

CHAPTER 1

PLURALITY AND HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS: FROM HETERONOMOUS BELONGING TO A TRADITIONED BELONGING TO HISTORY

*I am finite once for all, and all the categories of my sympathy are knit up with the finite world as such, and with things that have a history.*¹

In 1584, the self-styled Renaissance philosopher Giordano Bruno wrote a treatise, “On the Infinite Universe and Worlds,” which is suggestive in its implications for thinking about pluralism in a postmodern and global context. This work, set in dialogue form, argues against the traditional Ptolemaic understanding of the universe as a finite, hierarchically structured system with the earth as its focal center. Inspired by Copernicus’ criticism of the geocentric hypothesis and drawing extensively from Nicholas of Cusa’s notion of the limitlessness of space, Bruno maintains that the universe is infinite both in extent and diversity, which means respectively that its center is both nowhere and everywhere. Neither boundary, hierarchy, nor center can be ascribed to an infinite space, for there is no absolute limit-position or point of reference “inside” or “outside” by which the space can be measured. All positions and centers, all insides and outsides, are fundamentally relativized. The alleged center, earth, is decentered.

Yet this does not mean that space is flat or utterly homogenized. Paradoxically, Bruno also argues that this decentering opens up automatically into an infinite polycentrism. Not one but every point in space can be regarded as either a center or part of a circumventing boundary that frames some other center point. There are an infinite number of possible worlds, which from the unique location and perspective of their position become centers of their own. Bruno muses:

For all who posit a body of infinite size, ascribe to it neither centre nor boundary. . . . Thus the earth no more than any other world is

at the centre; and no points constitute definite determinate poles of space for our earth, just as she herself is not a definite and determined pole to any other point of the ether, or of the world space; and the same is true of all other bodies. From various points of view these may all be regarded either as centres, or as points on the circumference, as poles, or zeniths and so forth. Thus the earth is not in the centre of the universe; it is central only to our own surrounding space.²

We might sum up the basic insight as follows: it is the homogeneity of infinite space that makes it heterogeneous. The universe is simultaneously acentric and polycentric, the two seemingly opposite visions being inextricably intertwined.

Bruno's idea of the relativity of centers rings with a peculiar resonance to contemporary ears sensitized to cultural and religious diversity. His radical democratization of space bears a marked resemblance to what we have gradually come to view in more sociohistorical terms as a radical democratization of human meaning and value. This has dramatic implications. Indeed, since the notion of spatial orientation, the human need to find a dwelling place to call "home," is not unrelated to the human need for meaning and value, the decentralization of cosmic order brings with it a sense of displacement, even exile. This is portrayed forcefully in the unsettling sense of value relativism that informs much of how human differences are depicted and understood in recent discussions over the issue of plurality in human life—from multiculturalism, postmodernism and postcolonial theory to religious pluralism. Viewing human languages and practices as the product of particular and local histories, which are embedded in specific cultural forms that emerge in distinct places, such value relativism implies that no human thought or practice can or should become the stable focal point for all others.

The paradox here, as in Bruno, is not just that there is no Archimedean point or center around which human forms of life ultimately congeal, but also that there are many such centers, each unique and irreducible to any all-encompassing logic or universal standard of measurement. Relativism dramatizes the polycentric, plural character of human orientation in the world. All human systems, cultures, and traditions are finite standpoints, webs of significations that are intrinsically related to given relational contexts as particular centers among many. The upshot of all this is that we dwell in human spaces that are centered and yet centerless. There is, therefore, a certain irony to the intercultural diversity of the present—an irony that I wish to address first in order to set the stage for thinking critically about religious pluralism.

Plurality itself, however, is nothing new. Human beings, in various ways, have always confronted cultural and religious diversity. Plurality is a condition of life, from the largest systems down to the smallest fragments. But as sure as plurality is a fact, it also conjures various interpretations. What makes our situation distinctive, especially in Europe and North America during the past thirty years, is the peculiar *way in which* the fact of plurality is recognized and accounted for. I suggest the following: *the experience of the simultaneous homogeneity and heterogeneity of human space is unique to our time, presenting the “challenge of difference” with unprecedented clarity and intensity.* A new kind of world-orientation has been created, revolutionizing how we thematize encounters with difference and formulate the issue of pluralism—that is, how we envision the plurality of differences as such. The intuition of simultaneous homogeneity and heterogeneity is not merely an acknowledgment that differences exist; nor is it simply the discomforting awareness of cultural conflict. Rather, it is a certain way in which cultures and histories themselves are brought into view and understood.

Particularly in Western societies, a new kind of consciousness or sensibility has emerged, one that has developed slowly yet irreversibly over the past two centuries and risen to striking prominence in the later half of the twentieth century. This consciousness has no clear-cut intentionality and points in no obvious direction, other than focusing the issue of human sociohistorical differences. In this, it presents a challenge capable of being expressed in many different trajectories and attitudes. Recent discussions that celebrate the possibility and promise of human diversity reflect and nourish its powerful hold on our perceptions, as do those discussions that move in a different direction, lamenting the carnivalesque and increasingly fragmented array of dissonant voices—cultural, ethnic, and religious—that characterize our contemporary situation. Because of the way in which it problematizes the issue of diversity and nourishes a sense of the “other,” I shall call this consciousness a “pluralistic consciousness.”

Put briefly, pluralistic consciousness is a peculiar modification of historical consciousness, which demonstrates a markedly postmodern disposition—one that occurs in the larger socioeconomic wake of globalization. It is neither (1) the awareness of multiple centers of meaning and value, nor (2) the experience of the lack of an overarching universal center or standard of meaning and value. Rather, it is (3) the peculiar result of both alternatives experienced together. *Pluralistic consciousness arises in the experience of being placed among and with many equally placed others without a univocal or overarching sense of place.* Here, in a progressively more interconnected and global political, economic, and cultural situation, the sheer frequency of our encounters with different ethnicities, cultures, and religions intensifies the experiences of “otherness” to such a degree that our sense of dwelling in the world becomes itself pluralized, broken open, and dispersed.

As never before, we are self-consciously aware that we come from many places in the same space, the hybrid product of many pasts and many competing loyalties in an increasingly compressed and unscripted world context. Difference is no longer remote, somewhere else; it is proximate, here in this shared, yet heterogeneous, space. Cultural interfaces are now commonplace as boundaries become more porous and overlapping, and as people inhabit varied social worlds at the same time, some of them at odds with each other. This creates a kind of disorienting multiconsciousness where differentiations are upheld, yet collapsed. From early in childhood, we are exposed through vast communications and media networks to multiple symbolic frameworks, even within one fairly isolated locale, precluding the emergence of any unified or stable sense of place.

This dramatically highlights the impression of alterity or "otherness," rupturing our sense of what it means to dwell, of what it means to be in place, by opening up a tension-filled ambiguity whose product is often ambivalence. A sense of dizzying confusion, relativistic fragmentation, nihilistic indifference, separatist isolationism, and individualistic anonymity is cultivated, the latter of these symptoms poignantly represented by the meltdown of time and place into the virtual reality of cyberspace. On a more positive front, however, pluralistic consciousness opens possibilities for new and creative ways of dwelling together in dialogical openness and mutuality, of experiencing relational co-inhabitation rather than mere indifferent co-existence or xenophobic violence. But the basic point is that pluralistic consciousness lives in the throes of a paradox, human space now perceived as both homogeneous and heterogeneous, centerless and polycentric, shared and hyperdifferentiated.

