WHY HISTORY?

The question 'why history? can be interpreted in two ways. First, we may ask ourselves why there are 'res gestae', why things happen at all. This is a highly justified question, although historians utterly neglect it; I have treated it at length in my book 'The Origination of History' (1985). The second interpretation is why people occupy themselves with history, are interested in it, study it, use or misuse it. I am thinking here not so much of historical scholarship (although this is included) but rather of the 'memoria rerum gestarum' in general, encompassing all conceivable kinds of historical products, from Javanese wajang plays via historical exhibitions to essays on 'know your own town' in local papers. This second interpretation is the subject of this article.

Many more or less valid reasons use to be adduced for keeping this 'memoria' faithfully intact. They vary from the argument that some basic knowledge of history comes in handy when one is solving a cross-word puzzle to the contention that it is impossible to understand the present without being acquainted with the past. Hardpressed history teachers and academic historians who feel their discipline threatened break their heads in order to present ever more impressive reasons. I intend to leave all this for what it is. I am, however, not at all saying that it is all nonsense, on the contrary. But instead of repeating well-known and perhaps somewhat threadbare arguments I prefer to present some reasons that are seldom brought forward.

The first, and probably the most important, of these is that the recollection of things past gives us an existential status that is essentially different from that of animals. It makes us truly human. Animals possess no memory in the proper sense of the word; they only have a biochemical memory that prompts them to take action on account of some external stimulus. Migratory birds, for instance, receive an impulse to depart from a significant change in the local climate. But animals

possess no conscious knowledge of their past lives nor of their ancestry. All human beings, on the other hand, consciously remember their own individual past and that of other people, even of people who perhaps died long ago, their parents and grandparents for instance. Furthermore, they are able to reflect on their past, to speculate on it, to draw conclusions from it, even to use it to some end. History is plastic material!

Specifically as human beings we are capable of overstepping the limits of our own life-time and of going back into the past thousands and thousands of years. Our conscious use of our 'memoria' makes us essentially different from animals, in particular from the higher primates whom, in so many respects, we resemble so much. It is, probably, no coincidence that the hey-day of historical scholarship fell together with the upsurge of modern evolutionism. Whereas this ideology stresses that mankind emanated from the animal world, history accentuates the essential distinction, probably as a kind of human self-defence.

A second, and hardly less important, anthropological reason for occupying oneself with history is that our 'memoria' constitutes a victory over death. Very few things in our common existence are absolutely certain, but nobody doubts that all of us are destined to die. This is a hard and painful fact, the great anomaly of human existence, it does not tally at all with the idea we have of life, and we have great trouble in accepting it. In fact, we do not really accept death, we try hard to evade it (even the thought of it!), we want to triumph over it. When we visit a churchyard, we see hundreds of crosses and tombstones, all with names on them; what they tell us is : "I am still there, I don't want to be forgotten".

One of the principal means we have to triumph over death is securing ourselves a place in history. Of course, this is impossible for by far the greater portion of mankind. Only an exiguous part of the millions and billions of human beings that have lived on this planet is still being remembered by name in whatever kind of historical text. However, if we cannot live on as individuals, then we may be remembered collectively, as a group - as an army or association - or as a nation. We also live on in works of art, in the houses we build, in the books we write, even by transmitting our name to our progeny. I for one, Petrus Fontaine, bear exactly the same name of that son of a Swiss mercenary, Petrus Fontaine who, shortly before 1820, immigrated into the Netherlands and from whom all Fontaine's in this country are descended.

All this is a very efficacious way of prolongating one's own life. The pursuit of history, in whatsoever form, lifts our existence over the frontiers of our individual person and endows it with a dimension that, in principle, comprises the whole past and the whole future. I believe that the rise of historical scholarship and of history teaching in the nineteenth century and after is closely interconnected with the spread of secularization. Since the days of the Enlightenment religion has been losing ground steadily. Essential religious tenets have become deprived of their meaning in the eyes of countless people, not the most unimportant of these being the idea of personal immortality, of an afterlife, of eternal bliss. The least we can say of this notion is that it is hopeful. Its loss also signifies a loss of hope, of the prospect of a new and better life. This made the need of a secular afterlife more stringent, of living on in an earthly, an historical future - just as it forced modern political ideologies to promise future bliss in a foreseeable era.

