



## On Historical Consciousness

Tanabe Hajime 田辺 元

ORIGINAL TITLE: 「歴史の認識に就いて」『田辺元全集』[Complete works of Tanabe Hajime] (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1964), 1: 413–22.

KEYWORDS: history—historical consciousness—scientific method—early essays of Tanabe—Kyoto School

---

## On Historical Consciousness

*Translated by Rossa Ó Muireartaigh*

---

History seeks to describe the individuality of an object, whereas the natural sciences aim to establish universal laws. Of course, when we start splitting up those objects of history we have made, we do quickly find common characteristics between them and this can be taken as examples of actual universal laws. But if all we do is simply seek to detect and analyze cases of universal laws, and find explanations of their origin, we have given history a methodology that is no different to the natural sciences. Indeed, history's object must be that which cannot be reduced to one more element of a universal law presenting itself for analysis. Instead, it should be something that requires individual expression as an event occurring one time and never to be repeated within the unified all. What is special about historical consciousness is its individualized descriptions of a historical totality that develops inside a particular circumstance. Upon what can these various historical totalities be grounded? By what principle do the various parts of history's object unite in the whole? And how does this principle of unity differ to the unifying principles to be found in the natural sciences? The fundamental aim of the natural sciences is to unify, through a few basic universal theories, the totality of nature, and to construct what can be called *world configurations* to understand, through these theories, natural phenomena as particular determinants of the universal. If we believe that the essence of ordinary actual experience is exhausted by the various concepts we can extract from such experience then we will never be able to construct various world configurations from these concepts.

Perhaps we should think of the concepts of sciences as being akin to

“functional numbers” where the universal acts as the location for the differentiation of particulars in relationship with other particulars. The particular parts are unified in a synthesis following a few universal principles and an overall configuration is constructed with the functional numbers differentiating the concepts. In fact, this is how it is done in the world configuration of physics—theoretical physics—that field which claims the methodological crown of natural science. Particular individual events, then, are the specific values for functional numbers which are universalized in terms of quantity. There is a particular reciprocity between numbers that is a completely external relationship devoid of any internal development of meaning going on in-between. Any individual value can convert to one by means of another value. The interiority here is like the cause-effect relationship that exists between phenomena that appear successively in time. The value relationship between functional numbers involves small values and large values matching in time as parameters of differential equations acting to combine nature’s continuous situations. At the extreme of what we might call Bergson’s geometrization, the development of all internal meaning is removed, all is externalized and impersonalized, and making ultimate the unity of the particular all in the differentiation of functional number concepts becomes the goal for the systematic construction of universal consciousness in the methodology of natural science. However, we must distinguish between individual consciousness of history and its appearance. In history, the part stands mutually against the all of the object when aligned in a relationship that is completely external. There is no internal meaning in between, and the all cannot be synthesized in this way.

Any totality endowed with individuality must be a living and creative thing. Through this creativity, real value unifies the parts from inside through a relationship of internal significance. Of course, in the natural sciences, even physics cannot be reduced to mathematics. In the physical world, there are concepts, such as force, which can be sorted into simple numbers, and unified internally within this world. However, methodologically, physics organizes this kind of special internal unity into an external numerical unity, and the guiding idea is to restrict all within the special limits of mathematics. The ideal methodology for the natural sciences is externalization in the form of a functional relationship of numbers. A system—as in the whole becoming an external combination of the parts—becomes the ultimate goal.

By contrast, in history the whole sustains the parts from within. It penetrates them and combines them in a relationship of meaningful development. The parts, as separate from the whole, are to be understood as similar to one another and to be true examples of a universal law. They only acquire the individual life of the whole when they are combined within the whole. They have their own individuality as expressions of this. Unity of overall form in history is aimed towards an internalizing unity. Even though in general history looks at the development and progress of individuals and nationalities as subjects, environments are seen to be extremely important. When we look for an overall unity of form in history we are looking towards an internalizing unity. History books, in general, do ponder the development and progress of individuals and nationalities as subjects. But environment is seen to be of essential importance. However, is the environment something internal, something separate to the spiritual life of individuals and nationalities, something with its own meaning when set apart? No, not at all. Even when environments are considered identical when examined externally with the eyes of natural science, they will still have completely individual meanings for the subjects experiencing them from within. Environment here is not meant to mean something that encircles the subject from the outside as in the original meaning of the word. Rather, it is something internal, that individualizes through meanings changing from within through the experiences of the subject. It is impossible to have a historical environment without this internal unity.

