopenhauer counters that ours is “the worst of all possible worlds”.⁴⁵ The assertion, though undeniably hyperbolic, is not simply rhetorical; the presence of a certain amount of order and good is necessary for the continued existence of the world, without which it would cease to be. Somewhat facetiously, he even points to the fossil record as evidence that past worlds which were worse than ours have come to an end.⁴⁶ This aggressive pessimism, which permeates both his metaphysical system and his less systematic observations about the misery of everyday life, distinguishes itself for its refusal of the possibility of justice either in the present world or in any transcendent world to come.

⁴² See Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), and Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1985).

⁴³ *The World as Will and Representation II*, p. 605.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 605.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 583.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 584.

Nonetheless, the argument is not that the world is declining in some Spenglerian fashion, but rather that the very categories of progress and decline are philosophically inadequate in describing it. As a result of his transhistorical perspective, Schopenhauer was largely immune to the idealization of Indian origins, that originary mystique which was the source of the Romantic longing for the Orient. Unlike the Romantics, for Schopenhauer, there is no past golden age; but there is also no apocalypse awaiting humanity at the end of history. Admittedly, in regard to the lives of individuals, Schopenhauer writes that ““Today it is bad, and day by day it will get worse – until at last the worst of all arrives.””⁴⁷ But this portrayal of the life of the individual, who grows older and weaker with age until finally overtaken by death, does not apply to humanity as a whole. There is little indication that Schopenhauer believes that civilization is declining or that the world is spiraling downwards towards some great cataclysm. On this point, he is far removed from the German cultural pessimism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century even though he was sometimes invoked as one of its patron saints. In fact, his relative lack of interest in the historical role of larger collectives contributed to an indifference to contemporary German nationalism and revolutionary struggles in general.

Schopenhauer characterizes the tendency to see collectives rather than individuals as historical agents as being the result of a false hypostatizing; he maintains that “in the human race only the individuals and their course of life are real, the nations and their lives being mere abstractions”.⁴⁸ He therefore downplays the extent to which bodies of people have a reality independent of their individual constituents. This inattentiveness to the productive role of social formations in history sets Schopenhauer apart not only from German Idealism and Romanticism, but also the French positivism of his day. But a lack of interest in historical collectives also made

⁴⁷ *Essays and Aphorisms*, p. 47.

⁴⁸ *The World as Will and Representation II*, p. 442.

Schopenhauer receptive to foreign thought since thinkers from other times and climes could be imagined as fellow interlocutors engaged in an ongoing philosophical dialogue. A belief in the priority of the individual opened up the possibility that individuals were not completely bound by their culture or the time in which they lived. Conversely, the progressivism of Hegel and Comte quickly made the thought of the past obsolescent. In Hegel's history of philosophy, the greatest philosophers are those who most profoundly express the spirit of the times in which they live; but according to Schopenhauer, the most exceptional thinkers are precisely those who exceed and oppose their own time and place. In regard to Bruno and Spinoza, he writes,

they do not belong to their age or to their part of the globe, which rewarded the one with death and the other with persecution and ignominy. Their miserable existence and death in this Western world are like that of a tropical plant in Europe. The banks of the sacred Ganges were their true spiritual home; there they would have led a peaceful life among men of like mind.⁴⁹

Given his own sense of being out of step with the main philosophical currents of the time and his lack of recognition from his contemporaries, one cannot help but think that Schopenhauer fancied that he too would have been more at home on the banks of the Ganges. But more interesting than Schopenhauer's personal feelings of identification with the aforementioned thinkers is the understanding of culture and history that lies at its foundation. Here Schopenhauer not only allows for the possibility that an individual from one culture may be more at home in another but actually cites examples in which this is the case. This is partly due to an essentialist belief in the universality of the human condition, a condition that transcends cultural differences. Such a transhistorical notion of man is in direct opposition to the position advocated by Hegel, who continually emphasized the extent to which all individuals were conditioned by their specific historical context. While Schopenhauer's approach disregards the conditions of

⁴⁹ *The World as Will and Representation I*, p. 422.

emergence of philosophizing and the historical specificity of concepts, it also encourages a greater openness and consideration of ideas generated in different times and places.

