

What's wrong with history?¹

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Nothing so subtly distracts human beings as an environment of vestigially thoughtful speech and uninterpretable objects of reason emitting a persistent rational gibberish.

— Eva Brann, *Paradoxes of Education in a Republic*

I want first of all to welcome back all of our alumni to St. John's this Homecoming weekend. It is a bit strange for me to give this welcome, as I am myself welcomed back, as a member of the class of 1994 whose reunion year this is. In light of that I'd like to dedicate this lecture to two of our classmates who we've lost in the past few years, each of whom we lost suddenly and well before their time.

Michael Miller was a quiet student. Like many such students, his habit of silence masked serious and extensive reading, imagining, and thinking. He read large volumes of literature into the years after graduation, wrote fiction and reflections, and shared with a lucky few his thoughts in conversation. He worked as a switchboard operator at a hospital, for which he had been trained at the college switchboard (which we used to have), and was a devoted and loving husband and father.

¹ In preparing this lecture I was greatly helped by the college's para-curriculum on history, including Leo Strauss, "Political philosophy and history", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 10.1 (1949), pp. 30-50, reprinted in *What Is Political Philosophy?* (Chicago, 1957); Jacob Klein, "History and the liberal arts" and "Phenomenology and the history of science" (both reprinted in his *Lectures and Essays*), Harvey Flaumenhaft's lecture, "History in liberal education: Hindrance or help?" (2001) and Eva Brann's "The Student's Problem" (1967); as well as a forthcoming essay by Mary Elizabeth Halper, "Jacob Klein on the Problem of History for Liberal Education."

My interest in the topic was sparked by teaching the Graduate Institute History tutorial for the first time, and I am especially influenced by Nietzsche, "The Use and Abuse of History" and Husserl's *The Crisis of the European Sciences*, trans. D. Carr (Northwestern, 1970), as well as Husserl's 1910 lecture "Philosophy as a Rigorous Science." I did much of the reading and thinking connected with the lecture while on leave at the James Madison Program at Princeton, and was helped by conversation with the other fellows. Lastly I was aided by Liam Kofi Bright's short essay, "Facts vs. opinions" (<https://sootyempiric.blogspot.com/2024/03/facts-vs-opinions.html>) and by many wonderful conversations with Aschely Cone and Jordan Poyner.

Eddie Ames was what we call a transfer student. He studied aerospace engineering for three years before becoming bored and disaffected. After traveling around the country, he enrolled as a January Freshman at the age of 26. As a St. John's student he used his STEM education to help his fellow students through their Newton and Maxwell. After St. John's he enlisted in the Army, and served in civil affairs units overseas. After the Army he became a math teacher, and nursed his mother through years of dementia. He had a passion for Shakespeare and Mozart, whose work fed and consoled him until the very end of his life.

For these two men, and for so many others, the College was not simply one launching pad among others. It was, or is utterly indispensable to the development of a rich and nourishing inner life, and a foundation for loving service to others. I consider it the privilege of my life to be a part of the education of human beings like them.

Hard Times, a novel by Charles Dickens, begins with a short speech, given by Thomas Gradgrind, a father and headmaster of a school (as his name suggests):

"Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!"

What Gradgrind means by facts is briefly illustrated in the following classroom scene, when a student addressed as girl number twenty cannot properly define a horse. The schoolmaster turns to another student:

'Bitzer,' said Thomas Gradgrind. 'Your definition of a horse.'
'Quadrapped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in spring; in marshy

countries, sheds hoofs too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth.' Thus (and much more) Bitzer. 'Now girl number twenty,' said Mr Gradgrind. 'You know what a horse is.'

The realm of facts from which this answer is drawn seems to offer accounts of matters of common experience that are concrete, digestible, objective, and correct. Numbers are used when possible. The facts range from the obvious—horses have four legs—to the hypothetically practical, numbers of teeth, how to care for hooves, how to judge age.

