Philosophy and Religion: Our View of History – I

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An Evaluation of How We Look at History and Our Past in General

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Contents

1.

Introduction

In this entry, I aim to give a short evaluation of the way we probably should view our past, and especially people of the past, from the perspective of the modern world.

2.

How Most of Us View the Past in the Modern World

Here, I will outline roughly how many of us view the past, and how we might view the people of the past, especially when we talk about times before the 1500s.

In a nutshell, I think it wouldn't be a stretch to say that most of us view the past as primitive in some way. We are people of the modern world after all. It is only we who have cars, computers, modern science, planes–you name it we've made it. We mostly view our understanding of the world and universe as superior, since it is more developed.

All in all, we may think even that the past is irrelevant because we think that everything has changed since then, and ultimately we may jump to the conclusion that the voices of the dead don't matter.

The basis of this thinking is the assumption that everything has changed since the past. Therefore, I will propose my view on this assumption in the next chapter.

3.

How Much Has Changed From the Past

It is my current opinion that although many things have changed on the surface, barely anything at all has changed fundamentally when considering the past—ancient and recent alike.

To make my reasoning a bit more concrete, I will give the example of comparing two fictitious villages, one a modern English village, and the other an Anglo-Saxon village (around 700-ish AD), more or less because I am somewhat familiar with Anglo-Saxon England. I will consider several areas in these two different settings in order to outline what I mean by saying that I don't think much has changed at all. It's worth noting that I think the historical setting I have chosen to compare to has direct parallels all over the world, and so the conclusions I reach should be common to societies around the world.

3.1   Science/Technology

This is the most obvious area of differences. The understanding of how the world was physically formed in the solar system, how we evolved, how weather systems work—these are all things which the people of our fictional village would have little to no understanding of. Furthermore, they probably only had holes in the ground for fridges, cows and ploughs for tractors, pebbles for calculators, and horses for cars.

On the scientific front, maybe they thought Þor (Thor) or Wōden (Odin) caused the rain and thunder (noting this is before the Christianisation of England), or that Earth was formed from the flesh of some dead god, or that us humans were formed in the armpits of giants. Sure, we know now that these things aren't true, but I think actually, they might as well be—unless you're a NASA engineer.

In the end, thunder and rain is caused by something uncontrollable, Earth was made whether we like it or not, and we are simply here, living on this Earth. Maybe the people back then thought the 'world' was nothing more than Europe, but what did that matter, the harvest was due in Autumn and the farm's out the back door 20 metres away. What use would Antarctica be to these people, not that it's of any use to our fictional modern English village anyway. My point is, our understanding of the bigger things is most certainly developed, but our practical understanding of local-scale things is basically the same. We know when to sow and when to harvest, what plants need to live (on a local-scale like manure, not on a micro/macro-scale like phosphorous), how cattle breeds etc. just like we know now. The only thing that has changed is the scale of our understanding—a scale which is often unnecessary for everyday living.

On the technology front, much has changed on the surface too, but nonetheless, as previously mentioned, holes in the ground did their job. So too did ploughs, pebbles, and horses. The point here is that our fictitious Anglo-Saxon villagers would've used some tool to get cold(-ish) food, another to plough the soil, another to count, and another for transportation. The concept of all these devices has not changed one bit. You could say a car is a developed horse—simply because, for all intents and purposes, it might as well be the case. The same can be said for pretty much anything I would say, but only in the scope of everyday life.

And so, at a fundamental level, I argue that not much has changed in areas of technology and science, since many advancements in science don't affect everyday life, and the concepts behind our tools in technology are basically the same.

3.2   Food and Drink

I don't think I need to write much here at all, but simply to say that our recipes have gotten more developed, but the ingredients, and the concept of cooking/eating, is basically universal in time and space. We always have, and always will, eat and drink. The only thing that has changed (just slightly) is how much we eat, and what we eat as a final product.

And so here, fundamentally, the processes of eating and drinking are the same—even though I probably didn't have to mention it.

3.3   War

Like the previous section, this might be rather obvious too, but although our means of war have changed quite a lot (for the worse), fundamentally on this front too, nothing has changed. The key ingredients for war is conflict— tension, disagreement, anger, all things of that kind. In fact, I think its quite easy to say that the causes of war are frightfully similar to the causes of a tantrum between two toddlers. And if we complicate things no further, these causes are innate and constant throughout all of humanity, and show no sign of changing. And so, the nature of war is always the same, even if its expression is different.

In our fictitious villages, each may physically take up arms for reasons strikingly similar: to defend from an external force. Maybe the modern village takes up arms by protesting, shouting or pursuing the authorities that may be opposing them. Maybe the Anglo-Saxon village would take up swords and axes to defend from a raid. I may repeat myself, but as you hopefully see, the means are different, but the concept is exactly the same.

As of writing this, there is a war in Ukraine as Russia is attempting to invade it. In line with my thinking, I would say that this war most likely is no more complicated than mere greed—and I'm not trying to make it seem like a novel observation. If it is not greed, then it may be anger, or even some sense of false righteousness—who knows what may be going on in Putin's mind. What I want to point out is that the cause of this war is the will of the individual (Putin in this case). What this means is that although each of us don't go around waging full scale war with each other, if we had the

resources, we may very well be. Therefore, in a sense, war is just a macro-expression of our internal/local conflict as individuals. The implication of this is that we all have the potential to be war-mongers or Hitlers (or with regard to recent events, Putins).

This point doesn't have much to do with this entry, but it holds value. Because, although we have the potential to be full, cruel dictators, we also have the potential to purposefully be the opposite, in our everyday lives. But anyhow, I hope you might be able to see how constant war is, by seeing its root cause.

