

**LECTURES UPON  
THE PHILOSOPHY  
OF HISTORY**

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Lectures upon the Philosophy of History by William G. T. Shedd

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**WILLIAM G. T. SHEDD**

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PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY.

BY

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## INTRODUCTORY NOTE.

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THE substance of this book was originally written, in the winter of 1853-4, as an introduction to courses of prelections in the department of Ecclesiastical History. This will account for its prevailing reference to this department, as well as for the tone of direct address which occasionally characterizes it. At the same time, it is hoped that the work will be found to have a general reference to all species of historical inquiry, and may contribute to deepen and widen the growing interest in the most comprehensive of the sciences.

*Theological Seminary, Andover,* }  
*Jan. 2, 1856.* }



# THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY.

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## LECTURE I.

### THE ABSTRACT IDEA OF HISTORY.

IN order to the successful investigation of any subject, it is necessary, first of all, to form a comprehensive and clear conception of its essential nature. — Without such an antecedent general apprehension, the mind is at a loss where to begin, and which way to proceed. The true idea of any object, is a species of preparatory knowledge which throws light over the whole field of inquiry, and introduces an orderly method into the whole course of examination. It is the clue which leads through the labyrinth; the key to the problem to be solved.

It may appear strange and irrational, at first glance, to require a knowledge of the *intrinsic* nature of that which is to be examined, in order that it may be examined, and before the examination. At first sight, it may seem as if this perception of the true idea of a

thing, should be the result, and not the antecedent, of inquiry, and that nothing of an *a priori* nature should be permitted to enter into the investigations of the human mind in any department of knowledge. To require in the outset a comprehensive idea, of History e. g., and then to use this as an instrument of investigation, seems to invert the true order of things, and to convert ignorance into knowledge by some shorter method than that of study and reflection. But what is the matter of fact? Does the scientific mind start off upon its inquiries in every direction, without any pre-conceived ideas as to where it is going, and what it expects to find? Is the human understanding such a *tabula rasa*, that it contributes nothing of its own, towards the discovery of truth, but, like the mirror, servilely reflects all that is brought before it, without regard to reflections and distortions? We have only to watch the movements of our minds to find that we carry with us into every field of investigation an antecedent idea, which gives more or less direction to our studies, and goes far to determine the result to which we come. We are not now concerned with the reasonableness or unreasonableness of this fact; we are now only alluding to it as an actual matter of fact which appears in the history of every studious and reflecting mind. Even if we deem it to be irrational

and groundless, and for this reason endeavor to do away with it in our studies, we find it to be impossible. If we begin the study of Philosophy, it is with a general conception of its nature; and one that is continually re-appearing in our philosophizing. If we commence the examination of Christianity itself, we find that we already have an idea of its distinctive character as a religion, which exerts a very great influence upon our inquiry into its constituent elements, and particularly upon our construction of its doctrines.\* The demand therefore so constantly made by the Rationalist of every century, that the mind must be entirely vacant of *a priori* ideas and initiating preconceptions; in his phrasology, must be free from "prejudices;" in order that it may make a truly scientific examination, is a demand that cannot be complied with, even if there were a disposition to do so on the part of the inquirer, and is not complied with even on the part of him who makes it. With the *origin* of such guiding ideas we have no concern at this time. It is

\* This idea contains such pre-judgments as; that Christianity is a *supernatural* religion; that its author is *Divine*; that its truths are *mysterious*, i. e. are infinite, and therefore cannot be exhausted by the finite intelligence. Notice that these judgments are *a priori*; i. e. they flow from the nature of the case. For if Christianity is a religion differing in kind from all natural religions, then the above elements are necessarily involved in the conception and theory of it.