Hypothetical practicality seems to me an earmark of a fact. I suspect in general that the realm of facts is the realm of the useful. So much is suggested in Dickens's novel. Mr Gradgrind's closest associate is Mr Bounderby, owner of the local mill, the wealthiest man for miles, identified as a self-made entrepreneur. With Mr Bounderby's help, Mr Gradgrind eventually enters Parliament. The realm of facts, it is suggested, is closely intertwined with the realm of utility, and utility with wealth and power. Mr. Bounderby squeezes as much out of his mill-workers as he can. In that way—admittedly loose and hard to explain—the realm of facts is not only a resource for various practical concerns, but a system of rule, even a kind of tyranny.

In *Hard Times*, the realm of facts and utility are contrasted with the world of feeling, sentiment, and the imagination. Without these, the story suggests, human life will be small, impoverished, and hostile to human excellence, even to basic forms of moral order. I find this story moving, and perhaps even true to life. But the danger that facts present to the sentiments or to the imagination is not my chief concern. Rather, I want to try to understand better certain practices and principles at the College.

As the newcomers to us will have begun to understand, even by now, a fact is an unwelcome offering in our conversations. This can be a surprise or a struggle to many, and a scandal to some. Most notoriously, we neglect historical facts, or

"context" as it is often called. In support of our ancient practice, I seek to undermine the realm of facts as a source of explanation or understanding, as much as possible, on terms that lovers of facts—let's call them "friends of the facts"—might understand. I will begin with facts in general, but in the second part of my lecture, as my title suggests, I will turn from facts as such to specific difficulties that the study of history presents for liberal education. For now, the facts.

I.

A statement of fact always represents a human judgement. The fact about the weather is the judgement of a meteorologist, or the observant and experienced layperson. The fact about the year in which William the Conqueror invaded England is the judgement of a historian. The fact about what a Greek word means, or what counts as a rule of Greek grammar, is a judgement made by a philologist or a grammarian. The fact about how to get from Annapolis to Cape Henlopen, land of dolphins, is the judgement of an experienced driver. These days, such judgements may be processed and mediated by machines. Those machines are not just imitations of human judgement. They rely on human judgement, that is, they require real human judgements as inputs. Without human judgements as a basis, the machines produce useless gibberish.²

Some judgements have a kind of immediacy and concreteness that bears truth with them. I open the drawer at my freshman lab station, and there are a pair of tongs. "There are tongs in the drawer!", I proclaim. I know that it is true, as it is right before my eyes. If others are around, and doubt me, I can gesture toward the tongs, bidding all to gather near and share my immediate, overwhelming experience of the presence of tongs in the drawer. If others are not around, I may find myself alone

² See Shumailov, I., Shumaylov, Z., Zhao, Y. *et al.* AI models collapse when trained on recursively generated data. *Nature* 631, 755–759 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-024-07566-y>. Retrieved 10/6/2024. Open link: <https://rdcu.be/dWaMe>

with my fact, a fact that others may doubt or ignore or even scoff at. "Ohhh" they say, "Tongs in the drawer! Sure! Are there also little furry goblins?"

The example is silly, but my intention is serious. Judgements arising from immediate experience are perhaps the most vivid we have. And yet, that vividness—the radiance of the truth of the judgement—is not always shareable with others. If I am reporting on the contents of the lab drawers to anyone without access to the room—and there are hundreds, thousands, billions of people without access to our lab rooms—they must rely on some authority implicit in my report.

Most things we call facts are not the objects of our immediate experience. Their truth is usually unavailable, and that is when we most especially use the word "fact": to communicate a claim to knowledge not shared by our audience. When we state "facts", we hide the original judgement, whether ours or someone else's, under an air of authority. A statement of fact, generally speaking, is a demand for agreement on a question when the ground or basis or evidence for the judgement is not available.

