An Analysis of History
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In reading through the *Philosophy of History* entry in the Stanford Encyclopedia of History[1], I came away unsatisfied. The essay took a number of things for granted, and seemed to come at describing "history" from an observer perspective, suggesting a desired gap between the author of the accounting and the historical event(s) described. It failed to even reference foundational original texts such as Polybius, Livy, Herodotus, or Thucydides. And finally, while it made great efforts to define history, it didn't ask the fundamentally important question: what is history, and why does it exist?

What is history?

If we go back to our foundations, the concept of "history" is fuzzy. The earliest known text of Western Culture, the *Iliad*, is poetic and mythic in that it focuses on telling a story and communicating ideas rather than adhering to a fact-based rigidity we would expect today. The first written text we could actually call a "history" would be the accountings of Herodotus, which are only partially recognizable to us as history. Conversely, the standard which modern historians employ was set by Thucydides, who takes a markedly different approach. Because there is much debate about their respective approaches, we should examine them both to begin to answer our questions.

Herodotus's *Histories* (430 BC) is a fascinating tome that can't quite figure out what it wants to be. It begins as one thing, morphs into something else, and ends as a completely different work. I like to call Book 1 the "bridge" chapter, because it is filled with endless stories and fables, giving equal veracity to mythologic gods and verified historical figures. In my opinion, it serves as a bridge between the pre-classical world of poetry and mythology and the world in which Herodotus lives. There is almost no narrative structure, and the book at times reads like a written pot-luck dinner of legends. We don't have to guess why he wrote this work because he tells us in the first sentence:

> "I, Herodotus, of Halicarnassus, am here setting forth my history, that time may not draw the color from what man has brought into being, nor those great and wonderful deeds, manifested by both Greeks and barbarians, fail of their report, and together with all of this, the reason why they fought one another."[2]

It is worth noting that the word "history" here is a modern interpretation. The original text uses the word "ἱστορίης," which, according to Perseus, means "inquiry" or "recounting," despite the fact that it phonetically sounds like our word "history." I emphasize this point so that we do not confuse Herodotus' purpose statement with how we view history today.

His readers will quickly find that he is fascinated by the world around him, and does his best to document things. He travels to many parts of the known world, and writes down what people tell him, sometimes giving two or three versions of the same story. He is famous for his "digressions" in which he happily breaks narrative flow because something catches his eye, and he will go into great detail on seemingly insignificant things. At times his writing has the same feeling as that produced by a director who captures in film moments that are not relevant to the plot, simply to create immersion. In a way, his opening sentence is also a summary of his book: he begins with the pot-luck, transitions into an almost anthropological study of the known world, and ends with the Persian war.

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[1] https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/history/

[2] Translation by David Grene, 1987

Thucydides takes a very different approach. He opens his *History of the Peloponnesian War* (c. 400 BC) with a major event, the Corcyran civil war, and describes how an isolated incident festered and then erupted into what might have been called a World War in his time, between Athens and Sparta. This first chapter is so compelling and meticulously detailed that it has been revisited many times, usually when yet another major crisis is threatened between major powers, such as the tension that happened after WW2 between the United States and the Soviet Union. Graham Allison, an American political scientist, coined the term "Thucydides Trap" to describe the natural progression when one great power sees another as a looming threat.

In his opening, like Herodotus, Thucydides explains his purpose behind writing his work:

> "Thucydides, an Athenian, wrote the history of the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians, beginning at the moment that it broke out, and believing that it would be a great war, and more worthy of relation than any that had preceded it."[3]

Unlike Herodotus, Thucydides becomes very involved in his own narrative. Rather than simply acting as a relay for unverified stories and fables, Thucydides is quite clear that he is documenting the war as a lesson for future generations to provide that they might avoid such a conflict. He tries to analyse what happened, asks hard questions, and focuses on the "why" in addition to the "what." In this way, his story is analytical, and even attempts to be preventative.

Thus we have two competing origin stories for how our concept of history came to be, and an argument over what history *should* be. The first view is descriptive: it tries to paint an unbiased and objective picture of what things existed, what events happened, and serves as an act of preservation. We might ascribe the inclusion or exclusion of certain people or events to the biases or knowledge of the author. I would even argue that this is what comes to mind for the modern person when they hear the word "historian."

Of equal importance is the analytic view: instead of focusing on the "what," this view focuses on the "why." We can see this in Thucydides' opening statement if we read between the lines. He tells us that he began writing because he believed the war he was seeing would be "great", and then proceeds, through his entire work, to explain *why* he believed that. We could further infer that he is writing to attempt to capture what transpired in an attempt to help ensure such a war never happens again.

How does history begin?

