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December 30, 2016

### Should Historians Take Sides?

A goal of historians is, to paraphrase Leopold Ranke, to present history as it actually was, free of bias. Ideally should not take sides; only giving a sober analysis of events. This, however, is not possible, even with the best of intentions. Historians do not research, write, or lecture in a vacuum, being subject to the same pressures and criticisms as anyone else. Thus, why should we study history if, as I will argue, it is often prejudiced from the outset? This is the central question of this essay.

David Hume believed the study of history and pursuit of knowledge are synonymous. More than that, studying history “opens the door to many other parts, and affords materials to most of the sciences.”[1] In effect then, history can be considered the base upon which all our other knowledge rests. And because it is the base of all other knowledge, studying history results in the production of *new* knowledge.

Advancing further, Immanuel Kant argued history should be written with nine basic, transcendent theses kept in mind and that ‘history’ is the retelling of a story; the story of humanity. Each person has a will and history is the totality of these willed human actions, principled from a general will. For him, our world is governed in accordance with natural laws, which lead to an unknown plan, known only to God. “History is concerned with giving an account of these phenomena.”[2] Studying history helps make sense of the mess our world is.[3] Paradoxically, if we are all governed according to preexisting laws and we have no way of knowing *the plan*, then how can we ever be free?

The path to freedom is achieved through reason. It is through reason that we better ourselves, actualizing our potential:

By a continued process of enlightenment, a beginning is made towards establishing a way of thinking which can with time transform the primitive natural capacity for moral discrimination into definite practical principles; and thus a pathologically enforced social union is transformed into a moral whole[4]

If each person improves, it follows then that humanity does collectively.

Georg Hegel developed the idea of the importance of 'reason' further. However, Hegel differs from Kant believing if one uses reason effectively, the point can be reached where things make sense of themselves, so that they are both self-legitimizing and self-justifying and become rational, consequently making Kant's unknown plan known. Hegel wrote:

Reason rules the world...Reason is the infinite content, the very stuff of all essence and truth, which gives its own activity to be worked up...It lives on itself...Just as reason is its own presupposition and absolute goal, so it is the activation of that goal in world history.[5]

He reminds us that one who uses reason effectively will appear "like a sober man among the drunken ones." [6]

In school, children are instructed history is important to learn so that we can learn from past mistakes which will help us to avoid them in the future.[7] Yet, at the moment important decisions are made, world leaders usually do not consult the annals of history. Hegel argued:

Nations and governments have never learned anything from history, nor acted in accordance with the lessons to be derived from it. Each era has such particular circumstances, such individual situations, that decisions can only be made from within the era itself.[8]

For Hegel, there is no way to predict the future, but you can predict the types of societal structures that might be around and make projections from that. By studying history you can get a sense for the direction that society is headed, but it will only get you so far. We can only make accurate projections a couple decades into the future.[9] Beyond that, the leaps and bounds future societies are destined to take make such projections mere speculation. The goal of studying history then is not *necessarily* to learn from the past, but rather to make projections into the future.

Why should we study history then? Friedrich Nietzsche believed the answer lies in bettering our lives and history in moderation is good for us. Amongst many ideas for which he is known is his classification of history as one of mankind's 'needs.' Normally we associate needs with things like air, water, food, shelter, etc. While these are necessary for us to function, they can also be abused; as can history.

This is why Nietzsche warned against luxuries, because a luxury does not correspond to a need. If we eat too much we will become sluggish and tired. Similarly, he warned that the weight of too much history can be burdensome,[10] a condition he likens to “a huge quantity of indigestible stones of knowledge.”[11] Worse is that when this occurs “modern man suffers from a weakened personality”[12] and won’t even recognize this weakness until it is too late. The lesson is clear; if man treats history as a luxury he will endanger himself.

To do their job, historians are forced to look at past events and take into account the context in which those events occurred and how that context changed over time. Scientists can change variables to affect the outcome of experiments in order to test hypotheses. Historians, though, are unable to alter past events or repeat them, which means their only recourse is to interpret the series of one-time events they study. But interpretation is where the problem originates. Because human beings are liable to subjectivity and prejudice, so too are historians; even those who do their best to maintain an open mind. When historians do ‘take sides,’ oftentimes this is in order to meet certain agendas.[13] Whether this distortion is for economic or political reasons hardly matters. It is morally wrong because it robs humanity of whole swaths of history, which could be used to better all of our lives.

Still, when these distortions—not at all rare—occur, it is normally done unintentionally. Indeed, most historians make a conscious effort to avoid using counterfactuals when deciphering the past. By maintaining the attitude that *it happened* and avoiding playing the “what if” game, the hope is that certain histories will be less likely embellished at the expense of others.

While such a tactic may be nobly grounded, it is unrealistic. As a society we *want* to examine history’s ‘what might have happened’ to satisfy our entertainment. TV channels such as The History Channel and Military History have been set up for this purpose.[14] Playing a revisionist historian can be great fun but it is this attitude that begins a cycle of perpetuation in which historians exaggerate certain events more than others, not to intentionally mislead us, but to sensationalize history for the consumption

of the public. This perpetuation is enabled by *us*, the public who consciously or unconsciously encourages this sensationalization of history.

Hume believed that when writing history, historians should aspire to:

see all the human race, from the beginning of time, pass, as it were in review before us, appearing in all their true colors, without any of those disguises which during their lifetime, so much perplexed the judgment of the beholders.[15]

Doing so is easier said than done. Historians are not immune to external criticism or pressure; they do not write or conduct research in isolated ‘ivory towers.’ Whether they know it or not, historians have agendas when they write history, agendas that are made by the audience for which historians do their work. The best that can be done is to avoid sensationalizing history in the first place.

### Works Cited

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[1] David Hume, “Of the Study of History,” accessed December 26, 2016.  
<http://www.econlib.org/library/LFBooks/Hume/hmMPL45.html>.

[2] Immanuel Kant, *Kant: Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 41.

[3] One need only hear a passing police or ambulance siren to be reminded of this.

[4] Immanuel Kant, *Kant: Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 44-5.

[5] Leo Rauch, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History: With Selections from the Philosophy of Right* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1988), 12.

[6] *Ibid.*, 14.

[7] This lesson is drawn from George Santayana's famous quote, Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.

[8] Leo Rauch, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History: With Selections from the Philosophy of Right* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1988), 8.

[9] How many Americans in July 1869 believed that 100 years later two of their future countrymen would walk on the Moon?

[10] Hayden White wrote a famous essay on this topic called "The Burden of History."

[11] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 78.

[12] *Ibid.*, 83.

[13] This is where the traditional argument of writing history for the victors and not the vanquished comes in.

[14] Why else would television programs about Nazi plans for North American conquest be aired over and over when the Luftwaffe did not even have airplanes that could reach the United States from Europe? Surely the historians that are consulted are aware of this. The answer is because such programs are good for ratings.

[15] David Hume, "Of the Study of History," accessed December 26, 2016.

<http://www.econlib.org/library/LFBooks/Hume/hmMPL45.html>.