

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

For the past to act as a guide to the future, three key questions must be answered. The first is epistemological: to what extent can we gain objective knowledge about the past? The second is logical: can we use reasoning to gain future insight based on past knowledge? And the third is ethical: are there moral lessons to be learned from the past? By answering these questions, this essay will contend that the past can be a guide in two main ways; helping to predict future outcomes, and teaching us how to act in the present.

What we claim to know about the past usually extends beyond our direct personal experience. Our knowledge rests on primary sources (original documents and objects) and secondary sources (which relate or analyse primary sources) (Donnelly & Norton, 2020). The philosophical doctrine of *scepticism* would raise two key issues with this approach. First, sources can be mistaken or deliberately biased, especially if one viewpoint gains a historical monopoly – the famous ‘History is written by the victors’ argument. In his book *Society Must Be Defended* French philosopher Michel Foucault argued that groups which emerge victorious in social struggles will always marginalise the perspectives of their defeated foes (Foucault, 2020). This can include outright historical negationism, embodied by the Soviet Union under Stalin, where figures such as Leon Trotsky and Nikolai Yezhov were physically airbrushed out of photos and erased from the historical record (King, 1999). Secondly, even if sources are accurate, their meaning can be difficult to interpret, with different historians reaching different conclusions from the same evidence. The school of *Factual or Alethic Relativism* argues that this is because there is no such thing as absolute truth; the way historians perceive historical ‘fact’ will always be affected by their social and cultural frame of reference (Boghossian, 2006).

These arguments are overly pessimistic. Firstly, the relativistic stance that there is no objective truth is simply false; with any historical event, certain things *did* happen and certain things *didn't*. It is not equally true, for example, to claim that ‘JFK was assassinated in 1963’ and ‘JFK was assassinated in 2023’ – that would create a logical contradiction. Indeed the very statement ‘there is

no objective truth' claims to be objectively correct, and thus becomes meaningless if its premise is true (Boghossian, 2006). Second, the study of the historical method or *historiography* helps to overcome inaccurate and biased sources. First pioneered by Herodotus in the 5th century BC (Lateiner, 1989), the modern historical method involves collecting a wide range of sources from pluralistic perspectives, and evaluating their provenance (authorship, purpose, audience etc.) to determine reliability (Donnelly & Norton, 2020). If a number of reliable sources from contrasting viewpoints agree on the same piece of information, it can be considered, beyond reasonable doubt, to be 'fact'. And while interpreting sources can be challenging, the philosophical approach of *hermeneutics* provides a solution. In his book *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts*, German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher introduced his theory of *exegesis*, which involves placing a source in its historical and contextual framework to successfully grasp its meaning. This contrasts with *eisegesis*, which sees the reader project his/her own beliefs onto a work (Zimmermann, 2015). Using the historical method in tandem with an exegetical approach allows historical truth to be interpreted down the ages.

This however leads to our second question. Even if we can discover objective knowledge of the past, can this information help predict future outcomes? It has been argued by some that the ever changing social, economic and technological context of our modern world makes historical comparisons useless. The recent development of AI, for example, has no clear historic parallel, making its potential impact hard to judge. It has also been argued that some so-called 'black swan' events are entirely unpredictable and unforeseeable. A swathe of historical events from the fall of the Berlin Wall to 9/11 came as a shock to contemporary audiences. In his book *The Black Swan*, Lebanese-American mathematician Nassim Nicholas Taleb argues that 'black swan' events are often rationalised after the fact with the aid of hindsight, making us overconfident in our ability to predict future outcomes (Taleb, 2009).

On a deeper level some philosophers have questioned whether observations of specific events in the past can really be used to infer generalisation about future, unobserved events – a logical process known as 'inductive reasoning'. In his *Treatise of Human Nature* David Hume argued that all

knowledge is derived from sensory experience. Thus, if I state that event A ‘causes’ event B, what I mean to say is ‘in my experience, event A has always been followed by event B’. Hume referred to this phenomenon as two events being in “constant conjunction” with one another (Wright, 2009). However, Hume argued that we cannot observe the powers and forces by which a cause influences its effect, only the spatio-temporal changes that result. As a result, we cannot induce *a priori* that event A *causes* event B, only that event A *correlates* with event B. This is the famous ‘problem of induction’ – according to Hume, the “constant conjunction” of a cause and effect does not allow us to assume that in future the same cause will yield the same effect (Harman & Kulkarni, 2006).