Now that we have some idea of what history is, we should explore how we construct it. At its very base, both of our notions of history stem from placing markers onto time and trying to form meaning from them. In a sense, time is a constant of change. To borrow from Newton's Third Law of Motion, we know that every action in nature has an equal and opposite reaction. If we follow this law to its extreme conclusion and assume we have full knowledge of all actions, we should, in theory, be able not only to account for every action and reaction that happens at every point in time, but also, from a single point, to predict the state of everything in every other point in time.

Euclid teaches us that two points on a plane make a line, and that within a finite space, a line must have a beginning and an end. From this principle, we can start to plot out what we call "history." Because our documented events are predated by a potentially infinite unknown, the starting point will inherently be guided by our intentions and biases. One useful analogy might be the roots of a tree. If we consider

[3] Translation by Richard Crawley, 1874

recorded history to be like an ancient tree, instead of a single point of origin from which we can trace all events, we have a frayed tapestry of texts, inscriptions, and fables, the less relatable to modern standards the farther back we go. As we climb the roots to the surface and continue upwards, we find coherence, stability, and structure which allows the tree to stand tall, and the higher we go, the more we are able to see. As a tree is a living being, the limit to its height is unknown, as is the location of our endpoint in history.

And, once again, we have two competing notions of how the start of time should be recorded: "in media res," and from a blank slate. We can find the former in the *Iliad*, which literally opens in the middle of a conflict, and we must spend the first few pages trying to read between the lines to understand what has happened. In order for a conflict to transpire, some prior history must have occurred which sets the stage for said conflict. Therefore, this view suggests a difference between the start of recorded history, and the start of actual history. In some sense, this is a paradox, because if there is a history, we must ask what lead to there being a history.

We find the other view in Plato's *Republic*. Notice that when Socrates attempts to describe a "just" society, he does not take an existing society and improve it, but starts from scratch. He seems to think that if we can simply go back to the beginning of civilization and trace each event, we can avoid the introduction of "injustice" that leads to societal ills. This implies both that an early society can be free of injustice, and that once injustice is introduced, it is impossible to remove. To place this into the proper context, I'd contend that Socrates is proposing a society in which the Peloponnesian War could not occur. However, his society exists in an unrealistic world: he seems to suggest it could exist to the exclusion of other societies, like an Athens without a competing Sparta, or like a tree with only a single root into the ground.

We are left facing the question of how injustice enters a society. If we return to our Newtonian concept of motion, it's obvious that we are looking at a massive interconnected machine, where every action is explained by a previous action. But if this is how the world operates, then why does war happen? The clear answer is that Newton's Law is far reaching but not universal: it does not consider free will. It is a mechanistic view of the world, an attempt to reason out a simple pattern by which we can interpret reality, but its formula does not predict Achilles igniting a war against Troy.

The other problem with this approach is that history is only a line of points when we look at it retrospectively. When we stand at the current point of time, that which we might call "now," it seems there are an infinite number of "next" points to which we can connect, and asking how we make this decision brings us to the analytic view Thucycides would appreciate. It is clear that the next step happens as a combination of things we can control, such as our own interactions, and things we cannot control, such as what others may do, and time.

There is a different approach to this question in the Bible. Genesis opens with the fall of Man, and the rest of the Bible attempts to reconcile the consequences of the fall, and understand its implications. One might argue that the biblical account is what happens when Socrates' "just" society encounters free will. It is, after all, only after Adam and Eve both act of their own accord, that they are evicted from paradise. However, sin seems to be the biblical form of injustice, and without it, we feel empty. Consider how people born into rich households with very few "real" problems often turn to drugs or crime for the thrill, or compare the adrenaline rush of surviving a dangerous situation to the complacent boredom of "normal." It seems that humanity creates problems of sin and injustice in their absence.

Because of these problems, we feel a need to explain why they happened, and to try to ensure they

never happen again. We see this in Thucydides, when, after he completes the saga of the Corcyran civil war, he then presents a history of the past fifty years leading up to said war, a nice continuity from where Herotodus left off. We also see this in Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which starts immediately after the reign of Marcus Aurelius– which Gibbon considered the height of the Empire– and continues with Aurelius' son and successor Commodus, an awful tyrant who marks the beginning of the end. What follows is three thousand pages of disasters, attempts to resolve them, and cracks which emerge in the solutions and lead to yet another set of disasters. A similar pattern can be found in the historical books of the Bible (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles), in which a society is blessed by God, becomes comfortable with success, strays from God's will, destroys itself, and then is born anew with a "chosen" one who creates another society that is blessed by God. Recall that the parting of the Red Sea was in recent memory when the Israelites demanded Aaron create the Golden Calf.

How does history end?

