

IS THERE A DISTINCT AND VALID LIBERTARIAN FORM OF HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING?

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INTRODUCTION

IT IS A COMMON belief that every historian, in trying to describe any episode from the human past, cannot help but color his narrative with the hues of his own political stances, his positions concerning political economy, his visions of a just society, his religious beliefs, and other such subjective tinctures. Those influences will inevitably enter into his interpretation of the “bare, objective facts” of history, and, as a result, the plain facts are merely the raw material from which the historian sculpts his own creation. A corollary proposition is that competent historians, however divergent their ideological commitments may be, and however widely they may differ in their ethical, psychological, philosophical, economic, religious, or political opinions, will concur broadly as to the composition of that raw material.

The view just described, that the historian’s proper task is to offer his unique explanation for the appearance of the (mostly) undisputed facts composing the skeleton of some episode from the past, implies that, unless all historians miraculously achieve a universal consensus on all non-historical subjects, there inevitably will exist significant disagreements in the depiction of historical passages, with the divergences typically taking place between distinctive “schools” of historical thought, such as “Marxist history,” “feminist history,” or “libertarian history.” As such, there always will be a multitude of questions that, notwithstanding their proper place in the historian’s purview, will elude

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being definitively answered on purely historical grounds. A feminist historian and a patriarchal historian might agree the Battle of Actium took place in 31 B.C.E. and that the forces of Antony and Cleopatra were defeated by those of Octavian, but they will lack any means of resolving disagreements about other aspects of that battle based strictly on their historical research. Those disputes only could be resolved through one party converting the other to her ideological stance.

If this understanding of history were correct, then the subject would have to be convicted of falling woefully short of representing a coherent and independent intellectual discipline, and found guilty of an inherent inability to solve many of the problems raised by its very pursuit. However, I will argue that this view is unfounded, that historical thought contains all of the resources required for reaching any available historical conclusions, and that the invocation of a finding from another science in the course of a purportedly historical narrative represents an interruption in the modal consistency of that account.

My case is built around the proposition that the historical past is categorically distinct from all other actual and possible perspectives from which humans might seek to understand the past. I will attempt to distinguish genuinely historical explanation from other approaches to understanding the past. The consequential restriction of the moniker 'history' (at least in scholarly discourse) to those works that primarily display that particular style of explanation is proposed for the sake of intellectual clarity, rather than with any aim of banishing rival approaches to comprehending the past. Far from intending to denigrate or dismiss non-historical uses of past events, I hold that humans literally could not survive without engaging in at least one such concern, namely, the practical understanding of the past. If we abjured exploring the practical past, we would be unable to learn from experience, and be left with no guidance as to how we should correct our current activities. We would have no reasonable means to avoid actions tending towards disaster and no cause to repeat activities that previously led to success. However, even though the practical mode of understanding the past plays a vital role in human survival, mistaking it as the only possible view of the past, of which history as a scholarly discipline is merely a sub-species, ignores and imperils the unique contribution the historian can make to our knowledge.

THE CHARACTER OF HISTORICAL INQUIRY

What, then, are the essential differentia of the historical past? Soon after history emerged from the haze of all consideration of the past whatsoever to be recognized as a distinct way of contemplating earlier goings-on, a criterion for what distinguished the discipline from the reminiscences,

tales, and lessons of everyday life was sought in the kinds of events history incorporated: whereas my personal perspective on the past is oriented around my practical concerns, matters of little general interest like my trying to remember if I paid the electric bill last month, history records only those events that are widely significant, such as the ascension or death of a king, a major war, the fall of an empire, the invention and adoption of steam power, or the creation of a national rail system. However, the initial plausibility of this analysis fades away with closer scrutiny, which reveals that identical events can appear in both an individual's personal account of the past and in historical works. Just as a non-historian might view the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, on New York and Washington in terms of how they affected her, so an historian might include my failure to pay a bill in his explanation of the bankruptcy of a major utility company and a subsequent recession, if he sees in it a representative instance of the financial problems plaguing many consumers at that time.

