

Ernst Troeltsch, “Über Massstäbe zur Beurteilung historischer Dinge“ (On standards for assessing historical matters) *Historische Zeitschrift* 116 (1916): 1-47 (brief excerpts).

(Speech given at the Kaiser's birthday celebrations at the University of Berlin.)

For the second time we are celebrating the birthday of our imperial and royal *Herr* in wartime, amid the tremendous cares and hopes that the fateful struggle of the world's nations, so long feared and now surpassing every fear, has led over us and over all European culture. From the far-reaching fronts where our sons, brothers, fathers, and friends have bodily repelled the enemy and even gloriously burst the encircling ring in the East, from all cities and towns of the homeland where a keen work vigor and sense of sacrifice strive to make themselves worthy of our soldiers and fall into line in the salvation of the fatherland, from everywhere we raise up reverent greetings and wishes today to the man who stands in the middle of all these events, who has daily taken on himself an almost superhuman responsibility and whose decision and will power in the end guarantee the unity and energy of our dealings everywhere. The wind of the future blows around him and us, not with the gently shifting waft that constantly whirls around invisibly, perceptible only to the delicate sense, and that permeates every present, but with the storm violence of world-historical crises in which the old is visibly crumbling and the new announces its shattering presence. As we all know and learn anew from every one of his pronouncements, our imperial and royal *Herr* bears his responsibility before God's countenance with his entire soul and with the deepest gravity of conscience, and we know that today his thoughts as well as ours are directed to the future and to the responsibility that the [human] race [*Geschlecht*] of the present bears for it.

If we today in this narrow circle of scholarly work, so far as youth or age have kept workers in their usual and even in their undisturbed functionality in activity serving the fatherland, for our part we also make homage in deep earnestness and joyful gratitude to the kaiser and king, and the word thereby fairly carries on the science that seeks to penetrate the historical world by means of the concept and the targeted idea, that has its place at the margins between historical research which analyzes and represents and philosophy which constructs and forms ideals, that one might call philosophy of history, philosophy of culture, or ethics, and that has become a substantial part of all philosophy since Plato in his *Politeia* sketched out the foundations of his doctrine of state, society, and culture.

Its problem is initially simple enough. It does not interpret the future from the origins of autochthonous nations that can hold themselves apart, whether in happy naivete or in willful restriction of a sense of mastery, from everything foreign, general, and conceptual, and only clear the way before themselves out of the instinct of their historical structure or an unwavering will to rule. That is the old Roman way. It also does not interpret from a mixture of primitive fortune-telling, national self-confidence, and the closely associated national-religious fervor and ethical critique, like the prophets of Israel did. That is oriental. It also does not construct from a half philosophical and half revelatory metaphysics the course which things much take, along with the

unalterable ideal upon which it must be measured, as theology and church philosophy of Europe's truly Christian period did. That is Catholic and has also remained consequential in many ways from beyond the Catholic tradition in modern metaphysics. It merely works rather more with the tools of scholarship and it must therefore, without blinding itself in rationalist illusions about the capacities of science, regard just this leap from scholarly work to the grasping and forming of life in the moment as its most difficult and distinguished problem. Yet its foundations and starting points lie indeed in pure science, which among the modern nations has dampened and broken the naïve drive of life, providing them in turn with orientation in broader surroundings and with empowerment of their lives from the momentum of ideas. Such a science proceeds from two widely-separated starting points. This is on the one hand modern empirical-historical research as it has put into operation since the Renaissance and Enlightenment and in the nineteenth century has learned to encompass, insofar as we possess sources and traditions, the entire world of the historical. On the other hand there is modern philosophy, which has parted with the illusions of an a priori metaphysics and rather more examines conceptual tools with whose aid the developmental drive of the great historical totality of life can be grasped from historical experience and construed into an epitome of obligatory aims and norms. Only from this double foundation can either the question of goals or of aims of the future be brought up. On its basis the West's founders of open secular science, Plato and Aristotle, both grasped in a time of harshest crisis of Hellenic life the empirical-historical reality of the given polis, as well as sought to form or to limit it from a conceptually grounded ideal of the rational society. In the world-historical crisis of Napoleonic times German philosophy of history and ethics constructed the essence of the past and the tasks of the future from both points of departure, and thereby signaled the idea of national European states on the basis of a humanitarian-liberal world culture that became the result of the eighteenth and the achievement of the nineteenth century. Today we find ourselves in a similar crisis that ends a century of ideas and forces and signifies to us a new and as yet unknown world for the West and perhaps also for the planets just now joined together [in the solar system]. [Yes, Troeltsch does seem capable of this cosmic rhetoric.] In the midst of the flurry of events we are still seeking, much as we did then, to decipher its meaning and spell out the fate that is dawning. But for this we need to secure both starting points in the sense that they have in the general view of present scholarship and from which we can first make the leap to action.