Neither Herodotus nor Thucydides gives a conclusion, so to answer this question, we'll turn to Gibbon, who, like Thucycides, asks why a great society collapsed. But first, we should ask what makes a society a society. How does a society or civilization start? Does it arise with the advent of commerce, with a legal system, or perhaps is it an extension of social norms when a given community aquires land and power in a region? Or is it shaped by events? Consider the comradery felt by soldiers after they have been in combat together. Whatever the cause, there is clearly some bond that unites people.

Another question worth asking: is civilization the natural state of man, or is it somehow different from or superior to nature? We often see people dismissing things they consider improper as "uncivilized," suggesting that adhering to a set of norms is what separates us from animals. But if civilization is a marker of superiority, then why does it naturally arise, and why does it also seem to naturally fall after an inevitable conflict? Could it be that there is something inherent in human nature that both propels us to great aspirations, and then ensures that we fly too close to the sun and burn up? Hesse asks this question in *Steppenwolf*, where Harry Haller is ripped apart by internal conflicts, perhaps the same ones which affect societies.

Let us assume that Socrates is correct, that there is some inherent sin or injustice which will destroy society, but which, with proper care and planning, can be excluded. If its origin is free will, then why is it that his "just" society goes through cycles, from aristocracy to tyranny? On the one hand, he implies that there will be no need for a criminal justice system because the society is just; on the other hand, why would the governing system evolve, if not to address and improve upon past injustices? Clearly, a society exists within two tensions: the forces that bring it into being, and those which try to destroy it. A society would not exist without the former, but at a certain point, the balance tips. There seem to be multiple reasons why this might happen.

One explanation is that its populace simply grows too large in size. The anthropologist Robin Dunbar explores this phenomenon in his research into the populations of primate societies and finds a correlation between brain size and the point beyond which their societies fracture. Applying this conclusion to humans, we can also see a fracturing in societies that become ungovernable like Rome, or when the government becomes detached from the populace, such as in monarchies. In most cases, such societies will either devolve into war, or split into multiple different societies. It is noteworthy that the Ancient Greeks had two words for war: "πολεμισ," which means war between two cities, and "στασισ," meaning war within a city, known as "civil war" in modern parlance. This is a curious linguistic development, and perhaps related to the issue of how a society identifies itself.

Another explanation commonly cited is known as the "third generation decline." In this, a culture comes into existence because of some phenomenon, the next generation continues to exist but takes many of the benefits of said phenomenon for granted, and the third generation loses sight of why the benefits existed in the first place, and ultimately collapses. Thomas Mann explores this concept in his novel *Buddenbrooks*, in which a German family comes into wealth in the mid nineteenth century, proceeds to squander it, and by the third generation loses everything. While there are a number of factors that contribute to the family's decline, a combination of clinging to past glories and an inability to cope with inevitable changes gives their heritage and reputation a death sentence.

Sometimes the society collapses for reasons beyond its control. It could be due to natural disasters, such as a volcanic eruption (Pompeii) or a hurricane. It could also be due to a resource shortage, such as Ireland during the potato famine, or when a coal mine is exhausted and along with it the livelihoods of the coal mining town. A similar argument comes from Joseph Schumpeter, that of creative destruction: with each new evolution in technology, one industry is created and another dies.

But often, the reason is fully within its control. In *Decline and Fall*, Gibbon makes many comments about what happens when comfort and luxury replace strife and toil. He decries the relaxed standards of Roman citizens once their empire reached far enough to hold any enemies at bay; he also suggests that the Roman military itself becomes lazy without any real competition, which eventually leads to their own decline and defeat by the Vandals and the Huns. Of course, this could also be Gibbon falling into the trap of mythologising Cincinnatus, the Roman military hero who, after his dictatorship returned to being an obscure farmer, just as in many societies the "cultured" praise the "peasants" who do all the hard work.

And finally, although this point is controversial, societies fall apart with the passing of great leaders. In almost every case, we can look at a society, name a leader around whom it gravitated, and after whose passing it collapsed. Thucycides claimed this about Pericles, many Romans said this about Augustus (the first Emperor), and while Tolstoy himself writes at length in the second epilogue of War and Peace about why he believes that leadership is an illusion and all history is itself a formless chaos, his epic work exists under the shadow of Napoleon.

While it is difficult to identify an exact origin from which to begin a history, agreeing on a conclusion is almost impossible. Original sources are often biased by their own experiences: if a soldier is banished partway through a war, might his history change in tone to reflect that? Secondary sources have the advantage of distance and time, and the comfort that they do not need to defend or justify any actions of their own. Finally, especially in the modern era, we have the advantage of knowing how the past played out, and therefore can use outcomes to cast narratives that further our own vision of how things transpired. In the end, there seems to be no "ideal" way to capture history, but we can at least use known challenges to help guide how we navigate the future.