3.4   Government/Social Structure

This section and the next may be the hardest to argue, but I still think that barely much has changed, but remember, I mean at the fundamental/conceptual level. On the surface of large scale government, much has changed, the structures of legislation and their creation, the role of the people in government, and much more.

But let us look at our villages again. Here it is obvious that barely anything has changed. In both the past and present, we see that there may be a 'village chief' or sorts, and under that chief, others with more specific delegations, whether that be to do with crafting swords or doing the newspaper rounds. In the past, it is easier to see that the structure of the village is simply expanded out to the structure of the management of the country. Back then, the 'village chief' of England[1] was the king, and the sub-delegates were the king's ministers. It is harder to see this parallel in our modern time, but the idea remains the same: a group of people is managed and represented by a smaller group of people (or individual).

The structure of every single community, whether a country, a village, or even a UN council, has remained the exact same. There is a 'body' of people, to which a 'head' is appointed to govern them and manage them. This structure is simply repeated recursively. This has been the case for time immemorial, all over the world, and in this sense, I argue that nothing has changed from the past whether ancient or modern. The only thing that has changed is the means by which we appoint the 'head' (democratic or dictatorial means

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[1] We'll ignore the fact that there probably wasn't an 'England' yet, since England at that time was split into several smaller kingdoms.

etc.). Thus, in this way, nothing has changed fundamentally. Of course, the degree of freedom that remains is what the 'head' chooses to do, and this is always either the make or break of the entire 'body'.

On a rather separate point, this may also serve as a reason not to invest too much energy into seeing politics in itself as the sole solution to the world's problems. I seem to see this a lot my the present time. I don't wish to be misunderstood here, government gone wrong can be terrible indeed, and it ought to be fixed and made better, but I am weary of other areas also being ignored, and that is my only source of weariness. Presently, I see that many people—and I have been no exception in the past—imply that the perfect form of government/political system will solve all problems. But if we observe where governments go wrong, they usually go wrong for simple reasons under the complicated surface of the system. I think that the main, if not the only reason, why governments fail, is the presence of the greed of people, unchecked. The presence of a 'head-body' structure means that the 'head' can guide the people for the better, but it also means that they can guide the people to ruin. Because it is my belief that this 'head-body' structure is fundamentally universal in time and space, I think that these risks will always be present. And so, the greed of the 'head' will always be a looming risk, whether it is the greed to control more, to gain more, or to be known more. Therefore, it seems that when we put our hopes, stress, and attention, on any political system, it is easier to forget the basic individual greed that lies at the core of all governments' downfalls.

This greed applies to the people at the top of government of course, but also we can't forget that we are the 'heads' of our own local 'governments', whether it be at home or work. Thus, the same idea applies on a local scale, or maybe it was the other way around to begin with.

3.5   Religion/Culture

Here, change is most obvious at the surface. But again, I argue fundamentally that not much has changed. In each of our fictitious village's times, the religion and culture has changed drastically. Since the Anglo-Saxons, the religion of England has roughly been Germanic Polytheism, Christianity, and whatever we have at the moment. Now the last one is important, because I don't want to say that we have no religion as a country in the UK. Of course, a good percentage especially in cities like London, are non-religious. But I

would argue that we all hold a religion whether we say we do or not. And so in that sense, I say that the religion we have now (on average statistically) is simply "whatever we have now". The crux of my point is that everyone follows a religion, whether it is Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, money, fame, or possessions. A religion is a framework for what you give value to—roughly speaking. And so, if someone says they aren't religious, most likely they give value to something just as much as a Christian might give value to God in their lives. And so, both people are equally religious in my mind. Looking at things this way, no matter what we give value to, we must hold a religion so as to provide fundamental direction to our lives.

Just as we can get physically lost or driven off a cliff, so too our religion can lead us down a bad path. This may be because:

1. What we give value to (worship), should not be given that value

2. The way we give value (worship) is the wrong way (which may be caused by actually enacting the first point above unknowingly)

These are the two areas where religion can go wrong. And so, for example, unjust harm done to others in the name of any religion, I think, is an enacting of the second point above. You could say that a constant throughout all of human history, is the search for right religion, the search of what we should put value in. Done wrong, we have hate and war, but done rightly, we have kindness and peace.

In this simple way, I think there is a fundamental unchanged constant with regards to religion: we must and do, place value in something so that our lives may be guided. And so, in this regard, I hope that I have shown that not much has changed on the front of religion from a basic and fundamental perspective.

Finally, I will say that the point regarding culture is largely the same, since culture I think is just a reflection of our religion, a more widely spread expression of our religion, and so not as explicitly religious. And so, in the same way, we must and do have a culture, and that is the fundamental constant I would like to outline. It is worth noting also that culture/customs/traditions may also go wrong for the same reasons as religion outlined above.

4.

Conclusion

In all the previous sections, I hope I have shown at a fundamental level how barely anything, if at all, has changed when we compare the past to the present. Here, I would like to outline the implications of saying this.

The key implication is with regard to how we listen to the past, to the voices of those who are now dead. If we hold that everything has changed, we imply that there is nothing worth listening to from the past, and that anything said is simply invalid since "times have changed, they couldn't understand anything that we face today."

But, if we find that in fact, not much has changed at all, then we will be interested and happy to lend an ear to those who, more often than not, made it their life's work to say something. If we realise that we stand on more common ground, if not the exact same ground, as those before us, only then do the (mostly false) barriers between us now and us back then, come down. Only then can we listen to those older voices as if they have something valuable to say to each of our own lives now. That way we can give an ear to the past, just as we would give an ear to the present, and indeed I think we should.