Gradually, a more accurate characterization of the subject emerged¹: It is not in dealing only with a certain class of events that distinguishes history from other ways of conceiving the past, rather, it is his particular pre-suppositions, along with the methods of proceeding that those pre-suppositions imply, that differentiate how the historian approaches the past, whatever sort of episode he is dealing with. As Oakeshott says, "the past in history is not the only past, and a clear view of the character of the past in history involves the distinction of this past from that in other forms of experience" ([1933] 1985, p. 102).

As suggested previously, the most significant rival for history as a viewpoint on the past is the practical past, of which the fundamental characteristic is that the past is looked to as a source of guidance, an essential aid to achieving one's present objectives. Among several relevant considerations, here I will note just one that is sufficient, by itself, to indicate that the practical and historical pasts are not identical: for the purpose of practice, the historical authenticity of some tale is frequently of little or no importance.² The story of George Washington chopping down the famous cherry tree provides the same lesson about the value of honesty whether or not that incident really occurred, indeed, the value of the lesson would survive even the revisionist conclusion that Washington himself was only a legendary figure! But that

¹Collingwood (1946) provides a thorough investigation of the development of historians' self-understanding.

²Additional arguments against identifying the historical past with the practical past can be found in Oakeshott (1983, pp. 38-48).

such a finding would destroy the place of the episode in an historical explanation will not, I think, be denied.³ (This does not mean that, in the practical past, factuality is *never* of any significance: if I have been told that so-and-so habitually lies, it likely will matter a great deal to me, in directing my future dealings with that person, whether or not I believe that the report of his mendacity is itself true.)

However, the pragmatic perspective on the past, because its vital contribution to our daily existence means that for everyone it is the first and the most frequently adopted way of seeing the past, readily can be mistaken as the only possible way of doing so. Then the proposal that historical research is indifferent to our practical concerns might be rejected *prima facie* as rendering history an impotent and frivolous undertaking. The only real value offered by any intellectual endeavor, so this objection runs, is to be sought in the use to which we can put its findings. However, as Oakeshott pointed out,⁴ the attempt to equate the entire significance of any idea with the pragmatic consequences of holding the idea to be true is self-defeating. If the only valid criterion for accepting or rejecting any proposition is the difference between the utility offered by each option, then ‘true’ and ‘false’ are otiose terms, and should be replaced by ‘more pleasing to hold’ and ‘less pleasing to hold.’ Even the assertion that the merit of an idea is identical to its usefulness must itself be judged by how well it serves the interests of the person considering its adoption; if I stand to gain greater satisfaction through rejecting the pragmatic conception of meaning than I would by accepting it, then logically its proponents should approve of my dismissal of their own theory! Nor can the reduction of questions of truth to utility be salvaged by the additional supposition that it will generally or even invariably be the case that true beliefs will turn out to be the most useful beliefs to hold, since that amendment relies on there being some criterion of ‘truth’ apart from utility, which practical judgments ought to take into account. Of course the same weakness is present in the contention that “in the long run” one will find it most pragmatic to believe only true things: it pre-supposes some non-pragmatist notion of “truth” that good practice ought to track.

What separates history from the practical past is that the historian is properly focused on comprehending the past for its own sake, his work devoted to devising the story of the past according to the demands of the evidence before him, rather than as directed by some present concern of his own. Human beings have no doubt talked about and

³Except, of course, in so far as real historical actors were influenced by that mythical tale.

⁴See Oakeshott (1983, pp. 21-29).

remembered the past since they first could speak. Nevertheless, Herodotus is considered the first historian, because, with him, we find for the first time a critical examination of sources in the effort to determine *what really happened*.