These differences in methods of interpretation are manifest in the two philosophers' diametrically opposed reading practices with regard to Orientalist scholarship. Both Hegel and Schopenhauer were well-acquainted with Indological studies and sources, and they often drew their antithetical judgements about India from the very same journals and translations. But whereas Hegel consistently emphasized the ruptures and points of difference between East and West, often much more vigorously than the sources upon which he was drawing, Schopenhauer was inclined to recognize points of convergence within the different traditions even where these were, in fact, quite tenuous. And when he did not admit such resemblances, it was usually to the Occident's detriment rather than to its advantage. Also, while Hegel tended to uncritically accept the largely negative accounts of British colonizers' accounts of the native Indian population, Schopenhauer, who was much more skeptical of such narratives, discounted them almost automatically for being motivated by religious bigotry.⁵⁰

In his condemnation of the invaders of the subcontinent, he scoffs at Christian missionaries' attempts to convert the native Indian population and compares the work of the missionaries in India to the futile task of shooting a cliff with a bullet.⁵¹ His argument on the inefficacy of Christians proselytizing in India is bolstered by citations of British statistics, taken from the *Times*, on the lack of Indian converts. According to Schopenhauer, missionaries have only proven successful when encountering peoples "still in a state of childhood", among whom he includes Hottentots and the inhabitants of Polynesia; these proselytizers are, however,

⁵⁰ In praising an English officer's candid account of "the very beneficial and practical influence of Brahmanism" in India, Schopenhauer adds that this report is "quite different from those that emanate from clerical pens which, precisely as such, deserve little credit." *Parerga and Paralipomena II*, pp. 223-224.

⁵¹ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation I*, p. 357.

impotent when faced with the culture and religion of the Brahmins.⁵² The disparaging reference here to peoples from Africa and Southeast Asia exhibits the fact that Schopenhauer's high esteem for India did not necessarily translate into an appreciation for other non-European cultures. His further claim that "the highest civilization and culture, apart from the ancient Hindus and Egyptians, are found exclusively among the white races" points to the limits of his humanist vision.⁵³ Nonetheless, Schopenhauer does not argue for an intrinsic racial essence or some natural hierarchy of racial superiority; rather, he insists that changes in external racial features are due to environmental factors and are consequently subject to alteration over time. As a result, he elsewhere denies the very existence of "the white race, however much this is talked about".⁵⁴ He further asserts that "the Adam of our race must in any case be conceived as black" and even claims that "the white face is a degeneration and unnatural", a fact supported by "the aversion and repugnance that are excited among some tribes of the interior of Africa when they first see such a face".⁵⁵ Whatever one makes of Schopenhauer's fragmentary and often inconsistent pronouncements on race, it should be noted that his inegalitarian assessments of culture were made on grounds other than biological ones. Rather, these verdicts derive from ideas about the relative worth of different cultures' philosophy, religion, and art.

But while he attributes comparatively little importance to race and racial history, he also affirms the existence of some sort of genealogical connection between India and Europe, even speaking of "our forefathers the Hindus".⁵⁶ Like Schlegel and other leading German philologists of the time, Schopenhauer establishes this genetic relationship primarily on linguistic grounds; in this schema, Sanskrit is "the great mother language" out of which all later and lesser languages

⁵² *Parerga and Paralipomena II*, p. 328.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

⁵⁴ *The World as Will and Representation II*, p. 547.

⁵⁵ *Parerga and Paralipomena II*, pp. 157-158.

