



On the Philosophical Relevance of the Past and the Future Role of History

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Abstract

Some thinkers including some philosophers believe that history has neither present nor future role. Some others are of the opinion that it is of the past and at most ends in the present. Among these philosophers are Friedrich Hegel and Karl Popper. They both admit that history is a progressive achievement through the thoughts and its resulting actions of man. In the opinion of Hegel, history is of the past and it stops in the present. According to Popper the growth of human knowledge influences the course of human history strongly. They both deny that the course of history can be predicted. Hence for them, we cannot predict the future course of human history. This article agrees that history studies the past. But it argues against the submission of these philosophers by holding that history is relevant to the present and it has a predictive role. The work presents how history constitutes a mechanism of social change. It also presents the value of the past in the present, and the relevance of the past to the future. It establishes this relevance of the past to the future with culture and convention, custom and tradition, civilization, institutions, and disciplines among others. It concludes that history (the past) has some future, predictive roles to play in human and social affairs.

Key Words: Relevance of the Past, Present, Future Role of History, Prediction, Mechanism of Social Change, Social Evolution

Introduction

Some thinkers believe that the past is not relevant to the present. Many other thinkers including some philosophers are of the view that history has no future role. In their opinion it is of the past and at most ends in the present. George Hegel would argue that history is a progressive achievement, a dialectically self-developing reason of society through the thoughts and its resulting actions of man. In his opinion, history is of the past and it stops in the present. And since there can be no history of the future, Hegel denies that the course of history can be predicted (Atkinson, 1988: 822–823). An additional reason for this claim is that we cannot see what is to come.

We may agree with Hegel that history studies the past. The studies of the past can only end at the present; it cannot study the future; whenever the future is studied, then whatever is studied in it cannot be history because it is not yet. This may mean that history inquires into the exact past. But the fact that history studies the past does not mean it is of the past as Hegel assumed. It is because it is not only of the past that it can predict the future course of events. We should not expect from history predictions that are absolutely certain; for prediction is nothing more than a reasonable assurance of expectation, a reasonable probability of success. What are counted today as scientific achievements were in the past objects of prediction. We should not expect from historical predictions what we cannot expect from scientific predictions. Whatever is predicted is either a potential reality or a potential unreality.

Also in this quest, Karl Popper refutes the idea of historical prediction in his *The Poverty of Historicism*. Here Popper contends that for strict logical reasons it is impossible to predict the future course of history. According to Popper “the course of human history is strongly influenced by the growth of human knowledge.... We cannot predict by rational or scientific methods the future growth of our scientific knowledge.... We cannot therefore, predict the future course of human history” (Popper, 1960: ix-x). Can these claims be true?

History as Mechanism of Social Change

History has to do with shaping the present and future worlds with past ideas and practices. Although thoughts and ideas are product of the environment, they also aim at changing the environment. This means they are instruments of social change. While interpreting Karl Marx, Heilbroner asserts that “... thoughts and ideas are product of the environment, even though they aim at changing the environment” (Heilbroner, 1980: 142). Karl Marx’s materialism is not only historical, it is also dialectical. By being dialectical it “encouraged change, constant and inherent change, and in that never-ending flux the ideas emanating from one period would help to shape another” (Heilbroner, 1980: 142). The claim that ideas and thoughts are product of the environment and they are also designed to change the environment is captured and couched in Marx’s assertion that “men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please, they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstance directly found, given and transmitted from the past” (Heilbroner, 1980: 142).

From the above, it is evident that history is not stagnant. It does not consist merely in past events, but in addition to this, it is to change the future. This dialectical aspect of history is not merely a change of thoughts and ideas but also of society.

This change is not to be achieved in theory but in practice since practice is the mechanism of social change. Karl Marx requires philosophers to change the world. According to Marx, “philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, but the real task is to alter it” (Marx, 1845; Russell, 1961: 749). The changes with their resultant progress that are attained are not essentially peaceful; they are more conflictual, and in Marx’s sense, are only and always products of conflict. Hence in his conception war, strife or conflict are necessary for progress.