Both starting points must nonetheless be established anew. It is not just the present catastrophe that is pushing toward this, a catastrophe which we feel in many respects is putting an end to the century's liberal-humanitarian-rationalist philosophy of history, but also the development of Western thought itself, which in a kind of secretive sympathetic intimation of great historical events has held in check abstract certain rationalism and its eternal and general truths.

It is thus relatively simple to establish the first starting point, although already here this tendency of current thinking is to be heavily emphasized. Modern philosophy has acquired two great new impulses that condition its character. It acquires the clear, strong, and unambiguous one from the mathematical physics of a Galileo and Newton, the one that let it work with a concept of nature closely tied to experience and logical construction, and led from these logical concepts to a new ordering and interpreting of the entire world of reality and concepts. It is the mechanistic type of

philosophy, one that was initially constructed onto the world of spatial experience, became the epitome of the logical and rational in general, and as such strove to subject to itself the entire remaining world of experience as well. It gets the other, more fragmented, slow-working, and ambiguous impulse from the critical dissolution of the system of church culture and life, where everything, state and society, religion and ethics, economics and art theory, had to be founded anew or initially grasped independently and consciously at all...

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The writing of history today has in fact become cultural history, yet without the possibility of depicting simultaneously the entire coherence of the culture of an era—here again the scholar still has to stitch together the individual strands of the web and bring to each his own depiction, loosely based on a general concept of the totality of an era. This general concept is itself however an individual scholarly, historical concept, the highest and most difficult achievement of historical abstraction.

The remaining difficulties of this kind of historical logic, which above all touch on the classification of typical development processes, sociological laws, and general tendencies in individual scientific concept formation, cannot be discussed further here... The intrinsically necessary relativism of genetic-historical thinking seems to stand in hopeless and tangled contrast to any thought of a generally applicable, absolute aim of history and seems to make it impossible to resolve a historical crisis in the direction of such aims...

... We thus find ourselves in a new region of thought that stands opposed in an entirely different manner to empirical research and explanation, both to natural-scientific and to historical thought, which together are the order and comprehension of the world of experience. We find ourselves with a new question in the region of normative ideas, of the formation of ideals...

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The “life of the mind” is in truth either abstracted from our Western level of culture and thus not a rationally necessary standard, as it ought to claim in its interrelation with reason and the universe; or it is actually drawn rationally from the nature of the mind [*Geist*], and thus is every bit as powerless as the Hegelian idea regarding the global history of humanity with its monstrous contrasts...

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What is to be done in these circumstances? In view of the character of empirical-historical research doesn't the whole thought of historical-philosophical and ethical standards have to be given up? ... No. This “no” can moreover lean scientifically on the fact that all attempts of a dexterous dialectic of development to dissolve, spontaneously and on the strength of inner self-confidence, ideals which have surfaced in history in mere psychologically derivable illusions, products, or reflexes, fail in every real concrete explanation and deduction. The production of ever newer norms and ideals stemming from independent and autonomous regions of reason, which indeed everywhere proceed from the given, but also at the same time transform and correct it from a secret productive power of the mind, is doubtless a basic fact of the mind. Only

where will and belief wane, there this power also wanes and surrenders to the flow of immediate sensation; then thought exposes all standards of the Ought as reflexes of the Actual, praises its own present as knowledge free of illusion and explaining all, and construes the past as the Romantic age of illusions. But the error then lies truly in such a present, in the underestimation of the entire rational region of spontaneous, autonomous, and ceaseless production of standards of the Ought. So the standards themselves cannot be done without...

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[speaking of the historian's "critical selection from the cultural possession of an entire great collection of effects":] The last secret of these processes is the belief that in them lies obvious and compellingly present reason and the power of the will to affirm such belief... It is also the entire secret of that which theologians call revelation. It is an intuitive focus on the course of God's internal natural workings that no one can construe a priori or even only a posteriori, that brings [itself] forth rather more in the given discussion simply with a feeling of compelling necessity and clarity. In this manner interpretations of the present and future develop in prophets, in the political genius, in artistic style, in the intuition of the great historian, in the system of the true philosopher, and here one doesn't always have to think immediately of monstrous men in the sense of the hero cult, but one can also comprehend the feeling, the brooding, the longing, the complaining of the masses in this sense.