When we consider the form of the unity which is essential to the formation of the historical totality, the historical cause and effect here is seen as a successive relationship in time through the combination of internal self-expression in the experience of the historical subject. Cause and effect is not, though, simply a relationship of succession in time. It always involves a necessary synthesis between phenomena occurring in succession. Furthermore, the essentialness of this synthesis is determined as that which does not permit change due to the overall unity which includes the synthesis of this essentialness. In the case of cause and effect in natural science, the system of universal law and theory that unites the particular in the whole as its binding limit becomes the necessary grounds for this binding. As against this, in the case of history, the formation of the whole comes from nothing other than the subject's individual development. The changing of the grounds of

the necessary binding in historical cause and effect can only be the totality developing within the subject which attributes individual meaning to events through experience. It is impossible to think of historical cause and effect without this. To be aware of the cause-effect relationship in regard to those contents that are separate to the unity emerging internally in the historical subject means that a necessary successive relationship based on universal law has been established that is externalizing from the standpoint of nature. If we extract those factors that shape actual historical totality from the totality, it means that we are employing just one particular law and this can of course be bound to natural cause-effect relationships from the standpoint of nature. However, the abstract standpoint of awareness uses the means of a concrete standpoint, so sure enough it becomes a factor in the totality that is unified through the objectives of this concrete standpoint. And so we do not need to doubt that concrete historical awareness is included in abstract natural cause-effect as this factor. Thus, cause and effect is either historical cause and effect based on the development of subjective individuality or natural cause and effect based on the universality of laws.

If we think of the two types of cause-effect other than in terms of being natural or historical, we will be mistaking conventional gradations for theoretically autonomous objects within the world, leaving both types of cause-effect methodology confused and undistinguished. Either way, historical cause-effect, creating the particularity of history, cannot be separated from the historical subject that is united experientially with the total phenomenon from the standpoint of internal meaning. With natural science, the subject is fused with the totality of natural phenomena, it too reduced to a functional concept in an external unity—its unique characteristics taken to be self-differentiation. The subject, that which creates new meaning from within itself, ultimately cannot be recognized in the methodology of natural science. But in history, this creative subject developing internally has a particular historical meaning. When this is abstracted we completely lose that which is history.

In history we will always find a personality. I mean this in the wide sense of an individual or ethnic group incorporated in that subject which unifies the totality. Human development, and history in its basic meaning, begins with this. We must not, of course, overlook completely the important question of which should be emphasized: the individual or the group. Historical

research is divided over this question but it does not really concern us here. Whether it be the individual or the group, either way, the essential point I am making is that there would be no history without this underlying unifying personality conforming from within to the meaning of experienced events. So how can we become aware of this personality that unites events from within through experience? I have already mentioned, of course, how the personality can be known through its external links to universal laws. We know the personality of another through our common empathy with it deriving from within our own selves. Knowing the personality of another is *Verstehen*, not *Begreifen*. We enter into the object through *Verständnis* and attain direct knowledge through the experiences of the self. This unity in the internal development of the personality is known directly through the experience of the self from such a standpoint. Historical consciousness, as I have pointed out, gives shape to the totality creating the unity from within through the personality in the broadest sense. As such, historical consciousness is clearly, then, the essence of the direct understanding that psychologists would call empathy. It is the special characteristic of historical consciousness that it can be seen as an action. But to think of it another way, it is a part of the unsolvable puzzle of how the subject, limited as it is to our individuality, can understand from within the personality of the other. We need to recognize basic facts that do not conform to the action or advancement of empathy as in the explanations of psychologists theorizing about the mental phenomena of individual experience. To explain how one limited personality can understand the personality of another is to ask the impossible. When understanding the personality of another we do so from the standpoint of one limited personality. The ability of one absolutely limited personality to know the personality of another is a contradiction. In so far as we can understand the personality of another, it is from the standpoint of one personality.

