



# History and the Liberal Arts

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Friends and enemies of the St. John's Program, visitors to the college and many of its alumni often raise the question: Why is History neglected in the St. John's curriculum? They point to the obvious contrast between the chronological order in which the "Great Books" are read and the remarkable lack of historical awareness displayed by the students. The time has come, I think, to deal with this question extensively. I propose to do that in this lecture. Let us reflect on the role and significance of History in a liberal arts curriculum.

The first, rather simple, statement that can be made is this: Man, having the ability to understand and being inquisitive by nature, wants to explore everything that he sees about him—the various plants and animals, the stars and the clouds and the winds, the surface of the earth, the rivers and the forests and the stones and the deserts. Whether this preoccupation stems from his immediate and urgent need, whether his inquisitive attitude is merely an extension of his concern to provide the necessities of life for himself, whether it is the manifestation of his very nature or simply idle curiosity, need not be discussed at this point. Whatever the origins of this desire, man wants to find out, to figure out, to know. In this sense, then, man may be said to be inquisitive not only about what surrounds him, at the present time, but also about the future: he wants to know what is going to happen to him as well as to everything else around him. And finally he wants to know what happened in the past. Out of this latter desire, we may somewhat naively say, grows History, i.e., the exploration of the past, the finding of the past, the description of what has happened in the recent as well as in the most remote

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past. Curiously enough, as you know, the Greek word *historia* means originally exploration of any kind. Gradually, it came to mean, even to the Greeks, the exploration of the past and the description or narration of past events.

Thus we have History, i.e., historical books: Herodotus, Thucydides, chronicles of all kinds, histories of Europe, America, India, of Guatemala, of the city of Annapolis, of the Universal Postal Union, of St. John's College, of the Imperial Palace in Peking. Such histories may be more or less correct. Descriptions of events must be checked as to their accuracy with the help of all the evidence available: books, old records, letters, inscriptions, etc. Special skills in exploring and checking the evidence must be developed. Historical science and the methodology of historical science become a branch of knowledge; history can be taught and learned. Departments of History and archives are established. Historical journals come into being, dedicated to the improvement and enlargement of historical knowledge. All this circumscribes what may be called the domain of History. Is this, then, what History is?

You sense immediately: this is not quite it, this is not a sufficient description of History and what History means.

First of all, there is a special emphasis in the pursuit of History which is lacking in other branches of learning. Take the science of geology, for example. However important and interesting its investigations and findings might be, this science does not make *universal* claims, it restricts itself to a definite domain. There is no such thing as a "geological approach" to any given problem. And yet there always seems to be an "historical approach" to almost any kind of problem in almost any field.

Secondly, it is not quite correct to state that history is the description and narration of past events. Not everything that is past is "historic." That one of us here went to Washington or to San Francisco last week or some time ago does not necessarily belong to any history. It might, though. From a

certain point of view, with regard to an event we judge a significant one, we can—retrospectively—recognize the importance of events which led to that significant one. Nobody, indeed, ever assumed that all events and happenings are equally important and significant and could become recorded in history books. Even Tolstoi, who formulated the idea of such an all-comprehensive history, based on integration procedures in the face of infinite series of minute events, of historical infinitesimals, as it were, did that merely to reduce history thus understood to absurdity. All written and traditional history is based on a principle of *selection*. This means that we must have—and in fact do have—some yardstick to measure the significance and importance of events, whatever history we may be writing.

It is not too difficult to discern these yardsticks in Herodotus or Tacitus or Gibbon, for example; more difficult perhaps, but not impossible, to discover them in Thucydides. We can even venture to say that in general the yardstick is provided either (a) by the consideration of the present state of affairs, the salient features of which want to be traced back to their origins, in a sort of *genealogical* procedure, or (b) by the desire to derive a lesson for the future either from mistakes and failures or from exemplary actions in the past, which desire leads to what has been called, since Polybius, *pragmatic* history. Sometimes both kinds of yardstick are combined.

