

Johann Gottfried Herder, “German Peoples” (1784)

Abstract

Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) was a German poet, theologian, and philosopher. In his *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1784–1791) [translated into English in 1800 as *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*], Herder deals with the science of mankind from a historical-philosophical perspective. Among a range of other topics, Herder describes the composition of the earth, plants and animals, and the genus-specific characteristics of mankind. He then discusses earth's various peoples and the influence of climate and language on their development. One section is dedicated to the “German peoples” and the character of this nation. The excerpt below is taken from the 1800 English translation.

Source

CHAPTER III.

What is Climate? And what Effect has it in forming the Body and Mind of Man?

The two most fixed points of our Globe are the poles: without these it could not revolve, nay probably could not be a globe. If we knew the genesis of the poles, and the laws and effects of the magnetism of our Earth on the various bodies it contains, should we not have found the warp, which Nature, in the formation of beings, afterwards variously interwove with other superior powers? But, notwithstanding the many and fine experiments that have been made, as we yet know little of it on the whole, we are still in the dark with respect to the basis of all climates from the polar regions. At some period, perhaps, the magnet will render us the same service in the sphere of physical powers, as it has already full as unexpectedly on sea and land.

The revolution of our Globe about its own axis, and round the Sun, affords us a nearer indication of climates; but here too the application of even generally admitted laws is difficult and deceptive. The zones of the ancients have not been confirmed by our later knowledge of foreign parts, as, physically considered, they were founded on ignorance of them. It is the same with our calculations of heat and cold from the quantity and angle of the solar beams. As a mathematical problem, the effect of these has been industriously calculated with the greatest accuracy; but the mathematician himself would deem it an abuse of his rule if the philosopher, in writing the history of climates, should build conclusions on it without admitting exceptions. In one place the proximity of the sea, in another the wind, here the height of the land, there its depth, in a fifth place the vicinity of mountains, in a sixth rain or mist, gives such a particular local qualification to the general law, that we frequently find the most opposite climates in places bordering upon each other. Beside this, it is evident from modern experiments, that every living being has its own mode of receiving and evolving heat; nay, that the more elaborate the organization of a creature, and the more active the vital power it exerts, the greater capacity it possesses of generating relative heat and cold. The old position, that man can live only in a climate, the heat of which does not exceed that of the blood, has been confuted by experience: on the other hand, the modern systems of the origin and effect of animal heat are far from having attained sufficient perfection, for us in any wise to think of a climatology of the human frame merely, not to mention the faculties of the mind, and their arbitrary application. Everyone indeed knows, that heat extends and relaxes the fibres, attenuates the fluids, and promotes perspiration; and that thus it is capable in time of rendering the solids light and spongy, &c. This law remains incontestible on the whole and in consequence, from it and its antagonist, cold, many physical phenomena have been already explained: but general

inferences from this principle, or from a part of it, as relaxation or perspiration for instance, to whole nations and countries, nay to the most delicate functions of the human mind, and the most accidental ordinances of society, are all in some measure hypothetical; and this the more, in proportion as the head that considers and arranges them is acute and systematic. They are contradicted almost step by step, by examples from history, or even by physiological principles; because too many powers, partly opposite to each other, are in conjunction. It has even been objected to the great Montesquieu, that he has erected his climatic spirit of laws on the fallacious experiment of a sheep's tongue. It is true, we are ductile clay in the hand of Climate; but her fingers mould so variously, and the laws, that counteract them, are so numerous, that perhaps the genius of mankind alone is capable of combining the relations of all these powers in one whole.

Heat and cold are not the sole principles of the atmosphere, that are upon us; for it appears from late observations, to be a magazine of other powers, which combine with us to our detriment or advantage. In it operates the stream of electric fire; a powerful substance, of the influence of which on the animal machine we yet know little: and we are fully as ignorant how it is received into the human body, and what changes it undergoes in it. We live by the inspiration of air: yet its balsam, our vital aliment, is a mystery to us. If now we add the various and almost innumerable local modifications of its component parts, from the effluvia of different substances; if we recollect the frequent instances of extraordinary, often terrible, and for ages inextinguishable diseases, that have arisen from an invisible malignant feed, to which the physician is unable to give any other name than that of miasma; if we reflect on the secret poison, that has brought us the smallpox, the plague, syphilis, and many other disorders, which in the course of time have disappeared; and consider how little we know, not of the *harmattan* and *simoom*, the *sirocco* and north-east wind of Tatar, but of the constitution and effects of our own winds: how many introductory labours shall we perceive to be wanting, ere we arrive at a physiologico-pathology, to say nothing of a climatology, of all the sensitive and cogitative faculties of man! In the meantime, every judicious attempt deserves its laurels, and posterity will have many honourable ones, to bestow on the present times.

Lastly, the elevation or depression of a region, its nature and products, the food and drink men enjoy in it, the mode of life they pursue, the labours in which they are employed, their clothing, even their ordinary attitudes, their arts and pleasures, with a multitude of other circumstances, which considerably influence their lives, all belong to the picture of changeable climate. What human hand can reduce this chaos of causes and effects to a world of order, in which every individual thing, and every individual region, shall enjoy its rights, and no one receive too much or too little? The best and only thing we can do is to examine particular regions climatically, after the manner of Hippocrates, with his sagacious simplicity, and then slowly, slowly deduce general inferences. The natural historian and physician are here the pupils of Nature, and the teachers of the philosopher. To them we and posterity also are already indebted for several materials, collected in different regions, toward a general doctrine of climates and their effects upon man.— But here we must content ourselves with general remarks, as we cannot descend to particular observations.