That conflict is necessary for progress is theorized in his doctrine of dialectical materialism, documented in his other doctrine of historical materialism. This materialist documentation of history is periodically structured; one epoch annihilates, replaces and succeeds the others and to be annihilated, replaced and succeeded by another epoch. This conflicting process of developmental change will continue until it culminates in communism, a perfect, stateless and classless society. Till this stage, there is always a rearrangement of status and status quo due to incessant, inevitable overthrow of established and existing social structure. Marx thus gave the world the history of social evolution through revolution and the ultimate social destiny of mankind that is historically determined. This history is teleological.

If the mechanism of change or progress is conflict, and if communist society is devoid of conflict, this would imply an end to change and progress and inevitably the end of history. This is a contradiction because even in this communist society human activities cannot stop because the society will continue to sustain itself these activities. That history or society must continue is implied by the communist distributive paradigm: “From each according to his ability and to each according to his needs”. This paradigm shows that communism is not characterized with inactivity. But in Marx’s

sense there can be no progress because conflict is the mechanism of progress and communism is devoid of conflict; and progress resulting from conflict consists in one society or mode of production transcending the other. Communism cannot be transcended. It is the ultimate goal and destiny of history.

From the preceding rendering, it is obvious that history and the events of human history are teleological. They are directed towards a goal: to know where we are coming from, where we are now, where we are herding to, and probably how to get there with a reasonable level of assurance.

The Relevance of History

The past has some significant value. Pertaining to these values, Collingwood (1961: 10) submits among others that history is 'for' human self-knowledge. It is important to man that he should know himself. Knowing himself does not mean knowing merely his personal peculiarities, the things that distinguish him from other men; but it means knowing his nature as man. Knowing yourself means knowing, first, what it is to be a man; secondly, knowing what it is to be the kind of man you are; and thirdly, knowing what it is to be the man *you* are and nobody else is. It equally means knowing what you can do; and since nobody knows what he can do until he tries, the only clue to know what man can do is what man has done. The value of history, then, is that it teaches us what man has done and thus what man is and what he is capable of doing.

Collingwood substantiates further that
Man who desires to know everything desires to know himself.... Without some knowledge of himself, his knowledge of other things is imperfect: for to know something without knowing that one knows it is only half-knowing, and to know that one knows is to know oneself.

Self knowledge is *therefore* (italicized is mine) desirable and important to man, not only for its own sake, but as a condition without which no other knowledge can be critically justified and securely based (Collingwood, 1961: 205).

From this rendering it is obvious that for Collingwood, the knowledge of the self is a prelude to knowledge of others or external world. It is also obvious that it is the same way we set out to understanding the nature of our mind that we proceed when we try to understand the world about us.

On his part, Phillip Igbafe attempts, among others, to link the value of history to nation building. While maximizing his attention on the relevance of history to nation building with specific reference to Nigeria, Professor Igbafe asserts that the increased knowledge of our past will help us to appreciate our cultural heritage, give us a pride in that past and a satisfaction that our various peoples were part of the contributors to the heritage and development of our civilizations. According to him,

[a] better knowledge of ourselves and of our interconnections and inter-group relations is bound to make us more cosmopolitan in outlook, less parochial, less insular in our thinking as well as advance our group nationalisms into the nationalism of the integrated whole or nation. A country like Nigeria whose historical circumstances have exposed her to the devastating impact of foreign rule and influences and which is yet struggling to be properly welded together as a nation, needs to rehabilitate her sense of history and values. In this way, we can build confidence in ourselves and in our ability and ultimately build a united and integrated country erected on a foundation

of our knowledge of our past and ourselves, mutual understanding of the peoples leading to that empathy towards one another and a consequent preparedness to swim or sink together (Igbafe, 2006: 14).