I say that both—the universality of the tendency to subject any theme to an historical investigation and the selecting of events or facts to be dealt with historically—help us to win a better understanding of this human enterprise called History. This enterprise does not seem to be grounded in an inherent property of events or facts that permits us to arrange them in a sequence, an historical sequence, but seems rather to depend on a certain way of looking at things which stamps them into an historical pattern. One might be tempted to apply Kantian terminology to this phenomenon—and people

have actually done so—: there might be something of an historical *a priori*, a form of our thinking that inescapably leads us to see things in an historical perspective. Let us consider this for a moment. Let us beware though lest we indulge in an empty, if easy, construction.

As far as pragmatic history is concerned, the selection is based on our sense of moral virtues or our understanding of practical maxims of conduct. *Hybris* versus Moderation, Tyranny versus Freedom, false hopes and foolish fears versus prudence—these are presented and pointed out to us in the unfolding drama of historical successes or catastrophes. Here, then, the historical scene is merely the enlargement of our daily life, providing us with great examples in large script. History in this sense is founded on completely “unhistorical” points of view. That is why this kind of history writing does not constitute a specific domain like Physics or even Poetry. Note that Aristotle, the great systematizer of human knowledge, in the face of such history—the only one he knew—did not treat it as a *pragmateia*, a discipline in its own right. The same Aristotle who investigated, defined, elaborated on every conceivable art and science—grammar, logic, physics, botany, zoology, astronomy, theology, psychology, politics, ethics, rhetoric, poetry—did not elaborate on history, although he so often prefaces his investigations with a review of positions and opinions held in the past. I conclude: there is no historical *a priori* in pragmatic history.

The same holds true of the genealogical type of history, though not in the same way. The very notion of genealogy comprises notions of origin, source, development, more generally, the notion of a temporal order. But these notions are not strictly historical ones. They also determine our understanding of biological phenomena, or more generally, of phenomena of change. They are not constitutive categories of historical experience. They are operative in any myth, they help to picture the growth and decay of institutions, the expansion of dominion and power; but the emphasis is on the



nature of those institutions and the overwhelming character of that power. The bases of this type of history, exemplified in Polybius and the Roman historians, are still unhistorical, mostly legal and political.

But when we turn to that universal tendency to view things historically, to use the historical approach in almost any field, the picture changes. It seems, indeed, as if here the form of History shapes the material under consideration so as to make anything we look at assume historical clothing, as if the very basis of our looking at things were—we hear it so often—History itself. When, a moment ago, I denied that this was the case in pragmatic and genealogical history, I implicitly assumed, by way of contrast, the possibility of such a view. The question, then, is whether this historical way of looking at things is itself a necessary form of our understanding. One way of answering this question would be to apply the following test: Can we approach and solve *this* problem historically?

The pragmatic and genealogical types of history are the only ones known in antiquity and the understanding of the nature of history corresponds to them. But a new understanding of history begins with the advent of Christianity. Let us consider briefly in what it consists. I shall use two outstanding examples: Augustine and Dante.

Augustine, in the *City of God* (15-18), gives a World History based on a fundamental distinction. Mankind consists of two parts: there are those who live according to Man, i.e., in sin, and those who live according to God; there are two communities, the city of men and the city of God. The latter is in the making and after the Second Advent will become the everlasting Kingdom of God. The earthly city will then be destroyed and its inhabitants will join Satan. As long as this world exists, both cities are intertwined. Augustine distinguishes six ages: 1) from Adam to the Deluge; 2) from Noah to Abraham; 3) from Abraham to David (the “prophetic age”); 4) from David to the Babylonian captivity; 5) from