How then can we even begin to address the myriad implications of pluralistic consciousness? In this chapter and in chapter 2, I will outline the cognitive contours of pluralistic consciousness in more detail, tracing its genesis and unpacking its salient features in an effort to delineate what it is that a constructive vision of pluralism is up against, especially a vision that takes religion seriously and that attempts to account for the particular challenges it presents. I will show how two interrelated historical developments have been instrumental in fashioning the peculiar shape of pluralistic consciousness: (1) an historicist turn in the understanding of human culture and meaning, which engendered and nurtured the so-called historical consciousness; and (2) the advent of post-modernity, with its celebration of difference. Connected with the sociohistorical phenomenon of globalization, these two developments have changed the way in which we think about cultural and religious differences. Accordingly, they become the descriptive foundations for a global and interreligious model of human community, markers outlining our present-day situation in the space of

which mutual understanding and genuine dialogue between religious traditions becomes a necessary challenge. It is therefore worth highlighting this formative history in order to grasp the weight of its implications.

This chapter is a kind of preparation, dealing specifically with the rise of the historical consciousness, but in a programmatic way, setting the stage for the constructive proposals to follow. I suggest that historical consciousness, as it builds upon the critical consciousness of the Enlightenment, leads directly into the heart of Bruno's centerless polycentrism, stimulating a vigorous and irrepressible sense of sociocultural heterogeneity. Indeed, no discussion of cultural and religious pluralism can proceed very far without underscoring the drastic, even revolutionary, impact that historical methods have had on how we recognize and come to understand human differences.³ Hans-Georg Gadamer concurs: "The appearance of historical self-consciousness is very likely the most important revolution among those we have undergone since the beginning of the modern epoch. Its spiritual magnitude probably surpasses what we recognize in the applications of natural science, applications which have so visibly transformed the surface of our planet."⁴ From eighteenth-century thinkers such as Gotthold Lessing and Johann Gottfried Herder forward, a growing appreciation of the historical texture of human life has encouraged an increasingly critical and self-conscious awareness of the ever-changing, uniquely particular, contextual, and constructed nature of all human traditions and modes of discourse.

It is difficult to overestimate the power and scope of this modern historical sensibility in the West, which has had the effect of sweeping practically everything into its purview. One example of its pervasive sway is the transition from a normative-classical to an anthropological-pluralist sense of human "culture," which helped give rise to the social sciences.⁵ Indeed, all human events, traditions, and texts are historical, subject to the limiting conditions of time and space. And the reverse implication follows suit: there is no fixed and final center of truth that lies outside the contingency and flux of historical life. Everything human is caught up in process.

Furthermore, and because of this, there are multiple ways of being human, multiple ways of looking at the world and deciphering the value of human life within it, each developing within distinct cultural-historical networks of meaning. It is the ripening of this focus on human historicity that fertilizes the soil from which the pluralistic consciousness emerges. Historical consciousness signifies not merely a consciousness of historical location, but a robust affirmation that consciousness itself is localized.

Thus it is that many writers in the field of interreligious dialogue emphasize the impact that historical consciousness has had on coming to grips with

religious pluralism.⁶ It presents a sobering challenge to authority-based traditions that claim final and universal access to the truth over and against all other traditions. Indeed, the advent of historical consciousness meant that the age of ecclesiastical authority and dogma had run its course, a major paradigm shift in Western culture.

But how did such a process begin and what are the stages of its evolution? While there is not enough space here to discuss in detail all the factors that contributed to the rise of the historical consciousness, there are wider “movements” to the story that merit attention: first, the decentering of an ecclesiastically sanctioned European unity; second, the birth of the critical consciousness of the Enlightenment; third, the emergence of history as an autonomous domain of critical inquiry; fourth, a postcritical return to tradition; and finally, the rise and consolidation of historicism. My approach to telling the story of this epochal shift will stress how each of its movements are inherently connected. Thus, rather than viewing historical consciousness simply as the rebellious child of Romanticism and its particularism, I believe that it is more accurate to see its development in terms of forces intrinsic to the critical consciousness of the Enlightenment. In fact, many of the issues highlighted by the radical historicism of the “postmodern turn” have their roots in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thinking about history and depend in part on the very critical rationality of the Enlightenment so often dismissed by postmodernists in caricatured form. Exploring this thesis will prove to be instrumental in defining the shape of the constructive proposals to follow.

TRANSITION FROM TRADITION TO TRADITIONS

The first movement in the rise of historical consciousness involves a constellation of events in European history: the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the growth of nationalism. Certainly the Renaissance delight in the pursuits of art and exploration, in the scientific investigation of nature, and in the study and appreciation of the ideals of antiquity, all contributed to the emergence of a this-worldly focus that stressed the value of inquiry and human freedom. A new humanism challenged medieval assumptions about the function and purpose of human life in the world, which were heretofore governed by a geocentric and hierarchical vision of cosmic order, a vision in which the universe was thought to be saturated with symbolic significance and centered in the authority of the Church as the instrument of divine disclosure. With the emergence of the Renaissance, however, the productive power of human thought and the integrity of the natural world—an infinite universe governed by discoverable laws and properties—began to be appreciated as legitimate ends in themselves, sub-

verting traditional cosmological assumptions and, by implication, decentering ecclesiastical authority.⁷

One immediate effect of this was the loosening of textual interpretation and scientific speculation from their compulsory ties to orthodox dogma. Figures like Erasmus now approached the Bible with the same reasoned interpretive methods used to explore other literature of antiquity. And even while other free thinkers such as Bruno and Galileo had their problems with religious authorities, an energetic culture of inquiry and individualism began to open up new vistas, marking a departure from the previous ecclesiastically controlled culture.

Not unrelated to this was the Reformation challenge to the Church hierarchy and to its ability to police the proper interpretation of the Bible. Despite the Reformer's best intentions to maintain Church unity, there now arose a pluralism of "orthodoxies," each proposing its own selective interpretation of scripture. As a result, Catholic orthodoxy could no longer be the taken-for-granted backdrop for theological uniformity. In place of the requisite culture of the state church there grew voluntaristic, confessional communities that made religious faith a matter of personal conviction and active choice, a key ingredient of which was the idea of the universal priesthood of all believers, which effectively rendered the role of priestly, or institutional, mediation for salvation obsolete. This is not to say that religious freedom and heterodoxy thereby became fully embraced by all, nor to say that there was no variation in biblical interpretation among Protestants, who, even as they broke from the grip of magisterial Church authority, were in many cases equally as condemnatory of religious differences as their Catholic counterparts.⁸ The point is that with the Renaissance and Reformation, the social and religious cohesion of European ecclesiastical culture began to splinter apart into unavoidably independent subcultures.