We are entitled to think of evolution once again in this context. The evolution theory was, initially, only a scientific hypothesis framed to explain certain biological phenomena of the animal world and the flora. It had, however, a rapid and enormous popular success and was soon transformed into a kind of secular creed, in particular in the shape given to it by Teilhard de Chardin. What this scholar did was, in fact, reconciling science and history with each other - two disciplines that usually do not look eye to eye. We might even say that evolutionism meant the triumphant entry of history into the hitherto basically unhistorical realm of science. This unexpected result proves how important evolutionism, a belief in the creative powers of evolution that is, has become. The reason for this development is that the idea of evolution entails an indefinite prolongation of life, endlessly far back into the past and equally far into the future. This seems to make the idea of human mortality more bearable.

A third reason to preserve the historical 'memoria' is that it creates the notion of humanity, of mankind. The practice of history, again in whatsoever form, makes us step outside the magic circle of our own existence and connects us with others, even with all other human beings. The titles of sundry history textbooks and other historical publications testify of this : 'Chain of generations', 'Links with our ancestry', also my own, long deceased 'From primeval man to the cosmopolitan', to cite the titles of only a few Dutch textbooks. A very popular means of discoverings these links, of finding one's 'roots', is the making of pedigrees and genealogies.

This linking up with the past starts in our earliest infancy. There exists a curious anthropological fact that is usually utterly overlooked, even by scholars. We do not possess even the slightest reminiscence of our birth, that is, of the most decisive event of our existence. Furthermore, we may confidently state that none of us remembers anything at all of his or her first year of life (the earliest memory of which I myself am sure dates back to February 1924, when I was two years and ten months old). This gap in our existence is bridged by our parents who tell us of our birth and first years. The fact that we realize having parents and grandparents connects us with the past, with our own past but also with that of others. Our horizon is farther enlarged when we happen to live in an old house (I spent my youth in a centuries old house in the inner city of Amsterdam) or in an old farm. Already as children we hear bits of the history of our town or village; these may be wrong or phantasy but, anyhow, it is 'memoria'. We hear biblical stories of very, very long ago; the Church keeps the memory alive of saints and martyrs of former ages. Nationalholidays celebrate events of ages ago. History teaching in primary education presents youngsters with the history of the nation, even already with that of the world. This slowly but certainly constitutes in us the notion of one common humanity, of the 'family of man'.

Historians, walking in Burckhardt's footsteps, like to stress that "history is change". Change, however, can only be perceived against a background of constancy, of continuity. There is not only an unending continuity in nature - the eternal revolutions of the celestial orbit, the continuous succession of the seasons, the constant rotation of day and night -, but also in history. The fact that mankind, in all ages and in all parts of the world, has essential traits in common, not merely biologically but still more anthropologically, makes it possible for us to understand them, to conduct an historical 'conversation' with them. If the inhabitants of Amsterdam in the fourteenth century, or the Egyptians of the period of Ramses II, were, as human beings, essentially different from us, there would be no history. We then could do no more than describe them, just as we do mammoths and other extinct animals. But the very fact that their existence too was 'historical' enables us modern people to span all those innumerable centuries and to speak of them as sensible, rational, human beings, however much their habits and their outlook on life may differ from ours.

The forceful tendency of modern historical practice, of history teaching for instance, to stress this essential unity of the human race - in spite of the constantly repeated shibboleth 'change' - very probably is yet another con-

sequence of secularization. The old notion of 'Christendom' has slowly faded away. But we still need a common denominator. We may haven given up the Christian creed but we cling to the idea of all being one. Our modern world comprises Islamites and Buddhists, and believers of many other creeds, just as unbelievers and agnostics. It is for this reason too that we no longer speak of 'Christendom' but rather of 'mankind'.

We now come to a fourth reason. History is a frame for ordering the confusing diversity of historical phenomena. Speaking in philosophical terms we can say that history is, in its own way, an answer to the question of the One and the Many. This is probably the oldest problem of philosophical thought; already the very first Presocratics were preoccupied with it. The world, indeed, appears to us in an endless variety - of human beings, of animals and plants, of human artefacts and of natural products. Not one pebble, not one leaf on a tree is completely alike to another. This is bewildering to the last degree. It would even prevent us from being masters of our own lives and the world around us, if we did not have two instruments of ordering at our disposal. The first is making use of analogies, of comparing phenomena and bringing them together under a common head, like man, woman, tree, dog, oak, spaniel, river, hill, etcetera - all kinds of generic terms, I mean. Another way of creating order in the apparently limitless sea of phenomena is opposing them in pairs : summer - winter, young - old, man - woman, warm - cold, etcetera. This is, of course, what we all do, many times a day.