A seemingly fatal flaw in this view immediately may spring to mind: “Isn’t it the case,” this objection runs, “that when we survey the work of actual, flesh-and-blood historians, as opposed to your idealized figure who somehow floats far above common, mundane concerns, don’t we invariably find that they interweave practical interests in the past with the more austere vantage outlined here? And won’t any sensible, empirically grounded definition of ‘history’ incorporate all of the sundry activities undertaken by those widely regarded as professional historians? The contrasting attempt to conjure up some bloodless phantom of “pure history” and then exhort flesh-and-blood scholars to look to it as an ideal guiding their work is merely another ivory-tower fantasy aimed at replacing the complexity of the real world with a tidier, more comforting, but ultimately irrelevant abstraction.”

But such a complaint is quite beside the point, without any bearing for a philosophical quest for the ideal character of history. The mixed character exhibited by the work of most historians should, if anything, serve to heighten our interest in clearly discerning when an author is speaking as a historian *qua* historian from the occasions upon which he has adopted the voice of a political partisan, a patriotic champion of his country, a religious apologist, or some other, non-historical mode of discourse. In addition to the simple desire for philosophical clarity motivating the attempt to distinguish those different roles, it is also of interest on a practical level. The lay person, in encountering the professional historian pronouncing on events *as an historian*, rightly will assign to the conclusions of the historical expert a high, *prima facie* plausibility, since the amateur reader is quite unlikely to be in a position to challenge them intelligently. But it is a serious mistake to grant the historian the same presumption of authority regarding the non-historical interjections in his narrative, such as “the lessons for today” that he suggests we ought to learn from the events he narrates.

INTERPRETING HISTORY

If it is true that history proper is categorically distinct from other attitudes towards the past, then it follows that genuinely historical conclusions are exclusively the product of historical reasoning about historical evidence. The historian is neither required to, nor capable of, marshalling support for his theses from other disciplines. This contention may strike some readers as a capricious and unduly restrictive dismissal of what they regard to be the most interesting and important aspect of

the historian's work. "Quite the contrary to pursuing their subject as you suggest they should do," they may argue, "historians look at the same facts and disagree on their meaning and implications all the time. They don't just catalogue historical facts. The real heart of their efforts is their attempt to create a plausible and novel interpretation of well-known facts, facts whose mere recital could be accomplished by an intelligent schoolchild equipped with an encyclopedia. The unique skill of the professional historian is interpretative, and the particular form in which he exercises it he will inevitably be influenced by his understanding of economics, politics, ethics, religion, psychology and so on."

Lying behind the above objection is the notion that the historian embarks on his endeavor in possession of some collection of pre-existing facts. So outfitted, two possible routes for his voyage are available to him. One course is for him to methodically produce a well organized catalogue of the facts at his disposal, much the way a librarian catalogues an existing book collection. While such a catalogue may come in handy, compiling it strikes many as a rather mundane clerical task. Alternatively, he can employ the facts scattered at his feet as the material from which to weave an original "theory of history" (or at least of some portion of history), a theory that arranges the facts into a bold pattern composed around a theme, perhaps "class struggle," "the self-realization of the spirit in the world," "the advance of liberty," or some similar motif. The latter, to many, appears to be the more intellectually stimulating and more potentially rewarding way of engaging in historical work.

However, per the understanding of history proposed in this paper, the two routes described above, far from indicating the only reasonable paths open to the historian, are not even *possible* to follow. They are blocked at their very beginnings, unable to offer a way forward, because there is no pre-existing body of facts with which the historian can start his journey. "The facts of history" are the destination of his voyage, not provisions with which he has been stocked even before leaving his home port.

What the historian faces at the start of his investigations are not "brute facts" about the past, facts that are objectively given to him, for the past he wishes to understand has vanished and remains forever beyond his direct observation. Instead, he begins his inquiry equipped only with presently existing objects of a special character: these items at hand appear to have survived from the period attracting his attention and, as a consequence, are suspected of offering evidence about his chosen era, at least once they are rigorously queried about their place in the human activities that transpired in that lost time. The objects with which he will work may include documents, coins, emblems,

insignias, temples, statues, portraits, pots, weapon fragments, ruins, and human remains as well as those of animals and plants with which the people of the time he is studying may have interacted.