⁵⁶ *The World as Will and Representation II*, p. 547.

have descended.⁵⁷ He also proposes a historical connection between the ancient Indian religions and Christianity, but he does not provide an account of how eastern teachings were transmitted to the West. These assessments bear the impress of German Romanticism and thus suggest the presence of a certain kinship. And yet historical speculations remained peripheral to Schopenhauer's overriding concerns. Schopenhauer had no interest in discovering the place of India in world history since he denied that history presented a meaningful or rationally intelligible process. The question of Indians and Europeans' common ancestral heritage, like the question of the skin colour of "the Adam of our race", was a matter of historical curiosity, ultimately of negligible philosophical significance. His attachment to India was not grounded in a sense of the country's historical importance or its historical relationship to Europe, but stemmed from a conviction that its philosophical and religious insights were far deeper than those to be found in the Occident. Indeed, in striking contrast to Schlegel, it was this very indifference to India's historical position, which facilitated his sympathetic interpretation of its texts and teachings.

In reference to the unfortunate fact that these teachings did not more deeply influence western consciousness, Schopenhauer stated that "if an Asiatic were to ask me what Europe is, I should have to reply that it is that part of the world which is completely ruled by the unheard-of and incredible notion that the birth of a human being is his absolute beginning and that he has come from nothing."⁵⁸ Schopenhauer attributed this doctrine of human natality to the Old Testament and the dissemination of false Jewish ideas. More disturbingly, he even referred to Judaism as contaminating western thought, and he portrayed the Jews in Europe as constituting

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 547.

⁵⁸ *Parerga and Paralipomena II*, pp. 368-369

an untrustworthy foreign nation.⁵⁹ At the same time, he was much less inclined than *völkisch* writers to celebrate Germany or the German people; in fact, he showed a marked contempt for chauvinistic nationalism, which stood in opposition to his own vaunted cosmopolitanism and receptivity to intercultural exchange.

Echoing Friedrich Schlegel's *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians*, Schopenhauer speculated that the transmission of Sanskrit texts to Europe would inaugurate an intellectual and spiritual transformation comparable to that of the Renaissance.⁶⁰ For Schopenhauer though, unlike Schlegel, these texts were almost exclusively philosophical in orientation and largely excluded Indian poetic productions, to which Schopenhauer was surprisingly cold. Even allowing for the deficiencies of translation, since he did not read Sanskrit, he described the translated poetic works with which he was acquainted as "inelegant" and even "monstrous"; he contrasted these unfavourably with the beauty and equilibrium of the works of the ancient Greeks.⁶¹ Yet Schopenhauer's admiration for the classical aesthetic was combined with a rather low estimate of Greek religion and philosophy.⁶² Despite his reverence for Plato, he felt that the philosophy of the ancients was shallow and superficial; and this critical assessment of Greek metaphysics was further extended to modern European philosophy, which likewise suffered from "a very great dearth of correct metaphysical views".⁶³ As a result of this evaluation, Schopenhauer reproached contemporary Indologists for squandering their time on translations of

⁵⁹ Because of this conjunction of an idealization of India and a polemic against Judaism, Léon Poliakov portrays Schopenhauer as complicit in the formulation of the Aryan myth. *The Aryan Myth: A History of Racist and Nationalist Ideas in Europe*, trans. Edmund Howard (London: Sussex University Press, 1971), pp. 245-246. A more subtle treatment of the problems can be found in Henry Walter Brann, *Schopenhauer und das Judentum* (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag Herbert Grundmann, 1975). Brann explores Schopenhauer's views on Judaism, his personal relationship with Jews, and the complexities of his response to Jewish thinkers such as Spinoza.

⁶⁰ "I surmise that the influence of Sanskrit literature will penetrate no less deeply than did the revival of Greek literature in the fifteenth century". *The World as Will and Representation I*, p. xv. This prediction, made in 1818, is reiterated with the publication of *Parerga and Paralipomena* in 1851.