Each experience of pure activity that emerges from within us is free activity with no particular limits in itself. Whether any kind of unified personality develops through the contents of experience depends on its freedom in that situation. A real personality is limited by the particularizations of a personality with limitless potential. Each development of this is borne by a universal personality of infinite potentiality, and this determination limits freedom and becomes realized. The real personality is limited by the infi-

nite universal personality. In general, the determination of particularities can first commence on the basis of the universal. What is determined absolutely as particular from the beginning cannot even have the meaning of a particular. There will be universality and freedom already to be expected on the reverse side of any determination of such particularity. Individuality too must be determined by the universal totality. To say that a personality has individuality is to say that there is a particular determination of the universal which creatively develops from limitless possibilities. Of course, the universal here is not that universal that is extracted from the particular, as in when we think of the universal in logic. It is not this kind of abstract universal but the universal all that includes every particularity within, and which has infinitely abundant content. A particular personality is determined upon the surface of the underlying universal which lurks as the infinite potential all. As such, our personality is always linked to the universal all of infinite possibility looming behind. We remove the limits of the particular personality that is the reality of our self, and return to the universal all behind it. At this standpoint, the inner unity of another personality can be understood from within. Understanding the personality of another has nothing to do with the standpoint of one's own determined self. Removing these limits and occupying the standpoint of the universal totalized personality looming behind, means the contents of any personality can be freely experienced from within. Empathy, which from the perspective of empirical psychology is seen as a primordial fact and, which cannot be explained further, must be understood exclusively from such a metaphysical basis. Moving away from this type of understanding lets us finally solve this puzzle. Historical consciousness is only possible on this philosophical basis. However, from the point of view of pure theory, what is possible is not necessarily always completely reality. What I am saying here is that each human has a path towards common mutual understanding with the universal totalizing personality that is behind them. However, the actual range of this common understanding varies. It is us who don the halo of the universal totalized personality lit in the surrounding dimness as that light honing in on where lurks the inner particular personality. The intensity of light from the halo and the width of its brightness will be of a diverse multitude depending on each person. But however weak the intensity of light, no matter how big or small the halo, it is never zero. Such a person would find it completely impossible to

understand, or have common feeling with, or empathize with another. But at the same time there are a great many variations, and we must recognize the considerable difference in wideness or narrowness in ranges of understanding. What is necessary for historical consciousness is that the light of understanding is truly wide.

The complete and free realization and attainment of the universal totalized personality lurking behind the subject must be the ideal of the historian. To empathize with the minds of heroes, and understand the special spirit of an era or the mind of a people, a historically conscious subjectivity is required. In this way, the function of a historian is to freely occupy the standpoint of the universal totalized personality, and to understand from within the internal development of the personality transforming into a unity the historical all as an object, and through this, molding the individualized form. This is never like natural science with its constant conceptualization seeking to configure and pattern that which is external. Only those forms derived from the unity of inner experience are to be harnessed for history. With history, intuition and inner understanding is the essence of its consciousness. On that point, history is remarkably similar to the creations of art, in particular, that of literature. The creation of a novel or drama is the same as in history, where the most important requirement is that the subject freely enters and exits the infinite universal all-embracing mind. The literary person will be a man inhabiting a woman's mind, an old person taking on the thoughts of a younger heart, so as to describe persons imbued with individuality. Shakespeare was *myriad-minded* in having this ability. The only difference between literature and history is that literature is unrestrained by reality. It follows the dictates of the free self-expression of the author to create a new world through imagination, in contrast to history which is always shaped by reality. This shaping is imposed and is not delegated to subjective freedom. In this sense, history is not about creativity through imagination but involves consciousness of reality. But even so, looking at the overall shaping process going on in history, there is artfulness through literary creation in the sense of the formation of the individual centering on the unity of internal experience through the personal. If I can be forgiven for using the concept of "*historischer Sinn*" (historical sense), I wish to employ it to indicate the potential for shaping the whole through this common understanding. Historical consciousness as well as being the basis for this kind of

intuition is a way of very simply outlining my thinking upon historical consciousness, without my daring to conjecture from my own extremely poor understanding of the experiences of historians. It would be an unexpected pleasure should I have an opportunity to have my ignorance enlightened by the teaching of such well-informed people.