

HISTORY AND HUMAN NATURE

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For mankind is ever the same and nothing is lost out of nature,
though everything is altered.

John Dryden¹

[Man's] needs and nature are no more changed . . . in ten thousand
years than the beaks of eagles.

Robinson Jeffers²

One of the most commonly expressed sayings about history is that it does not repeat, but it does rhyme.³ So there are no exact recurrences, because circumstances alter historical cases. Yet certain phenomena recur with some regularity—for example, economic booms and busts or the decay of virtue into decadence. Each instance may be particular, but each fits a general historical pattern, *mutatis mutandis*. So history is not random, not merely James Joyce's "nightmare" or Edward Gibbons's "register of the

¹ "On the Characters in the Canterbury Tales." Preface to *Fables, Ancient and Modern*

² "The Beaks of Eagles"

³ Usually attributed to Mark Twain.

crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind.”⁴ It has something to teach and is even, to some degree, predictable. Harry Truman put it well: “There is nothing new in the world except the history you do not know.”⁵ But why does history rhyme?

Voltaire gave a pithy answer: “History never repeats itself, man always does.”⁶ History recurs because of the unchanging human nature asserted by the poets Dryden and Jeffers. This insight was given its definitive form by the political philosopher and historian Niccolò Machiavelli:

Wise men say, and not without reason, that whoever wishes to foresee the future must consult the past; for human events ever resemble those of preceding times. This arises from the fact that they are produced by men who have ever been, and ever will be, animated by the same passions, and thus they necessarily have the same results.⁷

What are these passions?

To this question historians have given different responses, but their answers all point in the same direction and tend to supplement, rather

⁴ Joyce, *Ulysses*. Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, v 1, ch 3

⁵ Retrieved at <http://www.truman.edu/about/history/our-namesake/truman-quotes/>

⁶ Cited Barbara Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*, 2014, xx.

⁷ *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius*, III, xlii, trans. Detmold

than contradict, each other. Will and Ariel Durant emphasize the power of human instincts: “History repeats itself in the large because . . . man is equipped to respond in stereotyped ways to frequently occurring situations and stimuli like hunger, danger, and sex.”⁸ Driven by their amygdala and limbic system, the seats of instinct and emotion, human beings tend to react rather than reason. They flee pain, pursue pleasure, fall madly in love, leap before looking, lose their heads, become addicted, and so on. To make matters worse, the effects of the passions are amplified by the defects of human cognition, which tend to create an illusion of rationality where none exists. So the generality of humankind—including the average politician—bumbles through life largely unaware of their real motives and mostly incapable of setting aside their passions as they make critical decisions. Those who exhibit some degree of rational self-control or foresight are hailed as saints, sages, and statesmen.

Along the same lines, Ian Morris summarizes the lesson he draws from 15,000 years of human history: “The bottom line is that we are lazy, greedy, and fearful, always looking for easier, more profitable, or safer ways to do things.”⁹ So Morris and the Durants agree: human beings are the slaves of basic drives causing stereotypical behavior that gets them in

⁸ *The Lessons of History*, 1968, 88

⁹ *Why the West Rules—For Now*, 2011, 194.

trouble or makes situations worse. A particular case in point: financial bubbles are a recurrent phenomenon that are very well understood by economic historians and therefore avoidable in theory; yet in practice “irrational exuberance” repeatedly bamboozles the unwary and lures the greedy with results that are utterly predictable.¹⁰

What Morris adds to the mix is laziness, which causes humans who should know better—a stitch in time saves nine—to postpone and procrastinate, putting off necessary action until a crisis point, when it may be too late. And humans tend follow the line of least resistance or sink to the level of the least common denominator, because to do better requires more effort and gumption than they can normally muster. Laziness explains why humanity took to fossil fuels with such alacrity in the first place and why it now fiercely resists transitioning to renewable sources of energy. The impending departure of our energy slaves means that our lives will be less comfortable and that we will have to work harder, perhaps much harder, for what we get. So we resist a future in which we may once again have to earn our bread by the sweat of our brow.

For a deeper understanding of the passions that drive human affairs in the large, the greatest teacher is Thucydides. In his history of the

¹⁰ Carmen M. Reinhart and Kenneth S. Rogoff, *This Time Is Different: Eight Centuries of Financial Folly*, 2011

Peloponnesian War, he says that Athens and Sparta were impelled by three passions: honor, fear, and profit (sometimes translated as interest or even ambition in the older sense of avidity for power). We have already encountered fear, about which there is little more to be said except that it is often exaggerated or irrational and can be triggered by the most nebulous of causes; thus it arises easily and is difficult to extinguish once arisen.

At the political level profit, interest, and ambition are all variations on the theme of greed, albeit for some larger object like status, power, or empire rather than mere sensual gratification. Unfortunately, the very abstractness of such objects means that final satisfaction is always beyond reach, if only because the fear of loss is ever present: “Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.” So there can be no end to power-seeking until it terminates in madness or corruption. Similarly, the profit motive impels individuals to enrich themselves and to keep enriching themselves until their wealth exceeds all bounds and the society becomes divided into rich and poor.