Finally, on the political terrain, the growing prevalence of nationalistic fervor and territorial self-interest served to augment this situation. Bounded, autonomous, and sovereign nation-states emerged, self-consciously identifying themselves through religious association, yet no longer appealing to the institutional Church as an arbiter of disputes. Europe became a chessboard for state rivalry, inducing an era of religious wars. The unity of Christendom, which, under the canopy of ecclesiastical sanction, had woven together numerous local cultures into a broad social, political, and civilizational composite, no longer possessed its compelling and authoritative grip. Tradition broke apart into "traditions," and the grand medieval ideal of unity shattered into "many" local and heterogeneous centers of loyalty. It is this "breaking up" that helped pave the way for the religious diversity of the modern Western world.

CRITIQUE OF TRADITION AND CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

In the wake of such a broad-scale transition, there developed a second constellation of events—more intellectual in nature but with powerful social and political implications—that has normally been characterized as the “European Enlightenment” or the “Age of Reason.” Religious pluralism in Europe had spawned bloody conflict, and many soon saw the need for a broader, neutral, and stabilized framework for measuring the adequacy of ethical and cognitive claims, a framework based neither on the constrictive biases of tradition nor the authority-bound affirmations of faith, but rather on objective and universal truths available to all persons. The newfound success of the sciences and mathematics seemed like ideal frameworks from which to pursue such objectivity. Though the Enlightenment was a far more complex and multifaceted phenomenon than can be represented here, certain key features are worth pointing out because of their instrumental role in shaping the modern world and historical consciousness.

The Scope of the Enlightenment Heritage

By extending and radicalizing the this-worldly humanistic spirit of the Renaissance, with its thrust toward inquiry and scientific investigation, and the ideas of free conviction and universal priesthood characteristic of the Reformation, the Enlightenment launched a devastating critique of ecclesiastical authority and dogma. In place of divine revelation as the primary court of appeal there arose a confidence in the ability of individual reason and conscience to adjudicate matters of belief and behavior. Human inquiry could discover the truth without recourse to external or imposed standards of meaning and value dependent on custom or tradition, whether God-breathed or not. The “true” and “right” were no longer arbitrary sanctions from the “outside,” assent to them compelled by the authority of the Bible or Church alone; instead, truth and rightness were now thought to emerge from human inquiry, through autonomous questioning and critical examination, the telos of which is independent and free rational conviction. Consequently, revelation stood no longer on its own, self-authenticating and absolute, but only as it was subjected to rational criteria in the court of reason. The model of the burgeoning sciences thus became the dominant vehicle for assessing the world and humanity’s place in it.

One crucial result of this process was a worldview in which nature was understood as an interconnected nexus of causes, a self-contained and autonomous whole whose laws had the lucidity and validity of mathematical axioms, thus emptying the world of the need for special interventions of the

divine (i.e., miracles). In this mode of thinking, all events are analogous and homogeneous, demonstrating a regularity that renders them capable of being examined vis-à-vis their connections with other similar events; no events are special, originating from outside the matrix of interrelationships that comprises the world. And so, a nonhierarchical and acentric cosmology not unlike Bruno's came into prominence, wedging a yawning rift between the newfound ideals of rational inquiry—such as objectivity and universality—and those more prejudicial, particular, and exclusivist norms governing traditions built on supernatural revelation and divinely ordained faith. In fact, this perceived distance between the truths of reason and of tradition produced a *critical consciousness* in the minds of European thinkers that not only made suspect the intellectual credibility of the Christian worldview, but also effectively removed social and political institutions from ecclesiastical control. Society and culture could no longer simply be a matter of remembering and embodying an absolute or exemplary past, for this restricted rational autonomy and reduced human thinking and behavior to mere repetition.

Dissociating itself from the normative past, the future thereby became a place of promise, a horizon of expectation. By sifting through and weighing the evidence, rational criticism could weed out fact from fiction, necessary truth from contingent opinion, to determine general laws of thought and action; and these laws could dispel the clouds of ignorance, error, and superstition and, in their stead, promote the furtherance of enlightenment, emancipation, tolerance, and well-being. Thus began a way of living and thinking that was “secular” and “modern” in character, liberated from submission to the past-ward looking prejudices of tradition and opened up to the progressive advancement of humankind through human effort alone. In a broad sense, the Enlightenment project meant a self-conscious critique of, and distancing from, tradition(s).

Identifying the Enlightenment Project in Three Moments

If we begin to unpack the basic constituents of the general description in the previous section, three interwoven ingredients of the Enlightenment project can be identified, each an inner moment of the landmark effort to “distance” the fabric of human meaning and value from the constrictive, even debilitating, sway of tradition. First, and perhaps most significantly, critical consciousness involves an emancipatory and liberative thrust. The point is powerfully represented in Immanuel Kant's famous dictum, “Enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage,” a release from heteronomy and authority—that is, the nonrational forces of convention, fear, ignorance, and superstition—through the use of reason as an engine of critique. And the ultimate goal is

freedom, “freedom to make public use of one’s reason at every point.”⁹ Here, Kant affirms a moment of critique that castigates, and severs itself from, those frameworks and institutions that restrict or subvert individual rational autonomy and thus distort the natural integrity of human experience. Enlightenment, then, is not just a cognitive affair, but the creation of social conditions that promote the self-determination of thought. Only free thinking can be critical thinking.

This freedom-making standpoint of critique is what we might call a “first moment” in the Enlightenment project. Its aim is liberative and emancipatory, to free us from being forced—overtly or otherwise—to become something we do not will of our own volition and power.¹⁰ Such an endeavor, then, is the fulcrum of egalitarian individualism, empowering the affirmation of individual dignity against authority-based systems whose normativity was based upon custom, superstition, or prejudice. But how is such a liberative project to be carried through?

The answer, of course, is that it cannot be carried through without supplementation from another dimension, a *second moment*, so to speak, in which “freedom from” the past takes the shape of a “freedom for” the present opened up to its own possibility. The Enlightenment project inaugurates a new posture toward the present, what I will call, drawing from Anthony Giddens, “reflexivity.”¹¹ Reflexivity consists of a dynamic feedback loop whereby one’s own moment or position in history is brought into reflective awareness. A truly critical consciousness, one that is self-determining and does not simply reprimand the past, borrowing its orientation from conventions or habits sanctioned by an authoritative heritage, is one that must become critically self-aware, casting its gaze productively back upon itself. Attaining critical distance from the immediacy of tradition requires a new form of time-consciousness that views the present as an authentic horizon of expectation released toward the future: as “modern.” In posing as a way out of the “self-incurred” social impositions and doxic assumptions of the past, critical reflection thus becomes a reflexive self-relation that is conscious of the need to establish its temporal novelty, its individuality, and its difference.¹² As Michel Foucault suggests, however, echoing Charles-Pierre Baudelaire, this is not merely a glorification, or “heroizing,” of the present “as sacred in order to try to maintain or perpetuate it,” but rather it is an effort to “imagine it otherwise than it is, and to transform it not by destroying it but by grasping it in what it is,” thereby problematizing the present and necessitating a “critical ontology of ourselves,” of our historical moment in time.¹³

Disengagement from the models of knowledge and action supplied by another epoch mandates that the present define and constitute itself, and even more, in the words of Jürgen Habermas, “create its normativity out of itself.”¹⁴ Accordingly, in its reflexivity, critical reflection analyzes itself even as it legislates

and defines the world; that is, it thematizes its own self-determination. Foucault states the point more radically, claiming that the modern human being is not liberated merely by virtue of the present or by mere self-discovery, but through the ongoing task of “producing” and “inventing” herself, or in other words, by effecting a critically reflexive self-creativity.¹⁵ Thus it is that the first two moments of the Enlightenment project are inherently intertwined, and in such a way that they necessarily invoke yet a *third moment*.