⁶¹ *Parerga and Paralipomena II*, p. 395.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 348-349.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 395.

literary works, of which Europe had no shortage, while neglecting India's philosophical treasures. The anxiety that "true philosophy" was in danger of being destroyed by the "sham philosophy" of Hegelianism made the imperative to study Hinduism and Buddhism all the more urgent. This call for an engagement with Indian thought led Rudolf Haym to carp that Schopenhauer wished to see "the whole occidental culture being swallowed up by the putatively superior Orient."⁶⁴ And indeed, Schopenhauer assures his readers that "Indian wisdom flows back into Europe" and "will produce a fundamental change in our knowledge and thought".⁶⁵ In fact, whatever changes Indian thought did bring about in the European consciousness were due, in no small measure, to the work of Schopenhauer himself as a mediating and promotional agent.⁶⁶

3. In the Wake of Pessimism

Following the failed revolutions of 1848, Schopenhauer experienced a dramatic increase in popularity. For decades, he had accused the philosophical establishment of suppressing his work through a conspiracy of silence.⁶⁷ By the time of his death, however, he finally began to receive the acknowledgement and fame, which he so intensely craved. In 1851, he published *Parerga and Paralipomena*, a large two-volume compilation of essays and aphorisms, which quickly attracted the attention of the wider reading public. A series of favourable reviews and

⁶⁴ Paul Gottfried, "Arthur Schopenhauer as a Critic of History," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 36, no. 2 (1975), p. 331. Apart from his influential work on Herder and Romanticism, Haym wrote biographies of both Hegel (1857) and Schopenhauer (1864).

⁶⁵ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation I*, p. 357.

⁶⁶ Dorothea W. Dauer asserts that, although Schopenhauer's great expectations were not realized, his success in promoting India to a European audience "must be considered as an epochmaking achievement in the history of world diffusion of culture". *Schopenhauer as Transmitter of Buddhist Ideas* (Berne: Publishers Herbert Lang and Co., 1969), p. 39.

⁶⁷ "Ich bin der Kaspar Hauser der Philosophieprofessoren: sie haben mich von Luft und Licht abgesperrt; – damit meine angeborenen Ansprüche nicht zu Geltung kämen." *Der handschriftliche Nachlass. Vierter Band, Erster Teil: Die Manuskriptbücher der Jahre 1830 bis 1852*, p. 292.

commentaries, both in Germany and abroad, catapulted the aging philosopher to celebrity status. As a result, Karl Rosenkranz, one of the leading Hegelian philosophers of the time, caustically referred to Schopenhauer as the “newly elected emperor of philosophy in Germany”.⁶⁸ Still, Schopenhauer’s popularity stemmed less from the endorsement of academic philosophers, who tended to be rather tepid towards his work, than from an audience of educated non-specialists, who were enthused at the prospect of a German philosopher who actually wrote lucidly and intelligibly.⁶⁹

The fact that this recognition came in the wake of the defeat of progressive revolutionary forces and the triumph of reaction has often been emphasized, particularly by Schopenhauer’s Marxist critics. Schopenhauer himself was terrified at the prospect of unruly German mobs rioting in the vicinity of his Frankfurt home and was fully in support of Prussia’s brutal suppression of the revolutionary forces.⁷⁰ Out of gratitude for their protection and maintenance of his private property, he even donated a portion of his annual income to the support of soldiers who had been injured in the conflict. But the extent to which the change in political climate was decisive to his later popularity remains difficult to determine with any precision. Certainly, his iconoclasm and intransigent opposition to optimism found resonance in an era that was struggling with a loss of faith in traditional values. No doubt, the appeal that his writings exercised upon prominent artists and writers further contributed to the dissemination of his ideas in the public sphere. Within the German context, Schopenhauer exercised a profound influence on Nietzsche, Richard Wagner, and Thomas Mann. And outside of Germany, his ideas were

⁶⁸ Safranski, p. 347.

⁶⁹ Thomas Weiner offers a brief account and assessment of Schopenhauer’s philosophical proponents and detractors, including Paul Deussen, Rudolf Haym, Eduard Zeller, Kuno Fischer, and Ernst Cassirer. *Die Philosophie Arthur Schopenhauers und ihre Rezeption* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2000).