the Babylonian captivity to Jesus Christ; 6) from Jesus Christ to the end of this world. This universal history is conceived mainly in terms of the Biblical account; but the great oriental kingdoms, as well as Greece and the Roman Empire, have their place allocated in the general flow. This is not a "Philosophy of History"; it is rather History itself, i.e., the description of succeeding ages according to God's providential ordering of all events. The important thing for us to note is that historical succession itself, the fact of History, the fact that men's lives weave the history of the World, is not an accidental property of those lives but their very essence. Our and our fathers' years have flowed through God's eternal Today, says Augustine in the *Confessions*: "from this everpresent divine 'To-day' the past generations of men received the measure and the mould of such being as they had; and still others shall flow away, and so receive the mould of their degree of being." History, then, reflects the essential temporality of man, but reflects no less the eternal timeless pattern of his being. In following up the chain of historical events we do not select significant links. We follow God's providential plan. *Our* historical perspective is *our* view of an eternal order, just as the flow is our way of incomplete existence. For us "to exist" is identical with "to exist historically." But that, again, means that our existence spreads out in time the timeless pattern of God's wisdom. This is neither pragmatic nor genealogical history. It is, one might say, symbolic history. History presents the symbols that unfold in succession the eternal relations between creation, fall, redemption, and salvation.

Let us turn to Dante. Here, again we see a World History conceived in terms of God's timeless providential pattern. History is the sinister chronicle of man's fall pursued through all generations of men. The Greek and Roman worlds occupy a far more important place in this chronicle than in that of Augustine. The horrors of Thebes more than those of Babylon indicate the complete abnegation of God's grace. It

is not the contrast between the City of Men and the City of God which determines Dante's general view of historical events, but rather the contrast and intertwining of God's spiritual and God's secular order, of Church and Empire. The secular order, stemming from God, reflects but is not identical with the spiritual order. Troy and its destruction are symbols of man's pride and man's fall. "And it happened at one period of time," Dante writes in the *Convivio*, "that when David was born, Rome was born, that is to say, Aeneas then came from Troy to Italy.... Evident enough, therefore, is the divine election of the Roman Empire by the birth of the Holy City (i.e., Rome), which was contemporaneous with the root of the race from which Mary sprang." The history of the world is here a kind of symbolic duplication of the spiritual history of man. It is by this very nature, as in Augustine, two-dimensional. Or, to put it in different words, the horizon of this kind of history, or better, of this kind of historian, is not historical. In this respect this kind of history is akin to the pragmatic and genealogical kinds. Here, again, it is worth noting: the primary liberal disciplines listed by Dante in the *Convivio* and linked to the ten heavens of the world (the spheres of the Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, the sphere of the fixed stars, the *primum mobile* and the Empyrean Heaven) are Grammar, Logic, Rhetoric, Arithmetic, Geometry, Music, Astronomy, Physics and Metaphysics, Ethics, Theology. History is not one of them.

When Machiavelli and Hobbes dethrone classical philosophy and revert to pragmatic history as the best teacher man can have in planning and conducting his life, they still cling to a two-dimensional history to build their own political philosophy.

But now the scene changes: Vico's New Science marks a new beginning. Like Machiavelli and Hobbes he defies all preceding philosophy. He bases his work on the fundamental (Leibnizian) distinction: the *true* and the *certain*. What is true is common and therefore abstract. What is certain is the

particular, the individual, the concrete. "*Certum* and *commune* are opposed to each other." The philosophers pursue what is common. They lack certainty. Only history (which includes philology) deals with the certain. The most certain for us is that which we ourselves have made, the *facta*, the facts. "The world of civil society has certainly been made by man; its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own human mind. Whoever reflects on this cannot but marvel that the philosophers should have bent all their energies to the study of the world of nature, which, since God made it, He alone knows; and that they should have neglected the study of the world of nations or civil world, which, since man had made it, men could hope to know."

Vico sets out to fulfill this hope. This is the scope of his New Science. It is historical by definition. The historian looking at man-made worlds can understand their innermost core. He will thus attain a more certain truth than the philosophers ever could; he will discover "the common nature of nations" or the "ideal eternal history" of nations established by divine providence. The New Science will thus be "a rational civil theology of divine providence." "Since divine providence has omnipotence as minister, it develops its orders by means as easy as the natural customs of men." This also means that this science is a "history of human ideas" (not a philosophical reflection on ideas). There are recurrent cycles in the history of nations that always comprise three stages: the divine, the heroic, and the human. The proper field of the historian is the customs of men, their institutions, their laws, their writings, their poetry. In understanding them he understands truth that is certain—truthful certainty—precisely what the philosophers are unable to accomplish.