Since its infancy philosophy has tried to solve the problem of the One and the Many. This discipline chooses squarely for 'identity', for phenomena that are identical with other phenomena. The identity of all identities is 'Being'. Parmenides opposed this not to non-being but to 'Seeming'; to him the changing and variable phenomena of daily life, historical events included, come under this heading. He denies them an ontological status of their own, or, in other terms, to him they are no valid subjects of philosophical speculation. Philosophers have always looked down on history and, in consequence, on historians. The reason for this contempt is that history not only works with analogies but is actually built on them; it is a system of analogies. Now, in the eyes of the philosopher, analogies are only similarities or resemblances but no identities; therefore, they are worthless and useless.

Contrary to philosophy, history decidedly takes the part of the Many. It is not particularly interested in the One, still less in 'Being'. Historians usually are not of a philosophical turn of mind. "By nature and habit of mind historians

are often uninterested in philosophy", says Chadwick. What they do, what they honestly try to do, is presenting reality, how things really were, 'wie es eigentlich gewesen'. Reality, indeed, is multifarious, multicoloured, manysplendoured; it cannot be stated nor caught in formulas, it must be described (in the order of time), it must be told. History, therefore (with its hand-maid history teaching) brings people, young people included, into contact with reality, with living and lived reality, extending far beyond the scopes of everybody's life. It may teach them to cope with reality in an orderly and rational way. It may also learn them to cope with it, with the past, with history, in an intrinsically human way, that is, by appropriating it, by identifying with it, by making it their own. In doing so they may learn to turn the past into a constitutive part, nay into the very essence, of their own existence.

My final reason for cherishing our memoria is that history has a therapeutic function. For a very long time religion and the Churches have exercised this function. Now they are more and more receding into the background, other instances must necessarily take over. For society cannot do without therapy. Individual persons may consult a psychologist, and, if the need arises, a psychiatrist. Society, on the other hand, needs the historian as its therapeutist. It is often averred to-day that history is a social science. By stating this the historians mean that they are not primarily interested in persons and events but rather in social groups and trends. But it should also mean that they are preoccupied with society for its own sake. Historians are, or they should be, the therapeutists of society. Their principal task with regard to society, their basic social function should be to cure society of its mental defects, of its prejudices, of its fallacies, of its anxieties, of its neuroses. They - and of course I am thinking here of history teachers - must teach people to accept the past, their past, the national past, just as it is, without distorting or embellishing it. Thus they must incorporate it into their own lives, into the life of the nation, in a rational and critical way, so that the result is harmony and balance.

I am dead sure that every historian will enthusiastically adhere to my last proposition. Isn't it actually superfluous to state this so emphatically to men and women of our profession? Is this not what everyone of us tries to do as honestly and conscientiously as possible? I am not so certain of this. I am not accusing anybody in person; I am not saying that historians are dishonest or unscrupulous. But some ominous words of the American historian Dwight D. Hoover keep ringing in my ears. "Historians ... serve as secular theologians, explaining the ways of society to man. In this role, historians are conservative

and success-oriented, showing how changes had to occur and why these changes are all for the best. Few historians document tragedy and failure; when they do, they consider only transitory failure which illuminates present success". This statement squarely conflicts with my contention that historians should be therapeutists. For a therapeutist starts from the premise that something may be wrong, even very wrong. If, however, the historian is 'success-oriented' - and this I believe he is -, he will show a tendency to overlook what is wrong. If this is correct, he will not really be able to help people to cure themselves.

In my opinion the modern world is a prey to many forms of neurosis. Or to put it in less psychological and more familiar terms, we are suffering from the effects of an undigested past. Many once colonial nations see themselves confronted with the after-effects of decolonization; our quasi-charitable turn of mind (the product of bad conscience) makes us forget that not only the once colonized nations suffer from them. Still more the world labours under the effects of World War II; as the endless stream of publications of every kind shows it is still with us as though not more than forty years separate us now from its end. I might go on for a while in this vein; instances abound. What I intend to say is that, reflecting on our present state of mind, I am asking myself whether historians really fulfil their therapeutic function. I might even argue that often history itself is a kind of neurosis. 'History as a neurosis' would be a worthy subject of a later essay.

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