



## Part 1. Introduction: Philosophy and History

### 1. *Fascinated by history*

Think about why we are fascinated by history. All of those outstanding individuals and exotic peoples. The rise and fall of civilizations—and wondering why that happens. How *did* classical Greece achieve its Golden Age—the age of Socrates and Pericles, Euripides and Hippocrates? What explains the remarkable confluence of so many outstanding individuals in one era?

Why, almost two thousand years later, did the Italian Renaissance happen? Leonardo, Michelangelo, Machiavelli, Raphael—again an incredible outpouring of genius in the arts, sciences, and politics.

Jumping ahead three centuries: What made possible the Industrial Revolution and its awesome outpouring of productivity? The ancient Chinese and the ancient Romans made impressive technological advancements—but nothing on the scale of the Industrial Revolution. Why did the Industrial Revolution first take root initially in England and Scotland? Why not in Burma or Botswana?

Or what, by contrast, explains major historical declines? Why did the Roman Empire collapse? The most powerful civilization of the ancient world imploded and became

defenseless before successive waves of barbarian invasion. And before the Romans, the powerful military empires of the Hittites, the Assyrians, and the Babylonians also collapsed. Is there a common pattern at work here?

Why did the French Revolution go so horribly wrong, descending in a reign of paranoia, fratricide, and terror? Why, by contrast, did the American Revolution, in many ways fighting the same kind of battle and subject to the same desperate pressures, not go the same self-destructive route? How, a century and a half later, could the most educated nation in Europe become a Nazi dictatorship?

All these questions raise issues of dramatic historical change, for better or worse. But we can also ask questions about long periods during which no dramatic changes took place. Consider the San people of the Kalahari area in Southern Africa, sometimes called Bushmen. Experts estimate that for 10,000 years the San have lived the same way for generation after generation. Let us put that in perspective. If a generation is twenty-five years or so, then 10,000 years means 400 generations of sameness. By contrast, it has been only about twenty generations since Columbus crossed the Atlantic—and consider how much has changed in Europe and the Americas since then.

Yet even the 10,000 years of the San people is dwarfed by the estimated 35,000 years that the Aborigines of Australia have existed in essentially the same way generation after generation. 35,000 years ago is approximately when Neanderthal Man was becoming extinct. Why did the cultures of the San and the Aborigines *not* change for such unimaginably long stretches of time?

## ***2. What is philosophy of history?***

These are fascinating questions. As historians we study interesting individuals and cultures to understand how they lived, why they lived the way they did, and what impact they had on the course of human events. As philosophers we think more broadly and abstractly. We learn our lessons from the historians and ask: Are there broader explanations we can find in the dramatic rises and falls of cultures, or in the static nature of others?

History, from this perspective, is a huge laboratory of experiments in human living. Some of those experiments have been wildly successful, some have achieved middling results, leading their cultures to eke out an existence across the generations—and some have been outright disasters, causing misery and death on a large scale. Can we identify the fundamental causes at work? Can we learn why some cultures flourish while others stagnate, collapse, or descend into horror? Is there a moral to the story of history?

Let us turn to one major experiment, one that turned out to be one of the darkest eras in human history.