Often, the reliance of factual judgements on authority does not matter very much. That is because such judgements are eminently practical. Consider the judgements arising from immediate experience that guide us through our day-to-day lives, often beneath our notice. What we judge to be in the kitchen cupboard guides what we buy at the supermarket; how many people are in the fishbowl at 10:30 guides where we will sit in between classes; the reading listed on the the official seminar list guides what we read for seminar; my judgement that I need a cigarette guides my decision to smoke one. "Go get tongs from the drawer in the lab room" may or may not mark a successful endeavor, depending on whether the underlying judgement was correct or not. Likewise, my friend in the passenger seat giving me directions to Cape Henlopen will be immediately tested as to the reliability of their judgement. If they are wrong, we will be lost or stranded; if they are right, all will go well.

That certain facts are immediately tested in practice shows that my earlier claim that facts are unwelcome in our classrooms is not strictly true. It is permitted, indeed necessary, for us to offer judgements about what is likely to be true as a matter of fact, when the consequences will surface in short order: "There's colored chalk across the hall" or "I think that if we cut the fish this way, we won't damage its heart" or "The passage we are talking about is in the third chapter" or "I think that noun is in the genitive", or "That interval is a major third," or "That planarium has been cut too many times. It is dead!"

Yet in daily conversation and in everyday writing, outside the college, facts are used not in this simple, practical way, but as a claim to authority on broader questions of human life, moral or political, or questions about the ways of nature. If such facts are justified, it is by further facts: "studies" for instance or "science" or "historians". Facts are the judgements of experts, presented where those experts, or their expertise, are absent.

Suppose we were to answer the opening question in our seminar with facts. The tutor asks, "Why is Achilles so angry?" and a student answers: "The progressive threat response in mammals is mediated by a system that runs from medial amygdaloidal areas downward, largely via the stria terminalis to the medial hypothalamus, and from there to the dorsal half of the periaqueductal gray." Or, the tutor asks: "Why are there two stories of creation at the opening of Genesis?" A student describes a study suggesting "that the neurological networks underpinning God representations amplify human empathetic responses." "Is Don Quixote crazy?" Well, "increases in the chemical dopamine can cause hallucinations, delusions and disorganised thinking". (By the way, I did not draw on any expertise in neuroscience to write these responses—they are, of course, from Google.)

I could answer in a similar style, not drawing on neuroscience, but on history. Why is Achilles angry? "The Greeks" had a "shame culture". Why are there two

Genesis stories? "Philological evidence shows that there are two different authors."
Is Don Quixote crazy? "Knight errantry was widely admired in early modern Spain."
(Here the first claim is bullshit, the second is true, and I fabricated the third one from scratch.)

What has gone wrong? First of all, as I've suggested, the appeal to a fact is an appeal to authority. Secondly, and more surprisingly, *because* it is an appeal to authority, a statement of fact does not convey learning at all.

That a statement of fact is a claim to authority can be illustrated by two contrasts. Consider first of all matters of common experience. Oak trees come from acorns. The sun rises each morning in the east. Matters of common experience are generally available and extremely useful in thinking about things, especially with others. Now, they may not be always strictly true—how many acorns are gobbled by squirrels, and never become trees? And what assures the relation between the sun and the sky in the long term? Still, these claims are "true enough", or as Aristotle puts it "true always or for the most part." Yet I doubt we would call these matters of common experience "fact."

Consider next the enunciations to the propositions of Euclid: for example, "Circles are to one another as the squares on their diameters." We spend as much time as it takes in class demonstrating the proofs that Euclid offers for these claims, and sometimes offering alternative proofs, and sometimes questioning the terms or the methods of the proof. We might describe this activity as a pursuit of truth so far as the objects are concerned. Yet I think we would not describe those enunciations, however luminously true and well-justified, as "facts."

If I am on the right track, then a fact is not simply something true about the world. There are truths that we do not tend to call facts. Sometimes we examine these truths, as we do with an enunciation in Euclid. Sometimes we take them for granted, as we do with matters of common experience. By contrast, to call something

a fact is a claim to knowledge, and hence, a claim to authority. When we accept that authority, and trust in the fact, we give the speaker a certain status, the status of a knower.

A knower may be able to offer an explanation or justification of the proffered "fact." But the explanation is frequently also in factual terms, or an appeal to further, generic authorities: "studies" have shown, or "scientists" think. That makes a factual claim a kind of oracle: a voice from a rock that mysteriously speaks a truth, whose source we cannot evaluate or understand.