⁷⁰ Safranski, pp. 322-325.

taken up by Ivan Turgenev, Leo Tolstoy, Guy de Maupassant, Marcel Proust, Thomas Hardy, and Joseph Conrad.⁷¹

With this newly acquired status, Schopenhauer's interest in and pronouncements on India achieved wider currency. Leading Orientalists, such as Paul Deussen, pressed the master's claims further in their attempts to find correlations between Platonic, Kantian, and Vedantic metaphysics. Deussen, who was also the founder of the *Schopenhauer Gesellschaft* in 1911, decisively shaped the subsequent study of Indian religion through his pioneering comparative work.⁷² Given Schopenhauer's devaluation of history, his influence on professional German historians was, not surprisingly, less significant than his impact on Oriental studies. Still, even here, Schopenhauer's skepticism towards historical system-building found a strange resonance with Rankean positivism in their common rejection of Hegel's philosophy of history.⁷³ More noteworthy, his ideas were embraced by Ranke's pupil and rival, Jacob Burckhardt, whose work on antiquity and the Italian Renaissance was formative for cultural history. Like Schopenhauer, to whom he referred as "our philosopher" and sometimes simply "the philosopher", Burckhardt emphasized history's unscientific nature, rejected the belief in progress, and proclaimed the primacy of the irrational will over the rational intellect in historical movement.⁷⁴ Notwithstanding Schopenhauer's own self-presentation as beyond petty political concerns, these

⁷¹ Bryan Magee thus asserts that although "the influence of Marx has been unquestionably wider", "the influence of Schopenhauer on creative artists of the very front rank surpasses that of any other philosopher since his time". *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer*, pp. 389-390.

⁷² For Deussen's contributions to comparative studies, see Michael Gerhard, "Paul Deussen – Eine deutsch-indische Geistesbeziehung," in "*Das Tier, das du jetzt tötest, bist du selbst...*": Arthur Schopenhauer und Indien, pp. 101-118; Dietmar Rothermund, *The German Intellectual Quest for India* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1986); Deussen, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy with an appendix On the Philosophy of the Vedanta in its Relations to Occidental Metaphysics* (New Delhi: Ess Ess Publications, 1976).

⁷³ However, Thomas Gil also points out that despite Ranke's rejection of Hegelianism, many of Hegel's ideas found their way back into his interpretation of history, often in submerged or unarticulated form. *Kritik der Geschichtsphilosophie: L. von Ranke, J. Burckhardts und H. Freyers Problematisierung der klassischen Geschichtsphilosophie* (Stuttgart: M und P, 1993), pp. 47-49.

⁷⁴ Richard Winners, *Weltanschauung und Geschichtsauffassung Jakob Burckhardts* (Hildesheim: Verlag Dr. H.A. Gerstenberg, 1971), pp. 17-18.

ideas gained increasing cultural and political significance in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

On this account, Georg Lukács asserts that “it is in Schopenhauer that the purely bourgeois version of irrationalism crops up for the first time – not only within German philosophy but also on an international scale.”⁷⁵ According to Lukács, Schopenhauer’s irrational and reactionary insistence that the misery of the world could not be alleviated through any historical transformation constituted an indirect apology for the bourgeoisie and the capitalist social order. He further alleges that it was due to the apologetic character of his pessimistic vision that Schopenhauer became “the leading thinker of the second half of the nineteenth century”.⁷⁶ Contrariwise, Max Horkheimer sees in Schopenhauer an outsider, an independent thinker and forerunner of critical theory. Notwithstanding his endorsement of Prussia’s anti-revolutionary actions, Schopenhauer’s unmasking of “the idealistic fable of the ruse of reason” makes him, for Horkheimer, one of the most astute critics of the false promises of liberalism, capitalism, and other political and economic ideologies besides.⁷⁷ The consequence of his ideology critique is certainly not a reactionary legitimation of the existing political order, but rather the possibility of a “solidarity that stems from hopelessness.”⁷⁸