In addition, Igbafe puts it that it is only through historical education that people are aware of the links which their forebears have with other people, or culture or states; it is only through this historical education that people are aware of their common values, relationships, bonds, and unity; of their migrations; of their national, constitutional, and cultural evolution; of their contact with other races or peoples of the world, and have knowledge upon which national unity can be build. He continues:

Surely without a knowledge of history we cannot demonstrate to our citizenry how all parts of the country have made their contributions to our common heritage. History is the only discipline that can create in us the awareness of a people united in the discovery of its fellowship by revealing in their true light the myths and prejudices which had distorted or concealed from us the true nature of our inter-group relations and our interdependence. A knowledge of history will make it impossible for the persistent stereotypes which lie at the heart of intolerance, discrimination, and religious bigotry which periodically explode into riots and violence that have plagued our country... (Igbafe, 2006: 15-16).

It is on account of this indispensability of history to nation building that Hugh Trevor-Roper, the British renowned historian, wrote that, "a nation that has lost sight of its history

or is discouraged from the study of it is intellectually and perhaps politically amputated” (Igbafe, 2006: 19).

Frederick Jackson Turner also perceives this relevance. He submits that “[t]he roots of the present lie deep in the past” (Turner, 1956: 203, 204). On the utility of history, Turner offers that history affords a training for a good citizenship. According to him, there is no doubt that good citizenship is the end for which the public schools exist. If it were otherwise there might be difficulty in justifying the support of them at public expense. He adds that the direct and important utility of the study of history in the achievement of this end hardly needs argument. “If any added argument were needed to show that good citizenship demands the careful study of history, it is in the examples and lessons that the history of other peoples has for us. It is profoundly true that each people makes its own history in accordance with its past” (Turner, 1956: 206-207). In summary, what Turner argued for so far is that history

is to be taken in no narrow sense. It is more than past literature, more than past politics, more than past economics. It is the self-consciousness of humanity— humanity’s effort to understand itself through the study of its past. Therefore it is not confined to books; the *subject* is to be studied, not books simply. History has a unity and a continuity; the present needs the past to explain it; and local history must be read as a part of world history. The study has a utility as a mental discipline, and as expanding our ideas regarding the dignity of the present. But perhaps its most practical utility to us... is its service in fostering good citizenship” (Turner, 1956: 207).

One other importance of historical study is that it enables the community to see itself in the light of the past to give it a new

thoughts and feelings, new aspirations and energies. Thoughts and feelings flow into deeds. Here is the motive power that lies behind institutions. This is therefore one of the ways to create good politics: here we can touch the very “age and body of the time, its form and pressure” (Turner, 1956: 208). Now that the value of history has been briefly discussed especially with reference to the present, we are now set in commitment, though not exhaustibly, to discuss how the past is relevant to the future.

The Relevance of the Past to the Future

History has future roles. According to George Ukagba, “the enquiring mind seeks to know the where, why of the beginning and the end of things. The answers to these questions cannot be satisfactorily given without reference to the past” (Ukagba, 2005: 6). This means the origin, meaning and purpose of life, and the destiny of mankind can best be understood when inquiry is made with reference to the past. Ukagba extends his argument by saying that many of the present socio-political, economic and legal ills of man could be healed if we know their origin, hence the importance of history. He continues:

Nowadays, many people... tend to think in terms of the future alone. The past is nearly relegated to the background... The problem posed by the future cannot adequately be solved without reference to the past. This does not mean that the present will always be like the past. Rather it means that the present cannot be taken seriously, nor the future without the help of past experiences (Ukagba, 2005: 6).