So much supports our common experience at the college. A statement of fact pretends to an authority which stands outside of community of the classroom, and so it smothers the flame of serious and collaborative conversation.

The questions which open our conversations are not answerable by facts. They are not, as is common in other forms of schooling, questions set to test our mastery of some material, laid out on a grid for the purposes of competitive box-checking.³ We ask real, open-ended questions, motivated by a desire to understand. The conversation might undermine the basis of the question, or begin to build a way to answer it. We may even go around in circles for a time. Only rarely does an *answer* emerge, and then usually only when something technical or concrete is at stake.

With experience, I think it becomes obvious to most of us, if not all, that the forms of conversation opened up by the exclusion of facts are exciting, fascinating, edifying and wholesome. Forced to appeal to resources we can share, we read more carefully. When we seek words and phrases whose meaning we understand, as matters of common experience—say, "downward tendency" instead of "gravity", a term mediated by experts—we must speak more carefully and more thoughtfully. Our thinking becomes transparent, available to be heard, disputed, or added to by others.

³ On which see the wonderful discussion in Eva Brann, "The Student's Problem" (1967).

Now, if we think again about our Euclid propositions, it becomes clear that what is presented in our classes as an invitation to examination, inquiry, or study can be presented as a fact in another context. Shortly, the freshman will turn to Euclid's famous proof about the relation of the sides of right triangles. It is likely to be familiar to us already, as a fact. Our fact has a pretentious title "The Pythagorean Theorem", as if that told us anything about it, and it has a snappy-sounding modernized formula: $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$. What is the relationship between the factual claim, used as a weapon by know-it-alls in schools around the world, and the piece of Euclid's writing that we discuss in class?

Here is a simple answer: The know-it-all's fact is dead, whereas Euclid's proposition, when a single person works through it, or several of us together, is alive. It is more alive, I think, even than my vivid experience of the tongs in the lab drawer. Like all living things, it takes time to come to understand it, and new aspects of it emerge over the course even of years. (I had a student in freshman math once who presented an alternate proof by baking cakes in the shapes of right triangles and the squares on their sides. She cut up the squares and lay them on top of one another to show their equality. Is that a good alternate proof, or not? Why not?)

By contrast, a fact, when it is not simply a tool for establishing authority or jockeying for status, may point to something true, and even deeply true. But it has been dessicated, dried up, like astronaut's ice cream, and it has traveled far away from its source in a person's thinking and judgement. It might even be a mere disconnected symbol whose meaning has been lost, like a stray name tag from one of those huge and awful academic conferences, like the American Philosophical Association.

In Plato's *Phaedrus*, which we read, by long tradition, at the end of freshman year and senior year, Socrates tells a story of the invention of writing in Egypt. Its

inventor, the god Theuth, claims that it will help people to remember, but the god serving as king, Thamus, objects:

For this invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn, by the neglect of their memory. Their trust in writing, produced by external characters which are no part of themselves, will discourage the use of their own memory within them. You have found a medicine not for memory but for reminding. You furnish your students with the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom, for they have heard many things without teaching and will therefore seem to know a lot, despite being ignorant for the most part and difficult to live with, since they are not wise, but only appear wise. (*Phaedrus* 275a-b, my translation.)

Facts, like writing, are knowledge in storage, dessicated understanding stored up to be rehydrated or restored to life at a later time or place. They are stand-ins or representations for a living understanding, such as the active judgement of the living human being that originates it. Once put outside a person in ink on a paper, or in encoded pixels, the origin falls from view. As Socrates goes on to say, the disembodied record of the judgement is rolled around everywhere, like flotsam and jetsam on the sea, able to be claimed by anyone, whether they have the understanding it represents or not:

Socrates: Writing, Phaedrus, has this fearsome quality, and is truly like painting; for its offspring stand like living beings, but if one asks them something, they preserve a solemn silence. It is the same with words and speeches; you might think they spoke with a certain wisdom, but if you question them, wishing to learn about their sayings, they always say only one and the same thing. And every word, when once it is written, is rolled and tossed about everywhere, alike among those who understand it and those who have no concern for it, and it does not know to whom to speak or not to speak. When sounded falsely or unjustly reproached it always needs its father's aid; for it has no power to defend or to help itself. (275d-276a)

Is there any better description of the condition that we live in? We swim in sentences without knowing who spoke them or why. Free-floating claims can lodge in our minds, like spores. We can repeat them as if we know and understand their origins in real human thinking and judgement, but nothing will stop up our mouths and prevent us if we do not. Their automatic authority motivates us to cling to them when the going gets tough, and when we fear diminishment or loss of status.

Worse than that: Our technological habits suggest that we believe that learning consists in the minimal acquisition of these dried up and dead judgements. To be used, like the directions from a global positioning system, one doesn't even have to learn the facts in question, but only to act on their assumption. Our thoughtless habits of deference and obedience to machines make it easy to forget that not only all true judgements, but all interesting judgements, originate in a living activity. We make these judgements when we get to know a subject matter by reading, study, and observation, by imagining and examining possibilities. If we do not cultivate these living activities of learning, in ourselves or in others, we risk becoming circulators of dead sound and symbol, exposed to an endless and unresolvable struggle for power and status.

Of course, it is not quite right to call facts "dead". What is dead remains so. In our study of Euclid-- or in the whole mathematics program -- we enter into the living origins of dead facts, the mathematical flotsam and jetsam in which we swim as a matter of course. We could say we "revivified" dead learning—although it has a creepy resonance, as if we were making zombies. Or we could use our founding dean, Jacob Klein's phrase, following Edmund Husserl, that what we do is "desedimentation", scraping off the deadening shell of the fact exchange, and seeing the truth of things, as vividly as if it were before our eyes.⁴

⁴ See especially Klein's "Phenomenology and the History of Science", with references.

I have suggested that the most visible effect of the use of facts in our classrooms, and the most obvious complaint to make about it, is the threat that the use of authority makes to our spirit of collaboration and openness. Our careful listening, to the voices of the books and to one another's voices, is interrupted by a demand for assent. Yet this argument against facts in the classroom is too weak. I want to suggest that the appeal to facts at best distracts, and most commonly disrupts, the use of our active powers to learn and to understand. To see this more clearly, I turn at last to history proper.

II.

I suggest we make rough and ready distinction between scientific facts on the one hand, and historical facts on the other. (Academics use the phrase "rough and ready" when they mean "crass and incomplete.")

The realm of scientific facts, to speak simply, seeks to explain everything that happens—at least, everything material—in terms of what things are made of, the most immediate causes of motion and change, and in terms of the laws of nature, laws which are often or usually mathematically conceived.

One of the very greatest privileges of studying at St. John's is the privilege of thinking through, over a period of years, in great depth, the claims of this scientific realm. You who are freshmen will observe living beings, at first with just your eyes and some old books, before turning in the second semester to the mathematics of materials and attempting to see materials more closely through various contrived observations. Sophomores will work through the relation between observation and mathematics in ancient and modern astronomy, and then consider the origins of algebra, the great engine of mathematical explanation. Juniors will gaze into the heart of mathematical physics, and seniors will explore the great complications it faced in

the twentieth century. Each of you, in other words, will have ample opportunity to think through the explanatory claims of science and the status of scientific fact.

What about historical facts? The nature of history and historical study gets much less attention in our curriculum. Those Graduate Institute students who choose the History sequence will work their way through a set of reflections on history and its nature. Otherwise, we have an essay by Nietzsche to be read in the second semester of senior seminar, "The use and abuse of history for life." It is this essay that guides the remainder of this lecture. A warning: I will focus on points with which I am sympathetic to Nietzsche, or where he has taught me something, or where his formulation is particularly vivid and true. Yet in the end I have disagreements that would separate the view I am trying to illustrate from his. Given the short span of a lecture, a muddle may result, and the question period may be the place to try to resolve it.