This sense of hopelessness derives, in part, from the loss of belief in God and its attendant consequences. For Schopenhauer, the death of God is also the death of history, the unraveling of providential religious narratives and their modern secular variants. But Schopenhauer’s work not only calls into doubt prior philosophies which rest on theistic

⁷⁵ Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, p. 192.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

⁷⁷ Horkheimer, “Schopenhauer Today,” in *Schopenhauer: His Philosophical Achievement*, ed. Michael Fox (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1980), p. 22. Originally published under the title “Die Aktualität Schopenhauers,” in Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Sociologica II* (Frankfurt am Main: 1962).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

foundations; it poses a further challenge to the varieties of atheism in which human beings assume the vacated place of the divinity; these include Nietzsche's doctrine of the coming superman as well as Marx's vision of the revolutionary proletariat. In one sense then, the loss of the value of history can be interpreted here as a consequence of the collapse of traditional theodicies. In different forms, Herder, Schlegel, and Hegel attempted to provide a justification of God and the world through an apprehension of the meaning, order, and rationality of history. The success of these thinkers in linking a progressive vision of history with the study of history as such constituted a formative moment in the emergence of modern historiography. But Schopenhauer's critique of these progressive philosophies of history did not simply consist in laying bare the untenable religious dogmas that lay at their foundation. He did not merely dispute the presence of a hidden order or rationality to history, "the cunning of reason" that lurks behind the ostensible purposelessness of events; he also combated the rising faith in human beings' capacity to make their own history. More than any residual Christianity, it was a fervent belief in this capacity for acting and making that inspired the historical visions of German Romantics and Idealists alike. Notwithstanding their substantial differences, Kant, Herder, Fichte, Schlegel, Hegel, and Schelling were united in their conviction that freedom was the watchword of philosophy and that the exercising of freedom was the mark of human dignity; moreover, it was in the movement of history itself that this freedom was supposed to find one of its highest expressions.

Whatever parallels may be drawn between Schopenhauer and the aforementioned thinkers, his philosophy represents an abrupt departure on this last point. Despite his invocation of will and willing as constitutive of all existence, the world stage of history does not exemplify for him the manifestation of freedom or the efficacy of human action; on the contrary, it exhibits

a purposeless bondage to an inexorable causal necessity. Hegel, who imagined that he saw in Napoleon the world-soul riding on horseback, attributes the greatest freedom to world historical actors since these are the men who best advance the cause of freedom, with or without their own intention and knowledge.⁷⁹ But according to Schopenhauer, it is precisely those who are furthest removed from the realm of the public sphere and historical action who are most likely to attain true freedom in the form of liberation from the will; the pinnacle of freedom is to be found not in the actions of the modern European legislator and conqueror, but in the self-denying practices of the Indian yogi. The legend of the Buddha, who renounces his princely status and power in order to find enlightenment, offers the paradigmatic example of this turn from the world to Nirvana.⁸⁰

In opposition to Hegel, Schopenhauer thus maintains that there can be no moral legitimization or validation of an individual or nation through history. His assessment undercuts Europe's claim to primacy and its justification for its imperialist conquests on the grounds of realizing some world-historical mission. At the same time, it challenges a relativizing historicism, which reduces all ethical and epistemological claims to matters of contextualization. Against the inflation of history's importance, Schopenhauer's critique calls into question the meaning of history, the veridical status of pronouncements made about it, and the purpose and value of its study.

⁷⁹ In October, 1806, Hegel wrote to Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer about his impressions on witnessing Napoleon ride past following the Battle of Jena. "I saw the Emperor – this world-soul – riding out of the city on reconnaissance. It is indeed a wonderful sensation to see such an individual, who, concentrated here at a single point, astride a horse, reaches out over the world and masters it." *Hegel: The Letters*, trans. Clark Butler and Christiane Seiler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 114.

⁸⁰ "The greatest, the most important, and the most significant phenomenon that the world can show is not the conqueror of the world, but the overcomer of the world, and so really nothing but the quiet and unobserved conduct in the life of such a man." *The World as Will and Representation I*, pp. 385-386.

