

The Limits of History in Brief

The purpose of this essay is to state in brief what I have written at much greater length in *The Limits of History*. I would prefer you read my book. Yet the book is long, and life is short, and it would neither be honest nor polite not to acknowledge the pleasure this author takes in being given another venue for his ideas. Moreover, authors generally like to hear informed responses of the sort this essay is intended to provoke, and readers have a right to ask the author just what he had in mind.

Let me divide my answer to that question in two parts. First, I will present the main points I tried to make in *The Limits of History*; then I will explain the method I used to get those points across. First *what*; then *how*.

1 What?

The Limits of History deals with history in the sense of a certain kind of knowledge—knowledge of the past—as well as the techniques by which such knowledge can be gained and the activities required to that end. It makes three basic points. First, history is not as innocent as it appears to be. It is not merely a form of understanding, but also a form of self-assertion. As such, it is tantamount to taking sides and inseparable from political activity, at least political activity of a certain kind. Second, history's most important function—the function that makes it inseparable from political activity—is to remove the possibility of doubt from certain elementary assumptions that tell us who we are, what we can do, and what the world is like. The knowledge of the past that history provides is merely a means towards that end. Third, ever since the purpose of history came to be identified with the pursuit of knowledge of the past as such—Ranke's *wie es eigentlich gewesen*—the means and ends of history have been confused. That has cast growing doubt on both. As a result, the ability of history to furnish adequate knowledge of the past as well as its ability to remove the possibility of doubt from certain elementary assumptions have been impaired. Let me take up each point in turn.

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First, we tend to think of history as nothing other than a form of knowledge. The value of that knowledge is debated among humanists, historians, philosophers, social scientists, natural scientists, and other kinds of people. Some think it is essential to the survival of civilized society; others, that it is a kind of unnecessary frill. But there seems no dispute at all that history is harmless in itself. Harmful are only the lack of history, the misrepresentation of the past, the ignorance and lies that history is intended to correct. Everyone agrees that lies about the past can be the source of grave injustices to living human beings and to their memories. Historians spend their lives in libraries and archives in order to prevent that sort of harm. They lie awake at night worrying if they have missed important evidence or misinterpreted its meaning. But so far as I can tell, the sleep of historians is never once disturbed by the possibility that they might get their history right. In that regard the conscience of history is completely clean.

This seeming innocence of history is probably its most seductive quality. It allows historians and their readers to go about the business of gathering knowledge of the past without having to ask themselves whether their business may not in some important way involve them in a cause they might not like at all if they knew better what it was. History calms the mind; it has a soothing function. It issues safe-conducts to passengers through time by drawing a firm line between the present and the past: that was then, and this is now. What was then is past—dead and gone. It happened, that much is true. But now it can no longer pose a threat, nor can it help in any way. The present and the future may worry or excite us, as the case may be. The past does not, except to the extent that we have not yet understood it properly. It lies still, just waiting to be known. Its stillness gives us the confidence we need in order to confront the future and make our fortunes and ourselves. Precisely because it turns attention away from here and now towards the stillness of that past, history assures us that we are free and independent agents with the ability to shape our fate, the obligation to act on that ability, and responsibility for the consequences.

History thus is not innocent at all. It is more than a form of knowledge; it is a form of political activity. It upholds a certain view of order and is effectively designed to defeat alternatives that could be taken up in lieu of history. Take, for example, providence. Providence teaches that everything happens by God's design. God is the only agent; even the Devil is but God's instrument. When human beings act, their actions are the battleground on which a cosmic drama can unfold. {5 | 6} Yet that view conflicts with history. In history people act, not God. History leaves no room for providence, except as a belief that certain people used to hold and other people hold today. History cannot allow providence to enter into its own array of explanations without turning from a kind