The emancipatory and reflexive character of critical consciousness automatically opens up the issue of the means of its procedure. After all, precisely *what* is it that should replace the past and provide the means by which the integrity of the present can be opened up toward its own possibility? This is where the (now dubious) legacy of the Enlightenment emerges in the ideal of an impartial and universalizing rationalism. The operative model of rationality employed by the sciences, which discerns uniformity and regularity in nature, begins to be applied as a reflexive mechanism to determine, order, and judge human values, behaviors, and institutions. For example, the animating force behind René Descartes’ program in the *Meditations* is an aim to establish an indubitable and objective ground of the sciences unencumbered by opinion, prejudice, or any external authority other than reason’s own self-guaranteeing methodical doubt.¹⁶ The regularity and uniformity of the natural world in this way becomes the paradigmatic model driving the larger modern project, determining the manner by which human reality is understood and ordered. Hence, thinkers like Descartes and Kant baptize reason as the formally entitled and empowering subject of critical consciousness. Reason is the engine propelling critique, giving critique its leverage.

It is no accident that the move toward the objective and universal meant an advance over the partial, the particular, and the contingent, which demonstrate inconsistency and error. In this third moment, reason is exalted as the highest court of appeal in determining what is right, true, and just. Only reason is qualified to dismantle the old and to provide the foundation and normative structure required for modernity to launch itself self-creatively into the future. Kant’s categorical imperative stands as a classic example, compelling humans to act in the most impartial and universalizable manner possible in every instance, in every context. In fact, elsewhere Kant describes the “universal man” as one who has a “*broadened way of thinking* if he overrides the private subjective conditions of his judgment, into which so many others are locked, as it were, and reflects on his own judgment from a *universal standpoint* (which he can determine only by transferring himself to the standpoint of others).”¹⁷

Thus, in place of varied and conflicting traditions, based as they are on contingent and local discourses perpetuated by appeals to custom and

authority, there now stands the homogeneous and impartial ideals of reason that bring the discord of multiple standpoints into harmonious relation under a univocal mode of objective discourse. Objective truth is transregional and universal, an inclusive framework for measuring human life in all of its variances. The ideal then is a kind of rational, homogeneous metatradition of sorts that functions to disembed and relocate all local differences in terms of a single, rational, and unitary standpoint. An example of this is the Enlightenment concern for a “natural religion” purified from ignorance and superstitious baggage, founded not in the particulars of tradition but in general rational principles upon which all thinking persons can agree, and therefore able to promote universal tolerance rather than exclusivist bigotry.¹⁸ In the mind-set of the Enlightenment, as Steven Toulmin quips, “abstract axioms were in, concrete diversity was out.”¹⁹

In sum, beyond its freedom-making power, reason also is reflexive, self-critical, and self-defining, capable of grounding itself apodictically (Descartes), setting limits to its proper purview (Kant), or uniting the ruptures and contradictions of contingency in its sweep as an integrative power (G. W. F. Hegel). In Kant, the knowing subject becomes a transcendental subject, the object of its own critique, in order to establish the possibility of knowledge, human freedom, and morality. Hegel’s notion of subjectivity, of the rational freedom of self-relation, goes further, bringing together the emancipatory and reflexive moments of the Enlightenment project in the shape of an idealist metaphysics, by which modernity comes to terms with and completes its own historical dynamic.²⁰ Striving against the rhetoric of coercion that defined ages past, the ideal of rational unanimity and a universal standpoint of critique propels the Enlightenment project toward inculcating an essentially utopian vision, where, as Christoph Martin Wieland advocated, all civilized minds are obligated to “do the great work to which we have been called: to cultivate, enlighten and ennoble the human race.”²¹ Freedom *from* the past thus entails a reflexively constituted freedom *for* innovation and progress via the enabling power of critical reason. But how is the Enlightenment project carried through and what are its implications?

Diving Deeper: Universality as the Detraditioning of Tradition through the Power of Reflexivity

Reason’s putatively universal standpoint involves what might be called the “detraditioning” of tradition, a decontextualization process that abstracts, or disembeds value from, its concrete sociohistorical location and reconfigures it against a broader, standardized universal context. After the means of preserving tradition by appealing to some direct link to the divine (whether textual or

institutional) are discredited, traditions become transparent and show themselves as humanly originated and not absolute. Their real value becomes grounded not in themselves but rather in their potential to display a nonparochial, standardized economy of rational virtue and truth.

A lucid account of this detraditioning process and its social significance is given by Anthony Giddens.²² In modernity, he notes, time and space become separated from any privileged connection to the distinctive vantage point of a certain group of people, events, or customs. With the invention of abstract time, symbolized by the advent of the mechanical clock, events are coordinated according to a uniform measurement without reference to any specific socio-spatial markers or traditions. According to Giddens, this emptying of time is also tied to the emptying of space: the dislocation of space from its lived relation to “place” or geographic locale, which standardizes and renders it boundaryless and substitutable, a point on the global map independent of the peculiar happenings in that locality. Separating time and space into abstract dimensions is the prime ingredient for what Giddens calls “disembedding,” a process by which values and social relations become “lifted out” or disengaged from local contexts of interaction and reconfigured rationally across indefinite and noncentric spans of time and space.

Besides opening up the possibilities for genuine change and mobility in a transregional world context, this type of delocalization of truth makes possible the instantiation of universal values and institutions that are not embedded in particular geographic locations and specific historical traditions but extend across and link them. Provincial boundaries become practically inconsequential. They hold no binding power within the sway of mechanisms that transgress the local and standardize time and space into routine units of rational management and technical control.²³ No tradition remains insular. Through this kind of detraditioning of traditions, the critical consciousness of the Enlightenment creates a genuinely global and world-historical framework of action and experience.²⁴ Knowledge of truth is (in principle) not the privilege of one locality, but is exchangeable across boundaries because it is disembedded and homogeneous, available to all. Rational discourse is the anonymous discourse of a universal standpoint. Knowledge is a universal currency.

The universalizing-disembedding process of rationalization can be further understood by noting its kinship with the dynamic of *reflexivity*.²⁵ Reflexivity is where modernity’s inherent contrast with tradition stands out with bold clarity, for, as noted earlier, it denotes a way of disengaging from a lived situation and thinking about it from an objectivizing distance, without appeal to an authoritative past. While the reflexive monitoring of ideas and actions is present in tradition-oriented societies, it is largely focused on perpetuating the continuity of

past, present, and future in recurring practices that reinterpret and clarify cultural inheritances in a given location. With the advent of critical consciousness, though, reflexivity takes a different twist, focusing not on time-space continuity but on the production of autonomous knowledge to be appropriated and fed back into the system, accordingly shaping the further production of still more knowledge.