At first sight it seems as if history in Vico's understanding preserved its two-dimensionality, since the objects of his findings are the "universal and eternal orders established by providence." But these orders do not exist outside of time. Divine

providence is not the providential plan of salvation anymore. Vico's history is bent on finding the laws governing the human world in contradistinction to the laws governing the world of nature. Historical reality with its recurrent stretches is one-dimensional. On the other hand, the historian alone is now the true philosopher. The methods of interpretation and of philology he has to use constitute a *new organon* comprising axioms, definitions and specific rules of inference. In other words: Vico's work competes with the work of Natural History, with the work of Mathematical Physics.

We have here a rather amazing historical fact before us. Let us remember. Towards the end of the sixteenth century a reinterpretation and reconsideration of the traditional, "classical," mathematical sciences lead to the establishment of Algebra, a hitherto obscure and "vulgar" discipline neglected by all recognized institutions of learning, as the eighth Liberal Art. Its progress coincides with the development of a new symbolic discipline, understood as Universal Mathematics, a new and most powerful instrument of human knowledge which is meant to replace the traditional Aristotelian Organon. The science of nature becomes mathematical physics, begins to dominate all human understanding and gradually transforms the conditions of human life on this earth. The only force opposing this development is History with its claim to universality, first attributed to it by Vico and maintained with increased vigor up to this moment. It is significant, I think, that Vico's idea of an "ideal eternal history" is a derivative of the idea of a Universal Mathematics, a shadow, as it were, that the latter casts. As Universal Mathematics is to all specific mathematical disciplines so is the "ideal eternal history" to all specific histories of nations. But this parallelism between Universal Mathematics and Universal History is to be understood in the light of the distinction between that which is "abstractly true" and that which is "concretely certain." The new science of Mathematical Physics leaves the natural experience of nature far behind: all

that is concrete vanishes behind a screen of mathematical symbols. Any teleology loses its meaning. The new science of History tries to restore the dignity of the concrete, fills the gap between the abstract symbolic understanding of nature and the immediate human experience of the world around us. It cannot dispense with the notions of means and ends. It is the distinction between the true and the certain which underlies the familiar and superficial distinction between Science and the Humanities. The latter are conceived as inseparable from History, can only be approached in historical perspective, come actually to life only in the medium of History. Since Vico, the idea of an eternal pattern of history, a vestige of the original Christian understanding, although occasionally forcefully advanced, has been generally abandoned. The emphasis is on the development of what has been called the *historical sense*.

Three consequences follow.

First, the fascination with the "otherness" of the past: the discovery or reconstruction of cultures and civilizations "different" from ours, each with a different "sense of values" ascertainable in customs, institutions, works of art, architecture, literature, philosophy, religion. This very notion of an autonomous "culture," underlying the various manifestations of human activity can arise only within an historical horizon. Truth itself becomes a function of "culture," the existence of which appears a certain fact; "relativity of values" becomes inevitably the concomitant of the historical perspective.

Secondly, the sense of participating in the relentless historical flow makes observable *trends* the guide of our actions. The acceptance of events and doctrines that are supposed to follow the "historical trend" is one of the most potent causes for the predicament in which European nations have found themselves in recent decades. The impact of Marxism which goes under the name of historical materialism and the reaction to it derive their strength from the historical sense projected into the future. The Gallup Poll is



one of the most recent and most ridiculous examples of this preoccupation with trends.

Thirdly, a man understands himself completely as an historical being. "Historicity" becomes his very nature, but not in the sense that it reflects some timeless pattern. His Self disintegrates into a series of socially, and that means historically, conditioned reflexes. Historicity does not mean Tradition. To see ourselves as historical beings means to break the invisible traditional ties in which we live. At best, tradition then becomes a romantic notion, at worst, an academic phantom.