That body of evidence before him, the task of the historian has just begun. First of all, he must determine if his ostensible evidence genuinely speaks of the era that interests him, since it is always possible that any item may represent an effort to forge a relic of some earlier time. Once he has accepted an object's authentic origin in the period under examination (or, perhaps, the authenticity of the effects suffered during that period by an object from an earlier time), his interrogation of the item is still far from complete, because the import of any piece of evidence only emerges through a process of historical research during which it is evaluated within the context of all of the other relevant evidence so far discovered. No historical artifact comes packaged with a guaranteed declaration of just what it should be read as signifying about what transpired in the past. For instance, an inscription, discovered on an ancient tomb wall, may assert, "I, Ramses the 15th, have succeeded my illustrious father, Hotep the 22nd, as Pharaoh over the two kingdoms of Egypt." The intended meaning of the text seems plain enough, but the historian must not accept what it says as a "brute fact" not requiring further examination. For one thing, such inscriptions are notoriously likely to contain major revisions of what really happened, devised to promote the interests of the current authorities. (For instance, the fictional example I just presented might have been an attempt to hide the fact that Hotep was really a brick-layer and that Ramses gained the throne by murdering the young Pharaoh for whom he supposedly was acting as guardian).

Philip Daileader (n.d.) presented a striking illustration of the historian's obligation to critically evaluate his sources in a lecture on Charlemagne. Einhard, the close companion and biographer of the emperor, touted his lords intellectual achievements by claiming, for instance, that Charlemagne was quite adept at Latin. On its face, this might be taken as one of those plain facts upon the foundation of which an historian erects his interpretive elaboration.

But that turns out to be a naive error. Other sources describe how Charlemagne would interrupt a monk chanting for him, to signal that a different monk should take up the chant, at quite inappropriate times, often in the middle of a phrase or even mid-word. Historians have concluded that the emperor, in fact, knew very little Latin and thus couldn't tell when it was reasonable to interrupt the chant, and that Einhard had been engaged in hagiography, not history.

Now, some particular historical fact, like the datum that "the last emperor of the Western Roman Empire was deposed in 476," may have

been so thoroughly researched and supported that it no longer is questioned and now is taken as a given in any current or future work. Other propositions, such as the suggestion that the Western Empire really should be understood as having survived the emperor in many ways, may still actively be under dispute. That difference between various historical results as to their degree of acceptance, ranging from those findings that are universally seen as indisputable, to a novel theory that is held only by the historian whose research led to it, is certainly significant. It matters both to the professional, in deciding on which questions it is worth spending his limited research time, and to the non-professional, who wants to distinguish the assertions of an historian that he can take as “simply the way it was” from those that are the scholar’s novel speculations about what occurred. But this is only a difference in degree, not in kind, for it arises solely due to the success of earlier historians in supporting their conclusions.

In support of that contention, consider the following two statements, both of which we find in the work of ancient, Latin authors:

(1) “Romulus and Remus were nursed by a she-wolf, and, after they reached adulthood, Romulus killed his brother and founded the city of Rome.”

(2) “Augustus Caesar reigned as emperor from 27 BCE to 14 CE.” (Of course, someone writing in classical antiquity would not have used modern dating, but that is quite beside the point.)

Why do historians regard the first statement as mere legend but the second as factually true? In our Roman sources, both are asserted to be literal reports of past events. But historians do not simply accept their sources at their word, instead critically examining them in a search for their real historical import.