Detraditioned universality and reflexivity feed on each other, their interplay energizing self-reflective autonomy. As Giddens notes, modern rationalism introduces reflexivity “into the very basis of system reproduction, such that thought and action are constantly refracted back upon one another.” Thus an idea, practice, or institution cannot be sanctioned simply because it represents tradition: “tradition can be justified, but only in the light of knowledge which is not itself authenticated by tradition.”²⁶ Knowledge is decontextualized and self-critical. This kind of autonomy is epitomized in the transcendental philosophy of Kant’s first “Critique,” wherein reason bends back on itself in order to examine, limit, and ground its own activity, speculatively establishing its own purview.²⁷ And this is why, distanced from tradition, modern reflexivity engenders the need for reason to authenticate itself, to create norms within itself.²⁸

Instabilities within the Enlightenment Project: Opening to an Historical Sensibility

It is my contention that the first two moments of the Enlightenment project—that is, its freedom-making and reflexive thrust—invoke unsettling implications which, despite themselves, begin to subvert the ideals of reason as an objective and universal currency. When the claims of science and reason replace those of tradition, they appear to offer greater certainty and stability, yet they too are constituted in and through the forward momentum of reflexively applied knowledge, engulfed in a process of constant revision and adaptation.²⁹ The Enlightenment apotheosis of reason thus contains the seeds of its own undoing, and this is played out in the following series of self-limiting components.

Modernity is a dynamism that seeks to become conscious of itself as self-grounding, fashioning its own historical identity with an eye toward the forward thrust of history—the future—rather than toward the past.³⁰ Yet, as Louis Dupré points out, where human action is set free to influence the future through innovation and modification, “the idea of history as indefinite progress follows,” which envisions a future always capable of further production and perfection.³¹ To a certain degree, then, this relativizes and limits the rational endeavors and accomplishments of the present. For it directs the human project forward “toward a concrete, historical goal attainable in time yet implicitly

denies that it can ever be reached.”³² The “not-yet” renders the present open-ended and incomplete, requiring a constant reinterpretation of the past. In order to render the ideals of progress acceptable, the new must legitimate itself in relation to the old, invalidating the past’s authority in order to thematize the authenticity of the present and to open up the future. But the present always displays a lack of self-grounding, for it is ever unfinished. The objective surety of reason is never quite realized. Accordingly, the notion of reason as self-contained and autonomous implodes.

Because of this, furthermore, the present must be continually unmasked as potentially heteronomous, even hegemonic. This is why modernity must cast its gaze back on itself. Breaking from a normative past necessitates that critical consciousness create and legitimate its own autonomy, granting its normative impulse as something that stems from itself. But this type of reflexivity introduces the prospect of a relentless and even paralyzing self-criticism. Launching a critique that functions to historicize tradition, exposing its human partiality and limitations, requires the critique itself to turn back on itself, caught up in a momentum that forces it inevitably to historicize itself—to see itself connected to the very tradition it critiques. In this, the ideals of universality and impartiality begin to collapse.

This dynamic becomes intensified by yet another difficulty. Because the general laws of thought are seen as homogeneous, objective, and universal, modernity presumes that knowledge across different fields of inquiry must accordingly correlate. Thus, objects in the variable and changing world of human events should mirror or indicate something analogous to those examined by the natural sciences, at least if they are to be suggestive of the uniformity of truth yielded by genuine rational inquiry. Descartes’ model, for instance, axiomatically assumes that human reason—in all of its endeavors—remains one and the same. Ernst Cassirer sums up the point: “No matter how heterogeneous the objects of human knowledge may be, the forms of knowledge always show an inner unity and a logical homogeneity.”³³ The methodological premises of the natural sciences, therefore, should be translatable into the realms of politics, the arts, and morality, indeed history. But an *aporia* is created. Where do we find the logic, regularity, and permanence characteristic of truth within the flux and flow of human life? Does human life exhibit the same order as does nature, capable of being reduced to predictable laws and axioms? Can that which is historically unique and transient ever be recognized as something with universal and unchanging significance?

These kinds of issues problematize certain strains in the process of thinking rationally about human affairs. And the third moment of the Enlightenment project begins to unravel from the inside. This becomes manifest in a growing

and inescapable concern for the relevance of history.³⁴ It is the dynamism of freedom-making reflexivity that challenges and helps transform the critique of tradition into a new attitude toward the past, not as an exemplar to which inquiry must conform but as an ongoing present, an objective fact capable of bearing questions and rational interrogation. Tradition is thereby turned into history—a purely human and contingent field of events perpetually carrying humanity into the future. It is this development that eventuates into a full-blown historical consciousness. We now turn our attention to this process, but will highlight only certain themes and figures as they are important for this study.

THE RISE OF HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

First of all, the foregoing analysis suggests, contrary to popular “postmodern” wisdom, that the Enlightenment project itself should not be seen as patently un-historical in its quest for the necessary, objective, and universally true.³⁵ In fact, the reflexivity of rational criticism contributed to the rise of scientific historical method, encouraging a sensitivity to history that paved the way for historical consciousness.³⁶ Such a process can be narrated in several key steps, leading to an historicism that effectively undercuts the third moment of critical consciousness, universal reason, by sweeping it into a reflexive mode wherein reason itself become decentered and contextualized, made relative to historical effect.

From Tradition to History

As illustrated earlier, the Enlightenment critique of tradition hinges upon advances in the sciences, which render nature an autonomous and interconnected realm of self-contained, efficient causality. This undermines any special claim to divinely granted authority by dismantling the supernaturalist interventionism upon which those claims are based. The result frees allegedly privileged human events and meanings from their direct link with divine intention or activity. Without its divinely ordained pillars to hold it up, the “house of authority” collapses.³⁷ Here then is the important point: rather than akin to the divine and tethered to revelation, tradition now becomes a constellation of transitory human events on a par with others, intertwined with, and part of, the ordinary empirical world and therefore open to critical examination.

Tradition becomes history, factual rather than paradigmatic, and the implications of this are radical. Freed from the dogmatic bonds of authority, history can be investigated as impartially, methodically, and systematically as the physical sciences investigate nature. The goal is not merely to recover the past in order to conform to it, but to survey and examine it as a mundane, causally

interconnected series of human activities and influences. And in this task, one cannot simply accept the authoritative testimony of someone else and treat it as a reliable or authentic account; one must apply methodical doubt and examine such testimony with a discriminating eye, weighing evidences and exercising considered judgments so as to determine what really happened and wherein its significance lies. A rigorous empiricism toward the historical world is opened up.

An excellent example of such rigor is the *Historical and Critical Dictionary* (1695), by Pierre Bayle, perhaps the first modern thinker to decry the obscuring consequences of traditionalist, uncritical, and nonhistorical thinking and to formulate a scientific approach to history as objective fact—fact emancipated from prejudice and distortion by religious or political bias.³⁸ For Bayle, autonomous reflection and methodological skepticism yields true historical knowledge; just as in the sciences, authority is conferred upon sources (rather than assumed) by evaluating their credibility, authenticity, and integrity, in the end (re)constructing by inference a sequence of events and/or meanings that best accounts for their intentionality and significance as facts.³⁹

The keystones of this germinating historical method, therefore, are the ideals of critical reason: investigative autonomy, impartiality, and objectivity in discovering and displaying the truth. However, the truth is revealed not through homogeneous, necessary, and universal axioms or laws, as in the natural sciences, but through detailed expositions of “what really happened.” Fact is not the starting point, but the goal, discovered by scrupulous analysis of the historical evidences. The basis for this approach is the sense that human events and meanings are “historical” not merely because they recount or narrate a sequence of occurrences, but because they spring from, and are inherently related to, a particular horizon of circumstances and intentions that can be rigorously explored and illuminated. Thus begins modern historiography.