Conclusion

Schopenhauer's questioning of the meaning of history and the value of its study marks a rupture with prior philosophies of history. At the same time, his own cosmopolitanism owed much to the widening of historical and cultural horizons that Enlightenment philosophies of history helped to bring about. The expansion of historical perspective in the Enlightenment was much more than a mere quantitative increase, in which new bodies of people were incorporated into historical discourse; rather, it precipitated a qualitative transformation in eighteenth-century historical thought. In the case of both Voltaire and Herder, their study of the non-European world was not simply a result of a desire for greater inclusiveness, but was wedded to pressing matters of philosophy, politics, and religion. And although their historical narratives, and their worldviews more generally, were opposed to one another on numerous points, they remained united in their insistence that any attempt at a universal history or a philosophy of history worthy of the name had to encompass the world and could not remain confined to the Occident.

In his *Essay on the Manners and Spirit of Nations*, Voltaire utilized India to good effect in attacking the accuracy of Mosaic chronology, but he was not without forerunners. Already in the seventeenth century, an appeal to the antiquity of the far East was used to undermine the biblical account of the formation of the first nations. It belonged to Voltaire, however, to synthesize this polemical mobilization of the East with a sweeping cosmopolitan narrative of history. His displacement of Israel and Jewish history from a privileged position gave new importance to both the non-biblical Orient and modern Europe. Within Voltaire's schema, China and India were represented not as benighted, heathen nations, but as durable civilizations with lofty moral codes and admirable traditions of religious tolerance. At the same time, Europe was

no longer conflated with Christendom; it was released from the hold of the Judaeo-Christian tradition and grounded on progressive secular principles. By virtue of this dual operation, Voltaire paradoxically contributed to both an elevation of the Orient, which made Europeans more open to acknowledging its contributions, and an elevation of Europe, which was conducive to the Eurocentrism he sometimes combatted. This perspective is already at work in Voltaire's judgement that after its belated beginnings, Europe surpassed the static Orient, which once sat atop the hierarchy of civilizations.

With Herder, we see the extent to which the birth of historical relativism was bound to the rise of cultural relativism. In Voltaire's writings, the Orient is often strategically deployed for polemical purposes, but it is with Herder that the idea of the incommensurability of cultures finds its full articulation. The result was a new way of conceptualizing history that demanded a sympathetic understanding of every culture on its own terms. Indeed, it has been argued that Herder's theory of historical relativism was his single greatest philosophical contribution.¹ Even without attempting to rate the importance of Herder's various achievements, and accepting the complexities of and the tensions within his brand of relativism, it certainly constitutes one of the great innovations of modern historical thought. And it emerged, in large measure, out of Herder's encounter with the Orient. His insistence that other time periods should not be judged according to present-day standards was an outgrowth of his position that other cultures should not be judged according to the standards of our own. And his further emphasis on the particularity and the uniqueness of each culture and each historical moment set the stage for nineteenth-century historicism.

¹ H.B. Nisbet, ed., *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism: Winckelmann, Lessing, Hamann, Herder, Schiller, and Goethe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 153.

It also set the stage for German Romanticism and the work of Friedrich Schlegel. Along with his personal contributions to the field of comparative linguistics, Schlegel's insistence that the study of languages offered a way to unlock the secrets of history provided a great impetus to German humanistic studies in the nineteenth century. The affinities with Herder are unmistakable; Schlegel's reflections on the relationship between language and spirit, his organicism, his fascination with origins, and his youthful idealization of ancient India all bear the impress of Herder's thought. But instead of a plurality of incommensurable stories, Schlegel's later philosophy of history increasingly assumed the form of a monological narrative. For all their differences in intent and in the logic they ascribed to the movement of history, Schlegel and Hegel both devised philosophies that conceived of world history as a single story.