THEORY AND HISTORY

Contrary to what I argue here, some notable social theorists, for example, Ludwig von Mises (1985 [1957]), Murray N. Rothbard (1985), and Hans-Hermann Hoppe (1997), have rejected the idea that history can be a self-contained discipline. As Rothbard puts it, “In human affairs, the complex historical event itself needs to be explained by various theories as far as possible” (1985, p. vi). Or, per Hoppe, “history [is] *comprehended by . . . economic theory*” (1997, p. 2). In their view, historians cannot avoid invoking some extra-historical theory about the nature of the social world, either deliberately or through uncritically having adopted the assumptions of a currently fashionable view, in formulating their accounts of past happenings. If that were true, it clearly would

be preferable for an historian to deliberately employ what careful consideration indicates to be the best available social theories, rather than to unreflectively rely on those that he just happens to have adopted in the course of his education or as a result of an idea being in vogue.

To an extent, this view can be seen as a quite explicable reaction to the positivist understanding of history that dominated nineteenth-century historiography, an understanding in which the task of the historian was seen to consist in the essentially mechanical compilation of the “empirical facts” that could be discovered in the documents and other artifacts surviving from the past, a project best advanced when the historian completely resisted the temptation to indulge in any interpretation of his “raw data.” All conclusions that the historical enterprise might have to offer would simply emerge on their own, as the necessary implications of that purely objective gathering of data.⁵

The severe lacunae intrinsic to the positivist program for history could not help but become obvious as soon as any attempt was made to put its strictures into practice. The evidence available to historians did not simply tell its own story or assemble itself into a coherent whole; contemporary accounts often contradicted each other or offered some blatantly partisan version of events; monuments and inscriptions had been altered to erase out-of-favor individuals from a society’s collective memory; and the only plausible candidate for coping with those and other such difficulties was, and still is, the trained and intelligent judgment of the historian.

Furthermore, the contention that all history relies on theory is correct to the extent that any intelligible work of history will make some assumptions regarding a few fundamental aspects of the human individuals taking part in the events that it seeks to illuminate: that they are thinking creatures, that they adopt the most plausible interpretation they can devise of any situation in which they find themselves, that in light of that interpretation they choose the action that they deem most likely to achieve their self-determined ends, however narrowly or broadly those ends are formulated, from among all of the possible responses they might imagine, and that they may decide to alter their plans should the subsequent course of events disappoint their expectations. Those pre-suppositions will lead an historian to write quite a different story than he would if he instead assumed that humans were actually puppets under the control of some mad demiurge.

But the argument that history depends on theory, as put forward by the thinkers mentioned at the start of this section, goes well beyond merely noting that the understanding of reality achieved by history, in

⁵See Collingwood (1946, pp. 126-33).

common with that offered by any other coherent discipline, relies on particular presuppositions that characterize and justify its mode of explanation, and therefore are, from within the subject, without justification. In their view, for example, an historian investigating the New Deal must turn to *some* economic theory, whether explicitly invoked or not, to decide if that set of policies ameliorated or exacerbated the Great Depression.

However, it appears to me that, even in cases where she is attempting to describe events apparently so calling out for the intrusion of some non-historical theory as does the Great Depression, the historian qua historian still is tasked with producing an entirely historical explanation of what transpired. She may conclude that the New Deal did or did not make matters worse, but her result ought to follow from whatever historical evidence she can unearth about the particular, concrete responses of investors, firms, and workers to Roosevelt's initiatives, rather than being summoned up by a theory from beyond the world of history, whose authoritative voice in its own field is taken as superior to historical demonstration even in a work of history.

For instance, a proponent of the Austrian Theory of the Business Cycle may feel confident that the easy money policies adopted by the Federal Reserve in the 1920s were a major factor in the depression that followed. But pointing to that theory does not provide an *historical* explanation of the Great Depression. The Austrian Theory of the Business Cycle describes an ideal situation and analytically arrives at a typical pattern characterizing its development. In actual history, no ideal type is ever fully realized, and factors not included in the composition of any idealization are always at work. A properly historical explanation consists in showing how some earlier set of concrete circumstances intelligibly led to subsequent events. As Oakeshott puts it, "In history there are no 'general laws' by means of which historical individuals can be reduced to instances of a principle, and least of all are there general laws of the character we find in the world of science" ([1933] 1985, p. 161).