This latter point, however, proves to be problematic for thinkers operating out of Cartesian rationalism, for whom the particular and factual, which includes history, is not the proper domain of universal and necessary truth. From such a standpoint, reality is rational insofar as it is capable of being brought under laws grounded in timeless and general concepts. But while it appears unhistorical at face value, such an attitude actually served to fuel new interpretations of historical events and sources. As Cassirer notes, “Consideration of the eternal and immutable norms of reason must go hand in hand with consideration of the manner in which they unfold historically, in which they have been realized in the course of empirical historical development.”⁴⁰

Biblical criticism in Germany, for example, represented an attempt to treat biblical texts as historical material, as objects of critical scientific inquiry,

while at the same time revelatory significations of eternal truths. These eternal truths, however, were not dogmatic or tradition-bound; they were reflective of the natural religion of reason, with its focus on self-evident moral and spiritual truths. Neologian J. S. Semler, considered by many the progenitor of modern historical critical study of the Bible (although its trajectory can be traced back through Benedict de Spinoza to Desiderius Erasmus), called for a purely historical approach to the Bible without concern for edification or orthodoxy, seeing the work as a compilation of texts revealing not infallible and verbally inspired truths but contingent religious worldviews representative of the varied circumstances in which they were written. Impartial historical inquiry leads to the viewpoint that the Bible is a literary source not unlike others. It is written by human beings and is a product of its times. H. S. Reimarus took this even further, claiming that the idealized Christ of Christian tradition is a corruption that has no genuine connection with the historical evidence relating to the actual person, Jesus of Nazareth.⁴¹

This brings into striking focus the problem of relating the homogeneity and disembeddedness of rational truth to the particular contingencies of history. If truth is rational and universal, how is it manifest in the transitory particulars of history? With this question, the growing sensitivity to history is raised to the level of historical consciousness.

The Beginnings of Historical Consciousness: Introducing Reason into History

It was Gotthold Lessing who rendered explicit the full weight of this tension between reason and history, highlighting its significance particularly with regard to religion. Other thinkers—like Giambattista Vico, Charles Louis Montesquieu, and François-Marie Voltaire—had in various ways already struggled to treat history scientifically, making efforts to discern patterns and hidden laws at work in the myriad religious, political, and cultural forms of the human past. The result was an understanding of human history as a progressive teleological development toward the instantiation of a rational ideal.⁴² Reflective of permanent aspects of human nature and inclusive of all humanity, this universal rational teleology proved to be the Enlightenment's trump card in employing critical historical method without recourse to the supernaturalism and exclusivism of traditional salvation history. Thus the process by which uniform patterns and laws emerge empirically came to represent the ideal and universal meaning of history, revealing the unity in multiplicity, the eternal in time—not as an actualized identity between the two, for this would be tantamount to a return to the authority-based absolutism of the principle of identity, but as a gradual program

of development in which the abstract Enlightenment ideals of tolerance, freedom, moral virtue, and rational discourse could be increasingly discovered and actualized. History, here, becomes seen as a vehicle progressively revelatory of the homogeneous and disembedded truths of reason.

Gotthold Lessing broadly adopted this viewpoint but with more sophisticated historical nuance. In his view, which adopted Leibniz's distinction between the necessary truths of reason and the contingent truths of fact, the study of history can neither establish the absolute truth of a particular historical configuration nor act as a vehicle portraying the indubitable and suprahistorical truths of reason. Historical truths themselves can never be demonstrated because they depend on the testimony of others, whose reliability can be questioned, thus rendering the knowledge of historical occurrences a matter of degrees of probability. In asserting this Lessing both refutes the certainty that traditional Christianity assigns to reports of prophecy and miracles and rejects the idea that any historical event can ever do more than indirectly infer a moral or metaphysical truth of reason. As he succinctly put it in his famous dictum, "If no historical truth can be demonstrated, then nothing can be demonstrated by means of historical truths. That is: Accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason."⁴³ Here is the "wide, ugly ditch" between history and truth over which Lessing said he could not jump.⁴⁴

Lessing's way of addressing this problem represents an important move beyond the more rationalist confines of the Enlightenment view. He did not share the Cartesian disdain for the messiness of history. For Lessing, the contingencies of history become a progressive means by which rational truths are made concretely manifest, disclosed provisionally in a way that autonomous reason, left alone in its disembedded anonymity, might never approximate. Reason *needs* to become subject to historical process in order to be appropriated and temporally realized not abstractly but as lived truth. In contrast to the abstract formalism of the Enlightenment, which seeks to extract the universal as an inference *from* concrete worldly life, Lessing shifted the focus to discovering the universal *within* the ever-changing textures and variations of historical life. The idea of teleological historical development allowed him in the end to affirm that there is no radical discontinuity between the rational and the historical, between the necessary/eternal and the contingent/temporal.

This mediation between the historical and the rational plays out with peculiar significance in the history of religion. In "The Education of the Human Race," Lessing developed the idea that, while limited in scope, positive historical revelation is necessary for the world-historical development of humanity toward the truly rational religion. Although an early passage in the text states that "Revelation gives nothing to the human race which human reason could not

arrive at on its own,” it seems clear from later statements that Lessing believed that human reason needs the aid of historical revelation to “win by experience” those universal and immutable truths it aspires to through a teleological process of “education.”⁴⁵ Reason alone is unable to attain divine and necessary truth; it needs the providential guidance of historical revelation to unfold properly and become actualized.⁴⁶ To be sure, the goal of revelatory events and meanings is “the development of revealed truths into truths of reason,” but this is a goal that “human reason would never have reached on its own.”⁴⁷ Rational religion was for Lessing the ultimate truth, but rather than depicting historical religions as unfortunate but inevitable additions to, or distortions of, this original and pure focus, gradually overcome through time, he considered them necessary for the development of a religious consciousness in a perpetual striving for a future ideal focus, which perhaps could never be fully realized.⁴⁸ Each positive religion is a partial yet legitimate disclosure of ultimate truth, expressing its truth with a distinctiveness appropriate to its own historical context and stage of development.⁴⁹

Finite human history is the framework for truth’s appropriation in the temporal process of becoming, and it is precisely this fact that thoroughly historicizes both reason and religion, reembedding the homogeneity of truth in the finite conditionalities and heterogeneous contexts of history.⁵⁰ History is not simply the past, a collection of facts to be scientifically examined, but rather the way in which the permanence of the real perpetually unfolds in fluid, limited, and diverse forms, no age to be viewed without its own relative virtue. While Lessing did show an Enlightenment propensity toward the natural religion of reason, his sensitivity to the character of history led him to a deeper understanding of the historicity of religion and of human life as a whole, marking in bold the transition from rationalism to historical consciousness.

Into the Sway of Historical Consciousness: From History to a Postcritical Return to Tradition

It was Lessing’s contemporary, Johann Gottfried Herder, who even further radicalized the implications of history by underscoring the heterogeneous and contextual nature of all human value and truth. In Herder, there is not the strong sense of teleological development in human history that we find in Lessing, nor is there a concern for diverse religions to eventuate in the necessary truths of enlightened rational reflection. Instead, there is a celebration of the varied and distinct forms in which human life flowers because of its inherently embedded and historical character. Herder saw in history, rather than in disembodied reason, the vital integrity of all truth and value, and this central insight becomes a well-spring out of which genuine historical consciousness emerges for the first time.