This argument of the relevance of the past can be demonstrated with culture. Culturally, the values of customs and traditions are indispensable to social stability and

progress. Customs and traditions are ultimately products of past cherished experiences. Both customs and traditions have to do with conventions. Convention is nothing but accumulated cherished values in the course of time. These accumulated values are often reflected, practiced, preserved and transmitted in the different cultures of those concerned. They serve as barometer or mirror of conduct and sanction. Igbafe quoted Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow that

it is through its culture that a people perceives itself as such, and it is through its culture in the broadest sense of that word, that it perceives other peoples. For culture may be seen both as the product of all that a society has created throughout time and as the essential driving force for all that it continues to create and that fashions the collective sensibility and imagination of its members (Igbafe, 2006: 17).

It is clear that African culture has been greatly tempered with by contact with the western world. Unless the contemporary Africans know how, why, when and by whom they were dominated and colonized materially, mentally and culturally, and unless they know the aftermath consequences of these events, they cannot make a meaningful projection into the future in guarding against unforeseen ugly consequences. They will not know to be tactful in the current surge for globalization which may mean another tie to the apron string of some superior masters. Mitias puts it that

the creative act connects us with history, with what past generations had created in science, philosophy, religion, arts, technology, morality and practical life. These realms of human creation constitute the fabric of civilization; they are not only the realms in which we think and act, they are also the impetus for new

modes of creation. By living in them we partake of the meaning which our forefathers had created. We established in this way a link of continuity with them. We feel united with them, for, on the one hand, we enjoy what they created and on the other we continue and extend what they started. This is perhaps why respect for tradition is prevalent among all world civilizations. This tradition is to a good extent the basis of our cultural, and consequently individual, identities. But the survival and continuation of tradition provide the conditions for the survival and continuation of the individual, for what I am is continuous with a long standing tradition and what I shall achieve will become incorporated in the corpus of the work of others. This is why I can feel that what I struggle for and achieve will not be in vain (Mitias, 1995: 110).

According to Mitias, achievement is not an individual but a collective effort; it has social as well as historical character. This is because an individual is always a cultural being. The language, ideas, beliefs, values, and desires which constitute his identity are derived from the cultural tradition which has been established by the hard work of past generations. Additionally, what he now produces is made possible by the cooperative effort of the society of which he is an integral part. Mitias argues further that social life is an unusually intricate network of relations, activities, and possibilities. The life of an individual is only one heart-beat of this life. What the individual produces does not, and cannot, have meaning if there is not an other to whom the meaning is significant or relevant (Mitias, 1995: 110–111). The point of argument for Mitias here is that it is the value which society acquires over time that defines the individual, imbues relevance or values on him and makes him realize his possibility.

The idea of Nwaubani (1989: 3) can be used to further substantiate this argument. Nwaubani puts it that in the contemporary time our ruling elite and even most intellectuals conceive of science and technology as exiting on their own. They think that all we need do is stretch our hands forth and pluck them. They believe that our past has nothing to contribute to the present, and that the transplanted of Western industrial structures –physical and institutional – is the ordained road to “modernity”. So the totality of our indigenous medicine, for example is profane, our locally-brewed gin is “illicit” gin. But according to Nwaubani

[h]istory in a very real sense... served as the midwife to modern science and technology. It was the study of their past that awakened Europeans to the great ideas and civilization their Greek and Roman ancestors had created. With this re-discovery the Europeans developed a new spirit of intellectual self-confidence and belief in their own creativity; this spirit ultimately laid the groundwork for modern science and technology (Nwaubani, 1989: 3).

Not only has history writing awakened peoples to a consciousness of nationality, it has prompted them to action by inciting hopes for the future (Teggart, 1941: 28-29, Nwaubani, 1989: 5). This suggests that an understanding of the past can be a prelude to laying a solid foundation for the future.