Nietzsche mocks his contemporaries, the historically learned Germans of the nineteenth century as "walking encyclopedias", as "dragging around with [them] a huge quantity of indigestible stones of knowledge, which then, as in the fairy-tale, can sometimes be heard rumbling around inside of [them]."⁵ The craze for ingesting information, facts, for a historical or scholarly approach to everything, has dehumanized them.

For Nietzsche, the indifferent collection of an endless stream of historical facts is a sign of a kind of disorder, a misuse of learning. He describes Mozart and Beethoven, for instance, as "engulfed by all the learned dust of biography and compelled by the torture-instruments of historical criticism to answer a thousand impertinent questions."⁶ Mozart and Beethoven are composers of music. Their music is why they matter, as opposed to other central European males alive in the late

⁵ "On the uses and disadvantage of history for life" §4, in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale. (Cambridge, 1983)78-79

⁶ Ibid. §7, p. 97

eighteenth or early nineteenth century. Nothing about their biography explains what matters about their music.

Consider another example, one that Nietzsche does not mention but one with which I'm sure he was familiar. In the nineteenth century, continuing unto the present day, scholars of Plato sought to discover the order in which Plato had written the dialogues, and so to give an account of the development of his thought. So, one might be told, some dialogues are early, others middle, and still others late, and the distinction would reflect changes in view on a more or less biographical basis—youthful idolatry of Socrates, the mature development of Socrates' ideas, the final rejection of Socrates. The motivation for the theory is not, for the most part, evidence from outside the dialogues, but rather, the apparent conflicts scholars find between various theses expressed in them.

Adherents of the developmental model of the dialogues do not enter into the conversations of Socrates or the other interlocutors and so into the practice of philosophy. They cherry-pick theses and invent stories about how each develops from the other. Just as the Mozart biographers diminish unearthly music to the banalities of life, so do these scholars diminish and demean the great model for philosophical conversation and for the philosophical life.

So far, we have suggested that a historical approach to books or to music might be pointless or distracting. For Nietzsche, the historical approach is worse than a distraction: it is destructive. He continues his earlier complaint about Mozart and Beethoven:

Does [the engulfing and torture of the composers with biographical detail] not mean its premature death, or at least paralysis, when that, the living effects of which are not yet exhausted, is subject to curious investigation of the countless minutiae of its life and works, and when problems of knowledge are sought when one ought to learn to live and forget all problems?⁷

⁷ Ibid.

"Forgetting all problems" perhaps makes more sense with music than with the dialogues of Plato. We are meant to listen to music, to perform it, to compose it, but not to study it; likewise, Plato invites us to practice philosophy, to face philosophical problems, to think about how to live—not to examine whether a moment's indigestion might have made him forget to apply something called the theory of Ideas.

Nietzsche claims that 19th century Germans—"walking encyclopedias"—cannot "live", which I take to mean, they collect words without ingesting them or taking them to heart. They are not inspired to live out philosophy, to write music or poetry, but to summarize everything in a book and hold it at arm's length.

By contrast, we can ingest Mozart's music as Beethoven did, composing music that responds to it on its own terms. Or we can ingest Plato's dialogues as Aristotle did: as the soil for further growth, as something in the light of which one might act, think, or create.⁸

Nietzsche's insight here is that a historical approach to certain figures or topics can be a kind of deliberate deadening. If facts are dead thinking, by burying art or thinking in facts, we make war on what matters.