In the international arena, fear and profit create a vicious circle that impels nations toward conflict. As they jockey for position in a world where “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must” fear is ever present, complacency is impossible, and a good offense seems like

the best defense.¹¹ For Thucydides, peace is therefore a mere armistice in a continuous state of war.

What sets Thucydides apart from the rest is the importance he attaches to honor, which can encompass shame, vengeance, ambition, and other correlates of ego. For the most part, honor is not taken very seriously today, unlike past epochs when it was something paramount to be defended at all costs, even at the cost of one's life. The exceptions that prove the rule today are revealing: prisons and ghettos, places close to a state of nature, where to violate the code or lose respect can mean death; and the military, whose members serve a higher cause and offer up their lives in exchange for the king's shilling. However, political actors—like the warriors in Homer's *Iliad*, albeit in a less flamboyant manner—are also vitally concerned with reputation. It is a rare politician who will admit error, or even that he has changed his position on an issue. And the combatants in World War I all felt they could not back down without losing credibility, even though they knew that going to war might extinguish the lamps of

¹¹ trans. Strassler 1996, 352/5.89

Europe for at least a generation.¹² “Face” is not a concept for East Asians alone.¹³

To understand the role that honor can play in war and peace, consider the decision of Japan to attack the United States. Sometime during the 1930s, a Japanese general visited Stanford University, and his hosts took him to a football game. Afterward, he turned to an aide and said, “We must never go to war with these people.” So the Japanese high command was fully aware that war with the United States was fraught with risk. Shortly before the attack on Pearl Harbor, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, its chief author and proponent, told members of the Japanese Cabinet, “In the first six to twelve months of a war with the United States and Great Britain I will run wild and win victory upon victory. But then, if the war continues after that, I have no expectation of success.”¹⁴ Precisely six months later, Japan was decisively defeated at the Battle of Midway, a blow from which it never recovered. If we ask why the Japanese military bet their nations’s future on such a risky strategy, the answer is, of course,

¹² The German Kaiser almost immediately regretted ordering the mobilization that precipitated the war, only to be told by his generals that it could no longer be recalled. British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey used the lamps metaphor to express his dismay when he saw Europe lurching toward self-destruction.

¹³ Donna Hicks, *Dignity: Its Essential Role in Resolving Conflict*, Yale, 2013, argues that “dignity violations” are the root cause of the deepest conflicts, whether interpersonal or international, and usually constitute the greatest obstacle to resolving them.

¹⁴ Wikiquote, citing Ronald Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun*, 1965

complicated, but honor played a key role. Roosevelt's policies were designed to strangle Japan's war machine and frustrate its imperial designs, an outcome intolerable to a government run by descendants of samurai. Far better to die a noble death fighting for the Emperor than cravenly yield to the humiliating demands of the Americans.

None of the above gives us a crystal ball. Exactly how the passions will play out in any given situation is never obvious, and there will always be wild cards, acts of god, and other surprises. As recent storms and quakes demonstrate, "civilization exists by geological consent, subject to change without notice."¹⁵ But understanding the role of the passions allows us to make better sense of events in the present and to foresee to some degree the direction in which they are tending.¹⁶ And if we do not like that direction, then we can perhaps change the trajectory by determined action—or, at the very least, avoid actions that will make matters worse or even precipitate war.¹⁷ It is up to us whether peace remains a mere armistice between inevitable wars, whether we tolerate the enormous inequities that guarantee future turmoil, or whether we cling to

¹⁵ Will Durant, "What is Civilization?" *Ladies' Home Journal*, LXIII (January 1946).

¹⁶ As I have tried to do in a previous essay, "The Perfect Storm."

¹⁷ Some have claimed that Roosevelt's policies were in fact designed to provoke a Japanese attack.

our energy slaves rather than make a timely transition to a sophisticated solar economy.

Unfortunately, the meta lesson of history is that, as many have said, nobody seems to learn from it. The most poetic version goes, “If men could learn from history, what lessons it might teach us! But passion and party blind our eyes, and the light which experience gives is a lantern on the stern, which shines only on the waves behind us!”¹⁸ The consequence of this failure to learn its lessons makes human history “mostly the history of stupidity.”¹⁹ It may be that civilization is a Greek tragedy writ large: the noble but flawed protagonist exceeds the bounds of reason or morality and pays the price. He cannot act otherwise, because character is destiny. One can only hope that this time he will come to his senses before hubris becomes nemesis.

¹⁸ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Table Talk*, December 18, 1831.

¹⁹ Fiona MacDonald, “Stephen Hawking Says Most of Our History Is ‘The History of Stupidity,’” *Science Alert*, October 21, 2016