Nwaubani argues further that in all ages and climes, history has served as the spring-board to organize the present. At one level, this implies that history is the medium for preserving a society’s heritage and transmitting it from one generation to another. But perhaps less obvious is that most great far-

reaching movements in the world have begun with a romantic appeal to the past. History is replete with examples of communities and nations who in their hour of need looked back to their ancestors or their past for guidance and inspiration. Apart from the Renaissance which derived its inspiration from the study of antiquity, the decisive revolutions of the Western World nationalist movements of the nineteenth century – all opened with somewhat romantic appeals to the past (Stephens, 1961, Barnes, 1962, Nwaubani, 1989: 5). This point, that is: that history is the medium for preserving and transmitting a society's heritage and that communities and nations in their hour of need looked back to their past for guidance and inspiration is an important one in the discussion of the relevance of history.

The relevance of history also permeates all institutions and disciplines. For example, in religion, the examination of conscience is fundamental to enabling practitioners know whether they are in tune with their maker or not, and if they are, to know the rung of the ladder they occupy in their relationship with their God and neighbours. This examination of conscience is also fundamental in enabling erring worshipers retrace their steps to the Supreme Being. In fact, it is history in religion that guides its adherents through the present to the future. No one can genuinely doubt the fundamental influence of religion in guiding its believers. For example, the various faiths that people profess today in different religions are not something of now but of the past. The thoughts of holy men and women (like Abraham, David, Solomon, Jesus Christ, The Apostles, Mohammed and Buddha, among others) which now constitute articles of faith, and which now guides different believers are thoughts of the past. And upon these perceived articles of faith decisions are made even for the future. To jettison the past in religious affairs is to jettison religion itself and its doctrines because those by whom these dogmas are generated are product of the past.

The belief and practices we profess now are legacies which history bequeaths on mankind.

An excursion into logic will reveal the importance of history in our daily lives. Logically it is the history, either of facts or ideas that guides our attitudes from the most rudimentary aspects of our life to the most complicated ones, from the most unprofessional aspects of our lives to the most technological and scientific aspects. Life and attitudes to life in all its engagements is nothing but submission to inductive faith. According to Adam Morton (1996: 125–154) induction seems to be the basis of many of our beliefs about the world around us. And it seems often to give beliefs in which we can have a lot of confidence. From data which shows a pattern repeated many times without any exception, we can conclude that the pattern will continue to be repeated. Hence these observed patterns in the data are projected to new cases. Reasoning by simple induction therefore, enables us to find pattern in the evidence, in order to get beliefs about the world that we can trust.

By inductive faith therefore, we always expect the present and the future to be like the past. We always expect the trains of events which we observed in the past to project into the future. We expect the regularities of events we have observed to continue in the ones yet to be observed. If we do not have reasons why they will not continue, then we must expect their continuation. This is why we make predictions based on the past observed instances and are guided thereby. For example, if scheduled classes and seminars have always been held, we expect the ones for tomorrow to hold as well. If a businessman has been making profit, he expects this profit making event to continue or else he will quit the business. If business has been a profit-making venture the prospective businessman will expect to make profit as well. The activities of market women are guided by the simple inductive inference that all the time they went to the market in the

past, it holds and this time it will hold as well and this will extend into the future. This is why a seller can buy today what he or she can sell tomorrow or next month or next year or more. If these events based on past experiences are not expected to continue, people will disengage in their activities. Scientific predictions are also made based on observed past regularities or constant conjunctions

In the dispensation of justice in law, history is needed. The past is relevant in at least three folds. Firstly, there is an inquiry into the history of the case of the disputants to ascertain the validity or the extent of the validity of their various independent claims. The court may need to inquire into the past by cross-examining the parties and witnesses to enable it know the root of the problem. These help to determine the merit of the case. Secondly, there is also the need to inquire into the past to know how similar cases have been decided. (Although all cases may not be decided in this way but at least this may be the best method for dispensation of justice in some cases). Thirdly, the court may inquire into personal history of persons involved to know the extent of their involvement or collaboration in crimes in the past. This may help to determine the validity of the case and the extent of punishment to be awarded.