But for Nietzsche, smothering real thinking and creativity is not the only thing history does. He thinks that history, properly practiced, is essential for life. What does he mean by proper practice, and why does he think it is essential? He distinguishes three types of salutary history: monumental, antiquarian, and critical, briefly described in the passage that follows:

Each of the three species of history which exist belongs to a certain soil and a certain climate and only to that: in any other it grows into a devastating weed. If a man who wants to do something great has need of the past at all, he appropriates it by means of monumental history; he on the other hand who likes to persist in the familiar and the revered of old, tends the past as an antiquarian historian; and only he who is

⁸ See the first chapter of George Steiner, *Real Presences*. (Chicago, 1991)

oppressed by a present need, and who wants to throw off this burden at any cost, has need of critical history, that is to say, a history that judges and condemns. Much mischief is caused through the thoughtless transportation of these plants: the critic without need, the antiquary without piety, the man who recognizes greatness but cannot himself do great things, are such plants, estranged from their mother soil and degenerated into weeds.⁹

Monumental history looks to the past for inspiration. Antiquarian history looks to steward the history of a place or a community, as a way to care for that place or community. Lastly, critical history seeks to uncover a wrong of the past in order to correct it in the present and to build a different future.

All three forms of history, for Nietzsche, must be undertaken with moderation. The wrong place, the wrong time, the wrong amount, would have toxic effects.

All the forms of history that Nietzsche praises are a part of practical life, the life of action, driven by present concerns and in light of the future. It is evident from the tripartite division of history that he sees the value of history as political, or as belonging to a community or a political community in a special way. Sometimes he calls such a community a "culture". Monumental history matters for the formation of participants and leaders in political life, by shaping their aspirations and inflaming their desire to imitate the virtues of their forbears. Antiquarian history is a mode of stewardship. If an interest in one's ancestry is a mode of commitment to one's family, an interest in antiquarian history is a mode of commitment to the buildings and customs of one's community.¹⁰ Critical history is a mode of improving one's political community, of liberating it from something from the past that strangles its growth or its flourishing.

⁹ Nietzsche, *op.cit.* §2, p. 72

¹⁰ I remember once visiting a small town in the Lake District of England called Grasmere. The church there had a custom, many hundreds of years old, called "Rushbearing". On a particular day, the townspeople brought rushes to cover the floor of the church. What was remarkable was that the historical pamphlet on the tradition contained no explanation whatsoever. They could speculate that the rushes were to cover odors or moisture, but why bring them on one day a year with pomp and ceremony? Antiquarian history prizes memory above understanding.

Why would history be limited to the practical and the communal, or subordinate to what Nietzsche calls "life"? (It is difficult to see what he means by "life", but I hazard that he means the use of the active and creative powers of the mind and heart.) Nietzsche is not so much placing a limitation on history, as noticing that that a limitation is necessary.

History is already necessarily limited. Consider for a moment everything that has ever happened. It is by no means all historical. What I ate for breakfast this morning, or a year ago, or twenty years ago, is not historical. It is simply a past happening. When we tell a history, we make a selection. Even if we choose to write a history of breakfast, or, even a history of breakfast in the United States in the late 20th and early 21st centuries—even then, my own breakfast might not be exemplary or interesting, that is, it might fail to be of historical interest. The act of selection is made in the present in which the history is told, although of course, the selections of the past will also have determined, for instance, which books of the past have survived into the present.

In his essay on history and the liberal arts, which I recommend, Jacob Klein makes this point about the necessary selectivity of history, and another point that seems to me related. Klein observes that, potentially, there is a history of absolutely anything. We could tell a history of Friday Night Lectures, a history of podiums, a history of public lectures, a history of audiences or auditoriums, or a history of receptions in between lectures and question period.

I find the breadth of matters to which history can be used to be mysterious. There is not a geology of everything in principle, nor is there a science of nutrition for anything you can think of. For what kinds of inquiry *is* this true? There is certainly a philosophy of anything in principle, and a poetry likewise; there has also been thought to be a mathematics of everything, and a physics or chemistry of everything.

Does every form of inquiry that has universal application also rely on a principle of selection? Not necessarily. Suppose there are universal and necessary laws of nature. The universality of their related sciences—physics or chemistry—might just consist in the application of laws to an unlimited variety of particular situations. In the case of philosophy, the disciplines within it are thought to have some internal ordering or other, for instance, logic lays a foundation for the study of nature, and the study of nature for ethics, in one familiar view. Our "selection", in these other disciplines, does not provide order and limits where there was previously none, but relies on an order within the discipline itself.