1. *As our Earth is a globe, and the firm land a mountain raised above the sea, a climatic community, affecting the life of everything living, is promoted on it by various causes.* Not only is the climate of every region periodically changed by the alternation of day and night, and the revolution of the seasons; but the jarring of the elements, the mutual action of sea and land upon each other, the situation of mountains and plains, the periodical winds, that arise from the motion of the Globe, the changes of the season, the appearance and disappearance of the Sun, and many less important causes, maintain this salutiferous union of the elements, without which everything would stagnate in drowsiness and corruption. We are surrounded by an atmosphere; we live in an electric ocean: but both, and probably the magnetic fluid with them, are in continual motion. The sea emits vapours; the mountains attract them and send them down in rain and streams on every side. Thus winds relieve each other: thus years, or periods

of years, fulfil their climatic days. Thus different regions and ages follow one another; and everything on our Globe combines in one general connexion. Had the Earth been flat, or angular, as the Chinese have dreamed, its corners might have produced climatic monsters, incompatible with its present regular structure, and diffusive movement. The Hours dance in a circle round the throne of Jove, and what is formed under their feet is only an imperfect perfection, because all originates from the union of things various in kind: but from an internal love and conjunction with one another, the children of Nature, sensible Regularity and Beauty, are everywhere produced.

2. *The habitable land of our Earth is accumulated in regions, where most living beings act in the mode best adapted to them; and this fixation of the quarters of the Globe influences all its climates.* Why does the cold in the southern hemisphere commence so near the line? The natural philosopher answers, "because there is so little land, so that the cold winds and ice of the south pole extend themselves to a great distance." Thus we perceive what would have been our fate, had the whole of our firm land been scattered about in islands. Now three quarters of the Globe, lying in contact, warm each other: the fourth, being remote from them, is on this account colder; and in the South Sea, a very little beyond the line, degeneracy and deformity begin with the deficiency of the land. Fewer species of the more perfect animals also dwell there. The southern hemisphere was made the grand reservoir of water for our Globe, that the northern might enjoy a better climate. Thus, whether we consider the World geographically, or climatically, we find Nature intended mankind to be neighbourly beings, dwelling together, and imparting to each other climatic warmth, and other benefits, as well as the plague, diseases, and climatic vices.

3. *By the formation of the land on the frame of the mountains, not only were its climates infinitely diversified for the great variety of living beings, but the degeneration of the human species was provided against as much as possible.* Mountains were necessary to the Earth: but we find Mungals and Tibetians only on one ridge of them; the lofty Cordilleras, and many others their fellows, are uninhabitable. Barren deserts, also, are rare, from the mountainous structure of the Earth: for the mountains rise as conductors of the clouds and pour out from their horns of plenty fertilizing streams. The barren shore, the bleak or marshy border of the sea, is everywhere more recently formed land; and consequently men have taken possession of it later, and when their powers were already improved. The vale of Quito was inhabited unquestionably before Tierra del Fuego; Cashmire, sooner than New Holland or Nova Zembla. The middle and broadest part of the earth, the land of the finest climate between sea and mountains, was the nursery of our species, and is even now the most fully peopled part of the Globe.

There is no question, but, as climate is a compound of powers and influences, to which both plants and animals contribute, and which everything that has breath promotes in its reciprocating mutations, so man is placed in it as a sovereign of the Earth, to alter it by art. Since he stole fire from Heaven and rendered steel obedient to his hand; since he has made not only beasts, but his fellow men also, subservient to his will, and trained both them and plants to his purposes; he has contributed to the alteration of climate in various ways. Once Europe was a dank forest; and other regions, at present well cultivated, were the same. They are now exposed to the rays of the Sun; and the inhabitants themselves have changed with the climate. The face of Egypt would have been nothing more than the slime of the Nile, but for the art and policy of man. He has gained it from the flood; and both there, and in farther Asia, the living creation has adapted itself to the artificial climate. We may consider mankind, therefore, as a band of bold though diminutive giants, gradually descending from the mountains, to subjugate the earth, and change climates with their feeble arms. How far they are capable of going in this respect futurity will show.

4. Finally, if it be allowable to speak in general terms on a subject, which rests so completely on particular cases, local or historical, I will insert, with a little variation, some cautions, that Bacon gives with respect to the history of revolutions. The action of climate extends itself indeed to bodies of all kinds, but chiefly to the more delicate, to fluids, the air, and the ether. It operates rather on the mass, than on the individual: yet on this, through that. It is

not confined to points of time but prevails through long periods: though it is often late before it becomes obvious, and then perhaps is rendered so by slight circumstances. Lastly, climate does not force, but incline: it gives the imperceptible disposition, which strikes us indeed in the general view of the life and manners of indigenous nations but is very difficult to be delineated distinctly. Sometime possibly a traveller may be found, who will pursue without prejudice or exaggeration the spirit of climate. At present our duty is rather to note the living powers, for which each climate is formed; and which, by their existence, induce in it various changes and modifications.

Source of English translation: Johann Gottfried Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*. Translated by T. Churchill. New York: Bergman, 1966 (1st edition: London, 1800), pp. 172–77. Available online at: <https://archive.org/details/outlinesaphiloso00churgoog/page/n200>

Source of original German text: Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*. vol. 2. Riga and Leipzig, 1785, pp. 93–104. Available online at: http://www.deutschestextarchiv.de/herder_geschichte02_1785/105

Recommended Citation: Johann Gottfried Herder, “German Peoples” (1784), published in: German History Intersections, <<https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/germanness/ghis:document-296>> [July 06, 2025].