It is probably the conceptions of these values that inform the opinions of Collingwood and Igbafe in their independent writings. For example, Collingwood writes that

history has a value; its teachings are useful for human life; simply because the rhythm of its changes is likely to repeat itself, similar antecedents leading to similar consequents; the history of notable events is worth remembering in order to serve as a basis for prognostic judgements, not demonstrable but probable, laying down not what will happen but what is

likely to happen, indicating the points of danger in rhythms now going on (Collingwood, 1961: 23).

While writing about the public purpose and relevance of history, Igbofe puts it that

[h]istory deals with life, the past of man which illuminates the present, instructing us on why we are where we are; how present developments have come to be; and how lessons of today from the past can shape the future. Every present-day problem has a history and a past. The past which a historian studies is not a dead past, but a past which in some sense is still living in the present. It is the duty of the historian to make his discipline understood, meaningful and appreciated by focusing, as the need arises, on the historical roots of current societal problems situated in their antecedents so that lessons from the past can instruct societies on the lines of remedies as well as future developments (Igbofe, 2006: 5).

As Igbofe puts it, history pays a special regard to the past; and being conscious of our links with the past makes us achieve a deeper understanding of ourselves and enables us to discover possibilities as well as limits that will shape our future (Igbofe, 2006: 21).

These few examples among the litanies of others portray the indispensable nature of the past if we must make a meaningful life at present and make a better meaningful life in the future. If the past is not relevant to today, then today will not be relevant to tomorrow because it will soon transit into the past. If the past is not relevant to the present and future, then no day or time and no event will be relevant to the other because everyday, every time, every event and so on is a potential past. It is not philosophically potent to look

only at where we are going to without looking at and thinking about where we are coming from because the knowledge of and reflection on where we are coming from will shape and prepare us for a better future.

Conclusion

From the above argument, it is obvious that the past can serve as a platform to understanding the present and the future. Besides, our understanding of the past can make us better in the present and guides us toward a better future. This implies that past ideas and practices can shape the present and the future; it can make us to understand or discover the true nature and meaning of life (Airoboman, 2014: 19-22). The Esogban of Benin Kingdom, Chief David Edebiri aptly argues that “a country that seeks not to know its past invariably mortgages its future and bound to repeat its past mistakes and wallow in an unending circle of errors” (Idahosa and Adanegbe, 2017: 7). Given the role which history can play, it is obvious that it is not given its due prominence in the contemporary system of things; instead, it is relegated. Because of these relegations, so much has gone wrong; in fact, in the language of Igbofe, very wrong in the past in the way history and the humanities have been handled, assessed, evaluated, funded and de-emphasized. According to him, the time to reverse the trend has come unless we want to do incalculable damage to our efforts at nation-building. This is because history is central to our ongoing understanding of ourselves and our society (Igbofe, 2006: 26). Added to this, history offers the ability to use one’s understanding of the past to inspire and legitimize one’s actions in the present; if we cannot prevent the past because it is gone, we can reshape the present because it is within our grasp, so that we can make the future something to look forward to. This shows that history (the past) has some roles to play in individual and societal affairs. There is no way we can do meaningfully without the past. The relevance of the past to

both present and future permeates not only our institutions and disciplines, but also our culture, convention, tradition and civilization. The knowledge and understanding of the past is the seat of wisdom to navigate through the present and for projection into a better tomorrow. This is reflected in Mo Tzu's assertion that when we cannot reach a decision in our deliberations, we examine the past in order to know the future (Chai, with Chai, 1961: 151). The knowledge of the past is an indispensable foundation to knowing our future. For a man or a people to improve on their weakness or for them to learn from another is simply to learn from history.

These are the reasons it can be affirmed that the past is inexorably linked with the present and the future and it is needed to enable us to know who we are, where we are coming from, where we are now and what and where we shall be in future. This backward looking is necessary for individual and collective achievements. To state it briefly, the knowledge of the past presents us with the wisdom and barometer to navigate through the present to the future. It is therefore imperative to entrench history in our individual, social, communal and national scheme to avert the peril that can ensue from its neglect.

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