Does history have laws? I believe that laws of this kind have been sought, and were sought with particular intensity in the 19th century. I am skeptical that they can have been found. What history may yield instead is rather matters of common experience, formulated by careful reflection on sets of events. Such a science of history, the kind that I think is practiced by Thucydides or Herodotus, Tocqueville or Tacitus, is not so much a "science" as a repository of practical wisdom, truths only as general as 'oak trees come from acorns' or 'the sun rises each day in the east.' Perhaps wealth provides for a leisured class, as Aristotle suggests in the opening of the *Metaphysics*, or, in the aphorisms with which Thucydides' history is larded, "war is a violent teacher"(3.82) or "it is a habit of mankind to entrust to careless hope what they long for, and to use sovereign reason to thrust aside what they do not fancy." (4.108)

The works that come closest to seeking or finding laws of history on our curriculum are Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* in the junior seminar list, and the Marx readings that the seniors will begin shortly. In my current state of ignorance, I suspect that these two authors have in the end, like other historians and political theorists, have not discovered universal laws of history. Rather, they have only pointed out

rules of thumb to guide large-scale practical judgement—what Aristotle called practical wisdom. Theirs is not a law-governed science at all.

Now, you will have seen, at this part of the lecture I have become hand-wavy and lazy. Let me try to take a stab at one more suggestion as to why history may be necessarily a practical endeavor, rather than a theoretical one.

Aristotle famously claims that poetry is more philosophical than history, since it aims at the universal:

It is clear from what has already been said that the work of the poet is not to tell what happened, but the sorts of things that might and could happen, because they are likely or necessary. For the historian and the poet differ not by writing verse or prose -- Herodotus' writings could be put into verse and it would no less be a kind of history, in verse or without verse. The difference is this, that the one tells what happened, the other what might happen. For this reason poetry is more philosophical and more serious than history, since poetry is more universal, and history speaks of the particular. It is universal, then, for a person of a certain sort to say or do certain kinds of things, either as is likely or as is necessary. That is what poetry aims at when it gives names, whereas the particular is what Alcibiades did or what he suffered. (*Poetics* 1451a35-b10)

If I am right in my instinct that there are no laws of history, so that no science of history could explain every particular, as is the ambition of natural science, history can only collect particulars. Further, it can only assemble particulars for a particular purpose, lest it be overwhelmed by a trillion irrelevant trivialities. It seems to me natural that this would be a practical endeavor, just as the multitude of facts we use in everyday life are most evident in practical endeavors. Recall at the outset of the lecture, facts seemed to have two uses: the attainment of practical goals, and the claim to authority.

What is history for? To help us to think about what we ought to do. We ought to demand a transparent usefulness of any history, an account of its aims, a purpose in the present moment.

III.

Where does this leave us? As two of my colleagues asked me yesterday: Is history all bad? Or is it sometimes good? It seems to me that we have good reason to think that we are subject to endemic forms of distraction, illusion, and enchantment, not the enchantment that makes Cinderella a princess, but the enchantment that turns Odysseus' companions to swine. We have an inbuilt inclination to seek historical answers, such as the biographical pseudo-answers to why we find one thought or another in the dialogues of Plato. Our search for collections of irrelevant facts can overwhelm our attention and lay waste to the precious time in which we live our lives. I do not believe this search can ever be fruitful, in the absence of universal laws of history that could promise to explain all the happenings that have ever happened and all the doings that were ever done.

I will confess, however, to having found history very useful in studying old books. To be so useful, it seems to me, it must help us to see what our friends, the books and authors, themselves saw. Our principle of selection, our terms of use, would then be the fundamental questions that we share with the authors of the books. In other words, when history is used well, it is subordinate to our shared interest with the books and authors, the love and zeal for fundamental questions.

Until our fundamental inquiries are done, until we achieve mutual understanding with all of the humans from the past with whom we speak in conversation, it seems merely optional to seek out such nuances. For our attitude to the past is shaped by its own sort of selfish concern, the concern for how we ought to live, and how we ought to understand the world around us, in light of that concern.