

On history

Recently, my colleague Eric Macaulay asked me the following question about JAW30 :

In JAW30 you assert that “history and epistemology —despite the best intentions and wishes of its devotees— have no uses whatsoever” . I know too little of epistemology to agree or disagree, but with regards to history. . . Would you mind elaborating on why you think history is useless?

Let me clarify my position, as I understand it today.

When, in JAW30 , I said that history was useless, I meant that history doesn’t provide us with useful models. (While fully admitting that doing history can be enjoyable to some people.) I think that that position needs to be refined a bit.

The concepts we have in our heads are rarely crisp and clear like they are in mathematics: usually they are some hazy mix of abstract properties, and specific memories.

To the extent that a concept is characterized by abstract properties, it behooves us to understand that concept by analyzing those properties directly. It is exactly analogous to the suggestion of how to understand a mathematical set: look at its definition, not at a handful of its elements. Hopefully, we can learn all we need to know about something just by looking at its nature.

To give one example, the nature of “friendship” or “human interaction” in general is, to me, quite well-defined. And by analyzing that concept directly, I have been able to structure my life so as to have much more fulfilling and rewarding relationships.

However, we aren’t always lucky enough to have abstract properties. In terms of the previous example, what about when it comes to a *particular* person? How can we hope to interact with that person without looking at the history of their actions? What other information about them can we possibly have? The answer is: we can’t, because we don’t have any other information. So in such cases, we have to use history. And this is the sense in which my statement in JAW30 was inaccurate.

Summarizing my position: if we need to understand something, only use “historical facts” when absolutely necessary, and only as needed. We should aim to make our use of data judicious and minimal. (And this goes for anything.)

To this I add a final caveat: The main problem in using history to understand something lies in the process of abstraction that lets us call a cluster of phenomena a “something” . For example, it is fruitless to try to understand the mechanics of a piano by looking at a harpsichord, even though one may have evolved from the other, and they are both keyboard instruments. The piano is very real and very well-defined: so attack it! And we have to be especially careful with our understanding of people, because people change all the time—though not very much from day to day— , but by an accident of physics we tend to consider them to be the same person.

Our ability to remember is as much a curse as it is a blessing. Our instincts would be

JAW43-1

nonexistent without it, but we should aim to purge it from rational inquiry wherever we can gain by doing so.

Eindhoven, 28 November 2005

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