If we consider the disciplines taught in our schools, it is easy to see that all natural sciences are patterned on the model of mathematical physics. The idea of a universal mathematics as the new organon of all science, however, dies away. On the other hand, all the disciplines within the realm of the humanities have become historical to the very core. The study of literature, philosophy, religion, music and the fine arts, for example, is almost exclusively the study of the history of literature, the history of philosophy, the history of religions, the history of music, the history of art. Fields of study of a more practical applicability as, for example, languages, political science and economics, retain a certain autonomy. The theoretical dignity they may have, however, is safeguarded only by historical considerations or, for that matter, by methods borrowed from mathematical physics.

It seems, then, that Mathematical Physics and History divide between themselves, in a fairly exhaustive way, the rule over the entire domain of human knowledge. Does this permit us to consider them as the two necessary ways and forms of our understanding? If this be so, Mathematical Physics and History would come close to being the two Liberal Arts of the modern age. Any liberal arts curriculum ought then to concentrate on these two great bodies of learning in keeping with the trend of events and in preparing students to follow it further.

At this point, we can pause and reflect on the results we have reached.

As to Mathematical Physics, the task before us is clearly not the tracing of its historic development. We have rather to understand the methods and the nature of the concepts that have made this development possible. We have to understand the specific use made of mathematical symbols, the relation of a mathematical deduction to a verifying experiment, the relations between observations, hypothesis, theory and truth. That is indeed what we are trying to do in our Mathematics Tutorials and in the Laboratory. And if we do not do that fully and in the most satisfactory manner, we have to improve our ways. The danger we are running in this case is the very same that has threatened the integrity of scientific understanding since the seventeenth century and which has barely begun to be warded off in recent developments: the danger to confuse the symbolic means of our understanding with reality itself.

If we turn to History, we have first to remember the question which gave rise to the preceding historical account. The question was: Is the historical way of looking at things a necessary form of our understanding? The answer—in the perspective of History—is in the negative: The universal historical approach is itself a product of, and presumably nothing but a phase in, an historical development, which cannot claim any absolute validity, no matter how “natural” and familiar it seems to us at the present moment. We have to recognize, moreover, the possibility of a dangerous confusion similar to the one I just mentioned with regard to Mathematical Physics. The results of historical investigations based on specific historical concepts and methods of interpretation ought not to be confused with the real picture of a real past. Not to see that, means to surround us with a pseudo-historical horizon of almost mythical quality so as to make us talk glibly of “Greek culture,” “medieval times,” “Renaissance,” the “Seventeenth Century,” the “Age of Enlightenment,” etc. Such pseudo-mythical notions are usually in the minds of

people who recommend that we take into account the proper "historical background" whenever we read and discuss a book. The assumption behind this recommendation is a rather naive one, to wit, that in the effort we make to understand a book or a series of books we could fall back on an objective and certain datum, the general culture in which the ideas expressed or propounded in those books are rooted and from which they derive their strength and intelligibility. We ought to see instead that the commonly accepted picture of an historical period is largely due to an interpretation of the content of books and other documents which presupposes in the first place the ability to deal with grammatical patterns, to discern rhetorical devices, to grasp ideas in all their implications. In point of fact, the main task of any historian is of necessity the interpretation of whatever data he may collect. The art of interpretation and all the other arts which minister to it depend on the understanding of the function of signs, of the complexity of symbolic expressions, and of the cogency of logical relations.

To understand a text is not a simple matter. To arouse and to cultivate this understanding is one of the primary tasks of our Language Tutorials. More than anything else, more, certainly, than the historical sense fed so often on sheer ignorance, an improvement of our interpretative skills could help foster genuine historical research and writing. We may ultimately get to see that the problem of History is itself not an historical problem.

It follows, then, that in pursuing these goals we should ignore history's claim to universality, ignore History itself, if you please, in order to devote our full attention to the development of all the arts of understanding and all imaginative devices man can call his own. It takes courage to pursue a rather narrow and steep path hardly visible from the highways of contemporary learning. But let us remember the inscription on the old seal of the College: No path is impassable to courage. The reward may be high.