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In the process, once we lay down these series [of totalities] and contrasts, the standard is something spontaneously self-generating in the comparison itself. It has at its disposal no other objectivity [*Sachlichkeit*] than the necessary immersion as far as possible in the Other [*das Fremde*] and the emergent relativizing of one's own standpoint that this brings with it; no other necessity than that of making a personal decision and taking a position bis-à-vis a connection extended in this manner. That is why the standard and the construction of series and contrasts corresponding to it will always be different for different thinkers... Moreover, there is in actuality no higher, extra-subjective authority.

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We will be free from tailoring all cultural-philosophical standards to the concept of humanity.

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Three great errors flow into this favorite contemporary mode of thinking [referring to the recent popularity of comparative studies], first, that the absolute value system is composed of individual rational values from separately representable evolutionary histories, second, that each individual value holds for all humanity and that this is why it can and must be traced through its entire human evolution from Botocudos and Kamtchadals to Paris and Berlin, third, that each such complete evolution possesses a law for its [hierarchical] classification from which the contemporary developmental tendencies holding for us today can first be reconstructed and thereby this [the complete evolution] can itself be determined. In actuality matters are such that the system of values in each cultural circle forms an inner, mutually determining life unit despite all tensions, and each individual cultural value can be comprehended only in connection with this

individual whole of the total formation... On the contrary history is not a fundamentally and systematically comparative discipline like comparative anatomy or zoology.

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True comparison elevates one's own self-understanding and further forms one's own reality, false comparison destroys the unity and power of one's own life and in the whirl of analogies and rootless possibilities makes one's own creation muddled in itself.

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We must rather get out of our cultural circle ourselves through historical analysis and cultural-philosophical adaptation of its own life-drive and assert it with the sovereign freshness that only a boon with regard to foreign worlds confronting us can enable, instead of dogmatic battles or tired relativist capitulation. A cultural domain that includes the ancient, Christianity, the medieval, and modern Europe does not need to capitulate so rashly, but requires only a faith in itself, one which may not let itself be excused away and also not trivialized by skeptical and rationalist philosophers.

But in the present moment of the most fearful crisis of European culture quite different questions lie closer to us. In this manner of thought lies the possibility of an answer to them and them only. The present crisis has revealed a deeper inner essential difference of the European nations than we had previously assumed in our all-too-strongly standardized concepts. This only corresponds to the entire fundamental individual-scientific manner of thinking of historical practice and cannot have anything really surprising for us. But it follows from this that the new formations of the future will stand very strongly under this special character, however urgently world-political interests like religious and cultural community must also urge us constantly toward the reconnection of the community of nations. We will still have to treat and form the German future above all as German. We must immerse ourselves more deeply than before in our history and clear the way more productively and with greater faith in the future, upon which the new German state will also be formed as a vibrant and future-empowered spiritual unity. Many thousands are thinking and muttering today about the essence of Germanness [Deutschtum]. Historical practice must teach us to recognize and understand, but it alone will never arrive at a unity and never at a future. It can only see a confused and contradictory reality so long as it remains pure history. All unity is merely ideal and work, formative power and direction grasped from it, i.e., the standard idea that yields the ideal-forming intuition from immersion in our historical plenitude of life and our present situation, and can only be affirmed by the will. It is precisely in this concept of Germanness extending before us more powerfully than ever that the two basic directions of cultural-philosophical thought meet, historical-empirical immersion and sovereign ideal-formation stemming from certainty of harmony with the creative world-will.

We know that our imperial and royal *Herr* has constantly pondered such tasks and has long held it our duty to read the signs of the times. Today the thoughts of thousands are streaming in to him and his advisers, and they want to find in him the expression and the embodiment of their will to the future and their hopes for the future. May the genius of our history enlighten him and all of us. But beyond mere thinking it is the prerogative of the *Herr* to make the leap from thought to

action. The Kaiser will in the final instance have to reach decisive conclusions about the substantial bases of our domestic and foreign political existence. With the sense that we are coming up against just such hours, we rally around him more firmly than usual, and we call out the birthday greeting with feeling for the great responsibility, with rage for our opponents' persistent desire to oppress us still, despite all the failure and all the victims, with hope for a future of new and noble peace, with trust in the divine leadership of our lot:

God bless and save His Majesty the German Kaiser and King of Prussia, Wilhelm II!

Translation: KH