The belief that, *ceteris paribus*, producers will react to easy credit by undertaking more round-about methods of production than are actually called for by the preferences of consumers, however well grounded, can at best provide the historian with an initial orientation for his unique task, which is to trace the course of the specific actions of real individuals and groups in the particular circumstances of the time and place with which he is concerned. "The method of the historian," Oakeshott says, "is never to explain by means of generalization but always by means of greater and more complete detail" ([1933] 1985, p. 143). It is quite permissible for an historian to note, as an aside, that

the episode he is describing more or less closely fits the pattern described by the Austrian Theory of the Business Cycle. The point of the argument being put forward in this paper is not to forbid historians from making such remarks or to chastise them after they have done so, but rather to clarify the character of history proper by distinguishing it from the non-historical considerations that often are included in generally historical works. “The moment historical facts are regarded as instances of general laws, history is dismissed” (Oakeshott, [1933] 1985, p. 154).

Mises, whose philosophy of history is in certain respects, such as its assertion of the independence of historical truth from ideology, in agreement with the ideas presented here, emphatically rejected the main contention of this paper. Far from history offering a self-sufficient mode of understanding experience, he argued that historians must draw upon the best available theories from *all* other sciences to arrive at their conclusions. He writes:

The historian does not simply let the events speak for themselves. He arranges them from the aspect of the ideas underlying the formation of the general notions he uses in their presentation. He does not report facts as they happened, but only relevant facts. He does not approach the documents without presuppositions, but equipped with the whole apparatus of his age’s scientific knowledge, that is, with all the teachings of contemporary logic, mathematics, praxeology, and natural science. (1996, pp. 47-48)

He offers the following example to illustrate his thesis:

The real corporeal existence of the devil is attested by innumerable historical documents which are rather reliable in all other regards. Many tribunals in due process of law have on the basis of the testimony of witnesses and the confessions of defendants established the fact that the devil had carnal intercourse with witches. However, no appeal to understanding could justify a historian’s attempt to maintain that the devil really existed and interfered with human events otherwise than in the visions of an excited human brain. (1996, pp. 50-51)

However, per the understanding of history presented above, Mises was operating on a mistaken view of the nature of the historian’s task. It falls outside the historian’s purview, I suggest, to opine on the physical reality of Satan. What is of historical interest is not the causal efficaciousness of the devil, but the effects that the belief in him produced in the people living in the time he is studying. Whether or not teenage girls in 17th-century Salem, Massachusetts, really *could* have had the ability to make their neighbors sick and sour their cow’s milk is not an historical question. Instead, the historian shows how the belief that they could do so played a part in what transpired in that place at that time.

His disbelief in witchcraft may lead him to seek other explanations of an outbreak of illness among livestock around Salem, but that only gives him a starting point for his research, which, if it is to succeed, must unearth historical evidence indicating what really happened to those animals.

Now, as mentioned above, it is doubtlessly true that, even in those works offering the most consistent exhibition of the ideal character of historical explanation, there are numerous intrusions of non-historical statements. I think this is an inevitable consequence of historians' effort to make their works more readable, comprehensive and satisfying. There is no reason for an historian describing the Siege of Syracuse in 23 BC to forego mentioning that the laws of physics render it highly unlikely that, using the mirrors available at the time, Archimedes could have successfully burned the attacking Roman ships off the coast. To recognize that proposition as falling outside the scope of historical explanation is not to condemn it. An attempt to identify the ideal character of history should not be taken as prescribing what historians may include in their works, but instead as an effort to achieve philosophical clarity. (Of course, if the Syracusans had actually deployed Archimedes' weapon, it certainly *would* be relevant if it worked! But, once again, the introduction of physics would be historically irrelevant: what would matter would be that the ships were burned, not whether they were burned by physics or by the intervention of Zeus.)