The solution to Hume’s problem can be found in the writings of Austrian-British philosopher Karl Popper. Popper lamented the dominant inductivist view of science, which aims to induce general laws from observations of specific phenomena. Instead he advocated *deductive* reasoning, which involves formulating a general hypothesis, identifying the specific phenomena that would falsify the hypothesis, and then testing whether those specific phenomena can be observed (Popper, 2005). By progressing in the opposite direction to inductivism, deductive reasoning avoids making generalising inferences from “constant conjunction” phenomena.

The German logician Carl Hempel helped introduce deductivism to the study of the past via his ‘deductive-nomological model’. In his essay *The Function of General Laws in History*, Hempel argued that historians should do more than simply discover *what happened* in the past. Instead they should identify certain ‘covering laws’ that have governed events throughout history. By applying these covering laws to the initial conditions encountered in a historical period, the historian can deduce the occurrence of specific historical events *modus ponendo ponens* (Hempel, 1942). One covering law might be that ‘increased defence spending increases the likelihood of war’. Apply this law to the Anglo-German naval arms race of the 1900s, and we can deduce that war between the two nations was likely to follow.

By applying covering laws to present day conditions, we can deduce future outcomes. For example, in light of the burgeoning arms race between the US and China, we can deduce that the likelihood of war between the two has increased. Of course, no covering law can be watertight; during

the Cold War, after all, the US and USSR increased defence spending without resorting to armed conflict. But this is because no covering law acts in isolation; based on different initial conditions at play, different covering laws will act in different proportions, leading to unique outcomes every time. This does not, therefore, nullify the usefulness of the deductive-nomological model – to quote Mark Twain, “History doesn’t repeat itself, but it often rhymes”.

This brings us onto the final question; are there ethical lessons to be learned from the past? Many philosophers have postulated a teleological conception of history, arguing that human progress trends towards some ultimate goal or *telos* – in which case, the moral responsibility of mankind is evidently to fulfil its *telos* and achieve *eudaimonia*. There are, however, diverse perspectives on the exact nature of humanity’s purpose. In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, the German philosopher Georg Hegel conceived human progress as a rational and dialectic process, which will end when every human *Geist* or ‘spirit’ comes to be fully self-conscious and free (Little & Zalta, 2020). Influenced by Hegel, Karl Marx’s ‘historical materialism’ perceived the human past as a succession of different “modes of production”, moving through primitive communism, slave societies, feudalism, capitalism and ending with communism and the establishment of a classless society (Chang, 2014). There are also religious theories; Christianity ultimately sees humanity moving towards the second coming of Christ and the final judgement, described by Augustine of Hippo in his book *The City of God* as the triumph of a ‘New Jerusalem’ over the earthly ‘City of Man’ (Augustine, 1998).

Aside from teleological theories, there is also the argument of Spanish-American philosopher George Santayana – that “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”. By analysing noted tragedies of human history, we can act to prevent future tragedies going forward. Take the rise of the Nazi German regime in the 1930s, aided in part by the Appeasement policy of Britain and France, which resulted in the most destructive conflict in human history and the extermination of over 6 million Jews, Roma, homosexuals and others in the Holocaust. The lesson – stand up to evil as soon as possible, or suffer the consequences later on.

The past can guide our actions in practical as well as ethical ways. By compiling historic data to form complex probabilistic and statistical models, institutions and governments can facilitate more effective outcomes; economic policymakers, for example, will regularly consult economic models to guide their decision-making. In common law traditions, moreover, justices will use historic precedent and case law to help determine their judgements and rulings in the present.

To conclude, knowledge of the past, used correctly, can be a powerful guide to the future. The deductive-nomological model provides a logically sound method of predicting future events from past outcomes, while learning from historical events can teach us ethical and practical lessons. A key takeaway is that these lessons can apply to individuals just as they do to collectives; as discussed by American psychologist Carol Dweck in her ‘growth mindset’ theory, by learning and growing from past mistakes we can all develop into better human beings (Dweck, 2012).

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