



UNIVERSITY OF
OXFORD

DEPARTMENT FOR
CONTINUING EDUCATION

Philosophy of History

Week 1: Introduction; Enlightenment
and Counter-Enlightenment

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ambiguity of 'history'

the past

- that which has happened
- German: '*Geschichte*'
- the philosophy of humanity's past
- 'philosophy of history'

the *study* of the past

- historiography
- German: '*Historie*'
- the philosophy of the study of the past
- 'philosophy of historiography'

two versions of 'philosophy of history'

First

- what it is for human beings to *have* a history, what it is for them to *be historical*; *historicality*
- (subjective)

Second

- the meaning of the history *as a whole*, the historical *process* (does it amount to *progress*?)
- (objective)
- philosophical history (universal history)

history – more than the past

- Whatever it is for human beings to have a history or to be historical turns out to involve their having *a future* as well.
- The historical process is not one that necessarily terminates in the present. The question of progress thus opens up onto *the future* and attempts to look ahead.

Enlightenment theories of history

Cyclical – rise and fall

- e.g. Voltaire, Diderot
- Restricted conception of progress.

Linear progress

- e.g. Iselin, Turgot, Cordorcet
- Generalized conception of progress

Models of progress

- A. purely cyclical
 - B. purely linear
 - C. past cyclical/future linearity
 - D. rising cyclicality
 - E. rising cyclicality approaching linearity
- perfectibility

Counter-Enlightenment

Rousseau

- First Discourse: cyclical view, inverting Enlightenment's valorization of itself.
- Second Discourse: linear view – but of decline.

Herder

- plurality and transience of forms of human culture and society
- opposed to 'presentism' and 'progressivism'

Herder's targets

1. Linear progressivism
2. Enlightenment cyclicalism
3. Negative progressivism (hybrid of 1 & 2)

regarding generalized progressivism:

Herder

- denies that there is any such primary dynamic: things aren't (and don't need to be) getting better;
- and yet, the belief that they are may in fact make things worse.
- Optimistic rejection.

Rousseau

- accepts that there is such a primary dynamic, but claims that it is on balance deleterious;
- and yet, historical change *could* be for the better (i.e. as per *The Social Contract*).
- Pessimistic rejection.

Herder's historicism

- an insistence on and appreciation of the diversity and mutability of human cultures as revealed in history
- *Einfühlung* – ‘feeling in/into’, empathy
- see Beiser's & Forster's accounts of historicism