# History

One of the main tensions that structured historical thought from the eighteenth century onwards was that between the universal and the particular. Many scholars in history, philology, and philosophy accepted the Herderian insight that each historical culture is to be viewed as an “individual” – unique, unrepeatable, and centred around values and experiences that may be drastically different from those embraced at present. On the other hand, this theme was rarely taken to imply historical relativism, since it was usually accompanied by a general commitment to the main tenets of universal history, that is the idea that the history of mankind is a unified process with a general spiritual meaning.

Herder himself rejects an abstract universalism that detaches norms from feelings and concrete historical forms of life. He likewise criticizes the conception of linear historical progress. In his view, the idea that different historical cultures can be ranked hierarchically is nothing but a self-serving triumphalism that uncritically projects present-day standards onto the past. But while Herder’s recognition of radical “historical difference” may seem to pull in the direction of relativism, Herder maintains that his pluralist vision of historical cultures is compatible with universalism. He articulates his universalism both in reflections on a common human nature, and on history as the realization of God’s plan in the world.

Although Hegel’s systematic speculative philosophy may seem diametrically opposed to Herders often meandering reflections, Hegel’s philosophy of history too is shaped by the struggle to reconcile the particular and the universal. Like Herder, Hegel is seeking show how the seemingly abstract norms of reason are concrete in history. In order to accomplish this task, he reconceptualises the tension between the universal and the particular in terms of a relation of expression that pertains between the absolute and the relative. In Hegel, the ever-changing *Volksgeist* is the relative expression of the *Weltgeist*, which in turn is the historical manifestation of the absolute spirit’s movement towards self-consciousness. Of course, Hegel thinks of this process in progressive terms: history has a general meaning, because the “stages” of historical development are identical with the “stages” of the self-development of the spirit towards freedom, self-consciousness and self-identity.

The professionalization of history as *Wissenschaft* in the early nineteenth century went hand in hand with staunch opposition to this “speculative approach”. From Ranke to Droysen and Burckhardt, historians were united in rejecting what to them seemed like a schematic a priorism that distorted history for the sake of deriving easy generalizations. Even though most historians did accept the idea of a universal history of mankind, they thought that knowledge of the universal had to emerge as a hard-won result of the rigorous application of source criticism, the meticulous collection of particular facts and the judicious compilation of individual national histories.

With this newly forming methodological awareness, the question of how to bridge the gap between the present and “historical others” received a new urgency as well. Although often not formulated in terms of relativism, understanding the past came to be viewed as an increasingly problematic affair: too vast seemed the plurality of historical cultures, to great the divides between them. Finding solutions to this problem was one of the central strands that united the hermeneutic tradition and thinkers as diverse as Schleiermacher, Droysen, Dilthey and Gadamer. In Herder, it was primarily the commonality of human nature that allowed for the possibility of understanding “historical others”. Schleiermacher places a stronger emphasis on the methodological process that moves between the particular and the general, the part and the whole, allowing one to approach - yet never fully reach - an understanding of past linguistic expressions. Dilthey combines both Herderian and Schleiermachian arguments, and in his later work uncovers inter-subjective understanding as the methodological basis not just of textual criticism and history, but of all the *Geisteswissenschaften*. A slightly different solution to the problem of understanding can be found in Droysen and Gadamer, who seek the basis for understanding not primarily in human commonalities, *Nachempfinden* and methodological processes that mediate between part and whole, but rather in historical continuity and tradition.

The methodological discussions in history, philology and hermeneutics were not without repercussions for philosophy. Towards the late nineteenth century, philosophers began to warn of “historicism”, which they considered tantamount to relativism and nihilism. Neo-Kantian philosophers such as Windelband and Rickert, but also Dilthey, and later Troeltsch were united in their worry that the thorough historicization of all life and culture undermined universal and necessary values. An additional problem emerged for philosophy itself: as philosophers jettisoned the Hegelian assumption that the historical development of philosophy expressed a systematic schema, they began to worry that philosophical truths too might be relative to historical time, nationality and culture.

The resulting debates on the historicity of values and philosophical knowledge often intersected with debates over *Weltanschauung.* Philosophers wanted to maintain a role for themselves in adjudicating the conflicts between “materialistic”, “positivist”, various religious, and “historicist” worldviews. Here, historical plurality came to stand in for political plurality. When Troeltsch worries that historicism leads to the “anarchy of values”, he does so in a situation in which the “historicization” of philosophy and theology has seemingly rendered these disciplines incapable of defending a consistent and convincing worldview. And yet, many held out hope that history bore not just the problem of relativism, but also its solution, that, as Dilthey famously put it, “the knife of historical relativism... which has cut to pieces all metaphysics and religion … also [brings] about healing.”

The contributions of this section explore the relations between history, philosophy and relativism, as they unfolded from the late eighteenth to the mid twentieth century.

Niels Wildschut analyzes the theological foundations of the historical thought of Johann Gottfried Herder and Leopold Ranke. He argues that it is only within their theology of history that Herder and Ranke appreciate the historical, individual and diverse. But at the same time, their theology of history ensures that Herder and Ranke approach history from a monist starting-point and with the intent to establish the ultimate harmony of history.

Katherina Kinzel focuses on how Wilhelm Windelband and Wilhelm Dilthey responded to the historicization of philosophy. She traces how both philosophers sought to fend off historical relativism by defending the idea of an ahistorical and permanent stratum of philosophical thinking. Kinzel shows however, that this strategy was a failure: although they succeeded in blocking historical versions of relativism, both authors did so at the cost of incurring a relativism vis-à-vis philosophical systems.

Kristin Gjedal recapitulates Hans-Georg Gadamer’s reception of the hermeneutic tradition. She analyses Gadamer’s suggested response to what he conceived as the historicist and relativist shortcomings of hermeneutics. Gadamer’s alternative approach views the existence of a continuous tradition as entirely fundamental to our self-understanding as well as our understanding of others. Gjesdal criticizes Gadamer’s concept of tradition and contrasts it with Herder’s more self-critical approach to historical understanding.