Rejecting the suggestion that ideal reason is autonomous, anonymous, and pure, a faculty that stands isolated from the qualifications of time and space, Herder's conception of history trades on a contextual holism, reflecting a keen sense of the unavoidably conditioned, temporal, and local character of all human life—that is, its historical embeddedness or historicity. The historical implies relationship, for no event exists in isolation, separate from a context. And as language signifies an interdependency between the individual and the social-linguistic context, so too is history intrinsically interdependent. Building upon the idea that history exhibits a dynamic relationality, Herder claims that “everything in history” points to a “dependence on others” for the development of human features, not to a self-made, isolated, and all-sufficient center of subjectivity.⁵¹ He makes use of the word tradition (*Bildung*) to describe such dependency, for the process of human formation and cultivation relies on the “transmission” of the values and ideas of those who have come before, linking the individual to parents, teachers, and friends, to the circumstances of that individual's life and her surrounding culture and people, implying both the history of that culture and its interaction with other cultures in the past and present.⁵² But this is not mere slavish imitation or backward-looking repetition, for Herder also stresses that through what he calls “organic powers” humans assimilate and apply what is transmitted in ways that make it uniquely their own according to the exigencies of time and place, promoting genuine historical change.⁵³ While not absolute, tradition is a given, a fact denoting the historical nature of human life, with its temporal and local situatedness. Tradition is a dynamically relational force-field of interdependency.

Such a conception of history is the product of a reflexive move. Stressing the uniqueness and individuality of cultures, Herder turns reflexively back through history to a postcritical affirmation of tradition, not as “the” exemplary past, but as a conditioned repository of human flourishing. We do not just have a history, we belong to our history, a sociocultural and traditioned context in which we become who we are. Put differently, the historical horizon of tradition is not merely a heteronomous imposition that blindsides rational reflection, preventing us from seeing clearly; rather, it is in fact the linguistically saturated condition for rational reflection, permitting sight in the first place.

This brings us to a place where Herder's move beyond Lessing becomes even more pronounced. Herder finds a way to articulate the idea of history as a realm of concrete individualization. History is not only a horizon of dynamically relational interdependence; it is a horizon of interdependence that flowers in novel and richly diverse individual ways. Contextual holism implies that each historical moment is irreducibly unique, having an intrinsic integrity developed in consonance with its own peculiar temporal and spatial exigencies. In the way

that each person has his or her own inexpressibly unique way of experiencing the world, so too does each social group in each period in history.⁵⁴ Every age, nation, culture, or religion has a distinctly individual character, its own “center of gravity,” which is always in the process of development according to its own organic profile, whether growing or decaying.⁵⁵ And it is the multiple shapes in which this distinctiveness blossoms across the human landscape that creates the fertile and heterogeneous mosaic of history, as “no two moments in the world are ever identical.”⁵⁶

This being so, “rational uniformity” and “human history” are, for Herder, contradictory terms. The historical is a dynamism that by nature inclines toward novelty, individuality, and variation, rendering it vanity to reduce the inexhaustible differences of specific cultures and traditions to some disembedded or abstract ideal of comparison or measurement.⁵⁷ Each must be seen in light of its own sociohistorical context and center of gravity in order to be truly understood. For Herder, as Hans-Georg Gadamer points out, “To think historically now means to acknowledge that each period has its own right to exist, its own perfection,” its own inherent integrity irrespective of standardized external criteria.⁵⁸ It is precisely in the two interrelated ideas of dynamic relationality and concrete individualization that Herder’s contextual holism blossoms into a pluralistic vision of human historical life.

Thus, the complex diversity and messiness of the drama of history resists not only the disembedded rationalism of the Enlightenment, but even the more historically sensitive notion of teleological development according to a collection of universal standards. Why? Because, I suggest, Herder has allowed full sway to the first two moments of the Enlightenment project, its freedom-making and reflexive elements. Each culture, each epoch, is free and reflexively self-constituting, including our own. Herder condemns the ideal of a uniform blueprint of progress as an illusion, for this would not only obliterate real differences, reintroducing a new heteronomy, but also deny the historical character of language and reason itself.⁵⁹ In order to free history, Herder historicizes the engine of rational inquiry.

HISTORICISM AND THE FULL WEIGHT OF HUMAN HISTORICITY

Though Herder was not a systematic thinker and did not take his program to its potentially more radical conclusions, his importance for the development of a historical consciousness in the modern world should not be overlooked.⁶⁰ Through his philosophy of history, as Georg G. Iggers opines, “Herder had laid the foundations for a historicism which spread far beyond the German bound-

aries.”⁶¹ In Herder, not the disincarnate or transcendental forms of reason, but rather history becomes the source of real value; all that is true and genuine about humanity emerges in the conditioned flow of time and place. Following Lessing, Herder did more than simply apply scientific methods of thought to historical matters of fact; he developed a sense for history as the temporal and contextual play of particular forms of life. Yet moving beyond Lessing, for whom history is focused progressively on the realization of axiomatic, rational ideals as the perfection of humanity, Herder sees history as an interdependent yet individualizing process of development instantiated only in the fecundity and multiplicity of sociocultural differences. Variety, not uniformity, is primary. This embodies the emancipatory and reflexive moments of the Enlightenment project while subverting universal reason.

According to historian Friedrich Meinecke, this “individualizing” view of history, in contradistinction to one that “generalizes” and holds hostage particularity to universality, introduces the theme of historicism (*Historismus*).⁶² While the term has been used variously, “historicism” on the whole reflects a methodological resistance to subsuming the historical under timeless and absolutely valid truths or laws reflecting the uniformity of the universe. The historicist outlook hinges upon the assumption that human history exhibits fundamentally different characteristics than does nature; history is comprised of temporal, unrepeatable, and unique acts of collective individuality and intentionality rather than permanent and uniform laws devoid of consciousness.⁶³

What I have called “contextual holism,” with its dynamic relationalism and concrete individualization, is at the heart of historicism. And, as Herder’s perspective on history suggests, three interrelated implications follow: (1) to study humanity one must study history; (2) history shows that human nature is not constant, eternal, and singular—that is, a standardized rationality that always and everywhere speaks with the same voice—but rather a mutable substance, constantly taking new and individual shapes; and (3) human ideas, values, and practices are always already embedded in a temporal and spacial sociocultural context, one that forms and is informed by tradition and language. These indicate a fundamental shift in the way in which human life is envisioned and understood, the effects of which send epistemological, ethical, theological, and metaphysical ripples through any and all thinking about human life. Historical method, when its sail is fully opened, almost invariably launches a wider and sharper historicist view of human existence, engendering an acute form of “historical consciousness.”

Perhaps this more radicalized historical consciousness is most fully embodied in the idea of human historicity. “Historicity” alludes to the fact that humans are temporally constituted beings, linguistically related to others in an

intersubjective world conditioned by determinate sociocultural configurations. There is, however, an important way in which this concept goes beyond Herder's program. For it acknowledges that the inquiring subject holds no special exemption from historical influence, but is—like all events—conditioned by historical forces, an intractable part of the flow of events being investigated. While Herder recognizes that all human events and meanings are contextually based, he does not go so far as to historicize the historian's act of knowing as such, a fact that betrays his proximity to the critical consciousness of the Enlightenment.