In Hegel's philosophy, the attempt to grasp history as a unity expressive of the universal is coupled with an actual contraction of historical horizons. Hegel brought about this contraction, which limits history to the near East and the Occident, not through ignoring the non-European world, but through actively marginalizing it. Rather strangely, however, the fact that he devoted so much attention to the Orient has led to the highly dubious conclusion that he was among the first western thinkers to "emancipate the non-European world from its historiosophical marginality".² Such an interpretation fails to recognize that Hegel was actually seeking to re-marginalize the Orient after tentative attempts to give it greater importance in the historiography of the Enlightenment and early Romanticism.

This Hegelian tendency finds a foil of sorts in Schopenhauer's thought. Schopenhauer flattened history and emptied it of its importance, thereby degrading the history of East and West alike; at the same time, he sought to elevate Indian philosophy, which he imagined to be akin to his own, at the expense of the western tradition. In his repudiation of the theory of progress, the

² Shlomo Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 223.

rationality of the historical process, and even the worth of historical knowledge, Schopenhauer's thought marks a turning-point in the trajectory of modern philosophies of history. Obviously, that does not mean that after Schopenhauer there was a cessation in the formulation of elaborate world-historical narratives or an end to ambitious attempts to understand the logic of history. Marx's historical materialism offers only one example, albeit the most influential and among the most interesting, of the endurance of systematized historical narratives.³ Nonetheless, Schopenhauer's suspicion towards history, coupled with his general pessimism, exercised a deep influence on late nineteenth-century thought. Burckhardt's cultural history, with its attentiveness to the irrational, and Nietzsche's philosophical perspectivism, which offered a qualified defense of history insofar as it was favourable to life, are among its offspring.

A study of later philosophies of history, and the place of India in them, would call for a separate investigation altogether. In many ways, however, after the middle of the nineteenth century, India plays a less significant role in the development of modern historical thought. This is not because India's position was downgraded; in fact, the contrary was sometimes true.⁴ But the importance of the Orient in the development of philosophies of history should not be confused with the favourability with which it has been viewed. The case of Hegel is instructive here; the Orient was an integral part of his historical narrative, but it was also a degraded part.

³ In his *Philosophy of the Unconscious*, Eduard von Hartmann even attempted a synthesis of Hegelian history and Schopenhauerian pessimism; the result was a peculiar tale of humanity's progressive self-negation culminating in the species' renunciation of sexual reproduction and its freely-chosen extinction.

⁴ In *The Decline of the West* (1918), Oswald Spengler boldly describes his project as effecting a "Copernican revolution" in the study of history. Whereas the older Ptolemaic system falsely imagined Europe to be the centre around which the rest of the world revolved, Spengler identifies history as the story of multiple discrete cultures, which go through periods of growth and decline not unlike biological organisms. Within this framework, the West does not have a privileged position, but follows the same cycle that other civilizations have undergone before it, including the Greco-Roman world, China, and India. In stark contrast to Spengler's model, Karl Jaspers' *The Origin and Goal of History* (1949) conceives of history as unified and progressive, but he also accords much greater importance to the Orient than it finds in Hegel's narrative, with which it otherwise has certain affinities. For Jaspers, history proper began roughly two thousand five hundred years ago with the advent of the Axial Age, a time of cultural and intellectual flourishing that occurred simultaneously in Greece, China, and India. These three cultures constitute the threefold root of all later history, and Jaspers even claims that no people has become historical without some form of contact with one of these cultures.

Exploring the position of India in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century philosophies of history provides insight into a defining historical moment. Part of the importance of such an inquiry derives from the fact that it was during this period that the narratives, interpretive frameworks, and terms of historical discourse which still shape historiography and historical consciousness today were established. Debates about historical origins were formative for modern narratives and theorizations of history, and it is in this context that European thinkers' ideas about India proved to have enduring consequences. A better understanding of the place of India in Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophies of history thus not only sheds light on the past, but also helps us to better understand the place that our contemporary thinking occupies in relation to the historical thought that has preceded it.

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