LIBERTARIANS AS HISTORIANS

In rejecting the claim that “libertarian history” is a distinct and valid idiom of historical discourse, I am not denying the very real possibility that a conscientious historian who also happens to be a libertarian might be aided in his work in so far as his understanding of politics or economics is superior to or even simply different from that of his fellow practitioners. For instance, he might be prompted to raise questions that other historians have ignored due to common ideological assumptions. Perhaps, in the case of the New Deal that we considered above, an historian of libertarian bent will be more likely to examine the relevant evidence for indications that those policies produced effects contrary to the results being sought. Nevertheless, his conclusions should be what the historical evidence requires him to believe, rather than the supposed “discovery” that an extra-historical assumption with which he began his research magically has shown up in his findings as well. Indeed, if confronted by the same evidence as our libertarian scholar, an ideologically interventionist historian who is faithful to her calling ought to reach the same understanding of the effects of the New Deal. What's more, her agreement with him about those historical facts need

not move her to embrace his political views, since she could maintain, without any lapse in intellectual integrity, that the failure of those specific interventions was an anomaly. Even the compilation of many similar historical studies cannot resolve policy debates, for the process of extracting law-like regularities from a collection of concrete happenings requires boiling off all the unique particulars that compose their historical substance so as to leave behind only a residue of abstract features they all share, transforming history into sociology. While such a procedure may illuminate aspects of social reality that would otherwise remain invisible, that illumination cannot replace the light provided by genuinely historical explanations.

CONCLUSION

To gain perspective on the proposed independence of history from ideology, it may help to consider an analogous situation that does not involve the human sciences. The great astronomer Johannes Kepler was a committed NeoPlatonist (see, e.g., Connor [2004], pp. 329–30). His most significant contributions to his science, generally termed “Kepler’s Three Laws of Planetary Motion,” are widely thought to have been inspired by Kepler’s mystical belief that at the center of the universe would be found a great, white light, which he took to be our sun. However, his Neoplatonism was also behind his hypothesis that the spacing of the known planets could be explained by the cosmic truth that their orbits represented the five Platonic solids, geometric shapes that if nested inside spheres and then one inside another yield the relative sizes of the orbits of Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. While the former trio of discoveries today is regarded as one of the most brilliant insights in the history of astronomy, the latter idea generally is considered to be an unscientific blemish on Kepler’s reputation. (See Polanyi, 1974, pp. 142–45). Should we classify his Three Laws as *good* Neoplatonic astronomy and his proposed connection between planetary orbits and the Platonic solids as *bad* Neoplatonic astronomy? And should Newton’s explication of the gravitational basis for Kepler’s laws be placed in the contrasting category of *good* Arian heretic astronomy? (The general consensus of historians seems to be that Newton’s religious beliefs were Arian in nature, but the truth of that proposition is irrelevant to the case I’m making here.) To the contrary, I contend that, whatever their personal inspirations were, Kepler’s Three Laws and Newton’s explanation of celestial motion in terms of gravitational attractions are simply *good* astronomy, while Kepler’s modeling of the solar system around the Platonic solids is just *bad* astronomy. Similarly, while it is undeniably true that individual historians have drawn inspiration for their work from Marxism, libertarianism,

feminism, Christianity, atheism, and countless other sources, what they finally produced must be judged as either good history or bad history, solely based on the standards of historical scholarship.

Mises was adamant that various activities, for instance, market forecasting and historical price studies, *whatever value they might have*, were not part of theoretical economics. I am merely making an analogous case for “pure history”: there is a distinctive, identifiable activity having its own coherent character, one whose independence from party faction, moral doctrines, etc. is worth protecting. In no way does this view represent an *attack* on other uses of the past, for instance, to illustrate a political doctrine. I imagine that Mises would not have been pleased to hear his work classified as “libertarian economics” and therefore only one among many instances of partisan apologetics; instead, he would have insisted that he wrote universally sound economics. Similarly, libertarians pursuing historical research should strive to do good history, not libertarian history.

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