This notion of historicity, however, leads to a problem. Given the embeddedness of the subject in a sociohistorical context, how can objectively valid knowledge be ascertained? Answering this question took two distinct directions in the nineteenth century, creating a dividing line between (1) those who held to a teleologically framed, idealist metaphysics of history as a means to universal and objective truth (i.e., Hegel); and (2) those whose focus was directed toward historical individuality, raising contextual holism to the level of the hermeneutical problem of historical understanding and the articulation of universal values (i.e., Dilthey). Space does not allow for a treatment of these developments. Suffice it to say, however, that out of the second view an even more extreme form of historicism emerged, leading directly into pluralistic consciousness by subsuming into finite history the very process of understanding itself.

The fact of human historicity radicalizes the problem of relating the always already local and particular to the translocal and universal. As Wilhelm Dilthey himself noted, the meaning of a whole can only be seen from the contingent perspective of its parts, rendering all thinking about universality inescapably particular and local in its jurisdiction, including that of the historian.⁶⁴ The collapse of everything human into history unavoidably undermines the human penchant (the Cartesian ideal) for immediate access to the objective and universally valid. All thinking that prioritizes the historicity of human life runs aground while trying to advocate objectively valid truths. Historical knowledge is mediated knowledge. Thus, historical consciousness revolutionizes the way in which human beings look at themselves, unveiling the spatiotemporal relativity and contextuality of all knowledge and meaning. As Gadamer concludes, this is both a privilege and a burden, "the like of which has never been imposed on any previous generation."⁶⁵

It is therefore in the historical consciousness that the reflexive turn of the modern spirit, engendered by the Enlightenment critical consciousness, becomes fully manifest.⁶⁶ Cognizant of the sociocultural contextuality of all human perspectives, modern human beings have been inducted into the "full awareness of the historicity of everything present and the relativity of all opin-

ions.”⁶⁷ This involves a reflexive *double critique*, on the one hand carrying forth the liberative moment of Enlightenment critique against the house of authority, undermining heteronomy and any protective appeal to tradition as absolute, and on the other, leveling against the third moment of the Enlightenment project an historicist critique of disembedding rationalism, rationalism that tends toward an abstract uniformity and homogeneity distortive of historical life. By underscoring the fact that there is no Cartesian view from nowhere, no permanent, timeless, and universal truths distinct from the local and temporal processes and situations that express them, reflexivity in the shape of historical consciousness is inescapably self-critical.

A kind of intertextuality pervades all levels of human life. Every position, including that of the inquirer, is embedded in an intensely fluid temporal continuum, conditioned by intrinsic relation to other such positions and therefore contingent upon them. The processes of historical life are *productive* of meanings disclosed therein, not *reflective* of some homogeneous transhistorical universality. History is not an accidental accretion to an otherwise timeless essence; human nature is historical. Human beings and their endeavors are defined by the traditions in which they live, traditions that themselves are organic, integrative, and contextual matrices of meaning and valuation limited by the exigencies of time and place. Historical consciousness thus means that modern human beings are relentlessly self-aware, perceiving their own cultural-historical achievements as finite configurations of meaning and practice.

In sum, the critical historicizing of tradition leads criticism itself down a path to the acknowledgment of its own historicity. The double critique of historical consciousness radicalizes the Enlightenment moment of reflexivity. The self-grounding normativity of the present is not accessible via rationalism, but only via an ironic process that historicizes all human meaning and value, including that of the present. Perhaps this chapter’s epigraph by William James puts it best, reminding us that we are finite and tied to things that have a history. And it is this reflexivity of historical consciousness that opens up a diversity of finite, relative, culturally bound, and plural worlds. A new horizon is formed, one that might be depicted developmentally as the gradual yet revolutionary transition from *heteronomous belonging to a tradition* to a *traditioned belongingness to history*.

CONCLUSION: PROMISES AND PERILS

This acute sense of belonging to history brings the discussion back to the paradoxical character of Bruno’s universe (or should I equally say “pluriverse”) introduced at the beginning of this chapter. For like Bruno’s cosmos, history is

simultaneously centerless and polycentric, both aspects dialectically intertwined. Sensitivity to history cannot help but germinate an appreciation for the fact that human events and meanings do not present themselves in monotone and stable forms. History is polyphonic and always already overdetermined in specific configurations irreducible to uniform characterization, only emerging in heterogeneous shapes. Yet this very acknowledgment implicitly signifies the homogeneous character of history as a democratized playing field of human differences. Indeed, it is the recognition of the homogeneity of history, its integral continuity, that carries out the Enlightenment project in historical consciousness.⁶⁸ The critical distance between universal truth and historical tradition is maintained, but in an historicist form that treats concepts and values as captives of finite sociocultural processes. History is a level playing field, a realm of homogeneous neutrality where all events are in principle analogous.

This recognition is a privilege in that it promotes a consciousness of what might be called “positional finitude,” which helps break the hold of absolutist commitments, whether dogmatic or rationalist. It enables us to thematize diversity in a new way and to encounter differences with full respect for their own integral sense. Moreover, it supports injunctions against ethnocentrism and cultural imperialism in favor of cosmopolitan ideals such as tolerance and cross-cultural mutuality. No culture contains permanently valid meanings capable of being normative for all others, for such meanings depend upon historical context. From different points of view, as Bruno suggests, all points in space, all historical perspectives, can in their own right be considered centers or boundaries, marked on the map of existence in terms of some framework or another. Thus, it is the acentric homogeneity of history that makes it heterogeneous and polycentric, opening up a new kind of pluralism that thematizes differences in sociocultural and historical terms. We are similar in our differences in one respect: our historicity.

But this recognition of human historicity is also a burden in that what it gives with one hand it takes away with the other, consequently threatening to unravel any and all claims to the worthwhileness of life. Cultural-historical differences, in effect, cancel each other out in an unqualified cultural relativism that leaves each paralyzed within its own vantage point, unable to address a shared world beyond the confines of its particular purview. Disturbingly, the homogeneity of history thereby becomes a meaningless anarchic vacuum in which localized particular meanings are not simply decentered, but ironically displaced, even dissolved. All value is democratized and flattened. Does pluralistic belonging-to-history then negate the very individuality it aims to uphold, introducing a skeptical disenchantment with all forms of meaningful valuation? While it compels acknowledgment of the facticity of sociocultural differences,

is it able to ground the positive value of such difference? These questions set up the dilemma that chapter 2 will address.

For now it is enough that the story of the historical consciousness has been traced and its implications discussed. If it is not already, it will soon become clear that the material outlined in this chapter is fundamental to thinking about pluralism in the present-day context. In fact, much of what post-modernity advocates stems from the conjoined seeds of the critical consciousness of the Enlightenment and the historical consciousness that followed. Thus far, I have intentionally focused on the historical preparation for “pluralism,” only lightly touching on the implied consequences. My hope in this was to establish a broader framework through an examination of historical consciousness, the fruits of which will become evident as the argument of this book unfolds.