Why Study History?

Many people live without any exposure to formal history. The dictum that those who do not understand the past are doomed to repeat it is generally true; but, at the same time many people live perfectly satisfying lives without giving much thought to history. Nevertheless, all people—merely by living in an economy, society, political system and culture—interact with and derive meaning from systems that people in the past helped to establish. All people are, therefore, implicitly historians.

People choose to study history formally, then, because it connects one's life to the lives of other human beings who lived in the past, thus enhancing the meaning of one's own life. History is a fundamental human endeavor that defines one's humanity. In going about everyday activity, every person constructs a story line to plot his or her life. Asking someone who he is means asking him where he has been, what he has done and experienced, where he is going, and what he wants to do. The basic questions we all face—"What do you want to be?" or "What do you do?"—are inextricably bound up with "Who are you?" The answers to all of these questions lie in how well we have formulated the narrative of our lives. Happiness in life could be defined as successfully acting as the protagonist of the plot one has written and directed oneself. This general process of personal development is analogous to the practice of history. As individuals pursue their own lives and create meaningful personal narratives, so, too, on a larger scale across time and space, do families, clans, groups, classes, and nations.

The study of history has practical value, too, in that it helps develop one's analytic ability. As written by historians, history makes use of intellectual methods that are employed by a wide variety of disciplines and uses them in distinctive ways that are shaped by the particular nature of history. By understanding the differences between the methods, assumptions, subjects, and practice of history and those of other disciplines, one sharpens one's intellectual and analytic skills in important, even essential, ways. The subject and methods of history, therefore make an understanding of some history a foundation for any education, whether its major focus is the liberal arts, the sciences, or professional, technical, or vocational training.

Historians use rational scientific methods as the study of statistics and data, but their ultimate goal is to tell stories that have a plot. The way they organize the information they gather into that plot is really an interpretation or a theory about how or why something happened the way it did. Many facts seem undisputed—the defenestration of Prague happened in May of 1618; World War I erupted in August of 1914—but the significance of those facts, or even the full story of what happened, is less evident than one might think. To understand and explain the past, the historian must develop a thesis, test that thesis, and then defend it, employing the evidence that he or she has gathered.

The type of evidence available to historians is what makes history distinctive. Historians have access only to the evidence that has physically survived over time. Historians of the recent past may have far more evidence than any one person could ever absorb, but even this is not a complete picture. Sometimes new evidence becomes available when a set of documents, letters, or papers previously believed to have been lost come to light. But in most cases historians find and use new evidence by developing new methods of analysis, asking new questions, or pursuing new story lines that give new relevance to evidence that was previously ignored. Often, historians have evidence—such as diaries, journals, personal letters, or secret

documents—that contemporaries living through the events did not have or even know existed. Or they may have no more than fragments of evidence, such as a single statement or a partial list, that do more to obscure than to clarify an understanding of the event in question. Most of the time, historians have an intriguing mix of material that no contemporary would have had, combined with a loss of much material that contemporaries took for granted. Out of this surviving database, historians must develop a theory and try, as best they can, to demonstrate it. Add to these concerns the fact that most historical evidence is circumstantial, rather than the direct testimony of witnesses. Often, historians try to construct a story with little more than a scrap of evidence that places an individual or a group in a time and place but not address the historians' specific questions. Historians must be creative in searching the documents they have in ways that will help to answer their questions. In some ways, the database available to historians is analogous to our memories about events in our past, which we have broader perspective on now but find hard to re-create in total. Given the uniqueness of the database, no historian will ever achieve the finality of the scientist. No historical thesis can be indisputably "proved" because in any human activity there is room for interpretation in telling the story. Many historical theses would fail to convince most trial juries beyond a reasonable doubt. Interpretations of a historical event can vary as widely as the range of views it is possible to have about current events or people living today. History thus uses the scientific method, but within a broader interpretive framework often supported by evidence that is not definitive. Every time one tries to understand the past, therefore, one gains insight into the uncertainty, biases, and fluidity of any knowledge.

The fluidity of history sometimes makes it more like a detective story or a novel than an experiment in a laboratory, and the practice of history as written adds to that similarity. Historians generally try to present their theses in the colloquial, nontechnical language in which people speak and read in everyday life. As a rule, they present their stories in narrative form, though often with an analytic foundation. The fact that history tries to fuse an understanding of different areas of activity into a general narrative adds to its intellectual power. History is the art of understanding social, economic, political, and cultural activity, then connecting these elements and trying to explain how they interacted to shape the general course of human events. By studying history, we can develop the powerful skill of articulating complicated ideas in a simple, straightforward way. Acquiring the skill to rationally examine much of the complex real world around us, develop a thesis about it, and argue the evidence to sustain a thesis is, indeed, one of the primary goals of a college education. History adds to that skill an ability to recognize human complexity within the context of its time and place. While putting a powerful intellectual tool in our hands, history also cultivates and satisfies our deepest human impulses.

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