

To what extent, and in what ways, can the past be a good guide to the future?

History is not only a recounting of events that occurred in the past, rather, it is a compilation of numerous interpretations and evidences which give us insight into the values that we hold as humanity in the present as well as the past. However, how do we know if the past can accurately demonstrate the way society may look in the next twenty years, or thousand years? How do we know that this future is not fixed? In this essay, I will be exploring the relation between the past and occurrences in the modern context, as well as the extent to which we can successfully use our past to anticipate the future.

Firstly, consider quite a recent example of supposedly using the past as a guide, the COVID-19 pandemic. The numerous epidemics and pandemics that the world has previously faced has allowed us to not only make tremendous advances in medicine, but it has also allowed us to develop a protocol to handle potentially lethal outbreaks of any disease. George Hegel defines history as a “progressive achievement”, where history is a plethora of man learning from shortcomings and applying these revelations towards a less problematic future. Over time, as we combatted against numerous disease outbreaks, the very boundaries of our knowledge and methods were challenged time and time again. Ultimately, being faced with rapidly rising mortality rates or numerous health crises, forced us to develop new methods of practising medicine as well as new technologies, impacting our future tremendously. An instance of this is the dwindling mortality rates from previously widespread diseases such as the Spanish flu¹ or the Black Death². By facing such perilous circumstances in the past, we were eventually able to gain an idea of the basic protocol we must follow to prevent a tremendously high mortality rate. Hence, the history of disease outbreaks that we had faced allowed

¹ “Influenza pandemic of 1918-19, the most severe influenza outbreak of the 20th century and, in terms of total numbers of deaths, among the most devastating pandemics in human history.”

² “Black Death, pandemic that ravaged Europe between 1347 and 1351, taking a proportionately greater toll of life than any other known epidemic or war up to that time.”

us to know what to avoid and what to prioritise, thereby improving the overall public health for the future. This concept of development in the medical field considers the past and present to be existent. Moreover, it suggests that the future of medicine is undetermined and controlled by our actions in the present and past to an extent. This deterministic³ outlook on the medical field ties to Correia and Rosenkranz's growing block theory, which considers the future to be unsubstantial, and the present and past to be concrete.

Another instance of the past shaping the future is the advances and progress in numerous other scientific fields. According to Nwaubani (1989), history has served as a "midwife to science and technology". The application of history in fields such as statistics⁴ and probability⁵ allow individuals to determine the most foreseeable outcomes from any given circumstance by being aware of the results that were obtained in the past from the similar or same situation. Probability analyses the outcomes of a given circumstance that has been repeated numerous times. By using the history of the results of a given experiment, the likely outcome or the future is determined using the previous results obtained from the situation. Hence, the past is acknowledged as an existent entity that can be used to ultimately determine the future to an extent. Hence, it considers the future to be non-existent and both the past and present to be entities that can be considered as definitive and real. However, in both cases, this analysis allows us to extract the most probable outcome, not the definitive outcome. These demonstrations of growing block theory provide insight into how certain our future can be based on our past and present. Even though there is inevitable uncertainty in the forementioned fields, we attempt to create some clarity about our future by considering our past and present.

Similarly, the evolution of culture over the years has demonstrated how the past is ultimately used to shape both our present and future in numerous ways. A prevalent example of this is the evolution of

³ All occurrences have a cause-and-effect system.

⁴ "Statistics is a branch of applied mathematics that involves the collection, description, analysis, and inference of conclusions from quantitative data."

⁵ "Probability theory, a branch of mathematics concerned with the analysis of random phenomena."

Indian marriages over the years. Even though they are majorly known for their heavily traditional arrangement, the comparison that can be drawn between marriages in the past and marriages at present is a major example of how the past can be used to guide us to the future. Even though the major aspects of it and the format itself may remain the same, since we choose to draw from the past and continue certain traditions, the future of Indian marriages will largely be shaped with modern values and ideals. This significantly relates to the growing block theory, where our future is a dynamic and shapable part of our lives with respect to the traditions we hold due to the past as well as the changing social norms that are relevant to the present. Moreover, Robert Heilbroner (1980) states that man makes history, “under the circumstance directly found, given and transmitted from the past.”. Hence, the future of numerous cultures is entirely shaped by our past traditions, values, and ideals along with our modern ideologies and views, which further supports the growing block theory.

However, Karl Popper (1960) supports the idea that the future is an undetermined part of our life that is solely shaped by our actions in the present. He argues that the course of human history is essentially in line with the growth of human knowledge. Even though we may not be able to predict the same with logical methods, our future is ultimately determined by the advances in our knowledge as humanity. This idea also considers the future to be a malleable and ever-changing part of our lives. Bigelow (1996) and Craig (1997) both proposed similar ideas in relation to the present being the only existent concept and the past and future not being real entities, which was ultimately termed as presentism. Hence, in contrast to growing block theory, presentism suggests that our future is primarily decided by the events that occur in the present, and it is not related to our past in any way.

One can also argue that our behaviour as humans ultimately encourages our society to end in one way only. An eternalistic outlook on time assumes that the present, past and future are all existent entities, where all the events at any point in time are spread out but exist regardless of humanity’s actions. Karl Marx’s Communist⁶ society suggested that our natural traits as humans ultimately meant that we were

⁶ A social system where all property is publicly owned, and people receive and work according to their skills and needs.

collectively working towards a communist society in the future, regardless of our actions or progress. Hence, despite our ever-changing progress as a society, our future may be fixed, and time may be static. Irrespective of our actions in the past, present or future, we may eventually end up as a communist society. Hence, eternalism demonstrates that the past may not be a good guide to the future, since the future will remain the same, independent of what has occurred in the past or the present. However, Marx's Communist society concept was largely opposed due to the prevalence of capitalism⁷ and the minority of the population that supports communism currently.

Lastly, even though eternalism and presentism seem logically competent, the application of the growing block theory seems more prevalent in our real world. Eternalism was criticised for being unable to explain the apparent dynamic nature of humanity and development in the modern context. Furthermore, presentism seemed to be contradictory in terms of discussing ideas from people of the past even though, according to the theory, they did not exist. Collectively, humanity holds a set of vague goals that it strives towards in relation to its values and morals. In my view, we try to enforce certain values to the public in the present with the idea that it can get us closer to achieving certain goals, thereby implying that we believe our future can be changed with our current actions. From my perspective, the use of propaganda and mass media has allowed us to create a herd mentality of sorts, in terms of propagating a capitalist ideology to the public. This idea has been demonstrated throughout history with the rise and fall of numerous empires and political ideologies. Ultimately, as a capitalist society, the past can give us insight on how society today and in the future will incessantly convey desired values and ideals.

I believe that it is quite common for us to have certain expectations in terms of what we believe we want to happen in the future. By constantly working towards it, we create a dynamic reality of sorts, where our past and present are existent and comprising of our progress and work done towards our supposedly fluid future. Hence, the past can be a good guide to the future in terms of how our human

⁷ A political ideology where trade is controlled by private individuals that aim to make a profit.

nature truly drives us to carry out certain actions in the present under the assumption that our future is in our control to an extent.

In conclusion, I believe that the past can be a good guide to the future to a point where we are able to anticipate how society will attempt to achieve its goals in terms of any political ideologies as well as the social and economic goals it may be trying to acquire. However, with a dynamic society where norms, values and knowledge are fluid, we cannot entirely anticipate how accurately our past will determine our future. Overall, we can draw certain values, traditions, and methodologies from the past and apply them in the context of our current society to be able to get a brief idea of what our future might look like.

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