

## 15.1 | *History: The Record of Events*

Among the passages included here are quotations from eminent historians—Herodotus and Thucydides, Plutarch and Tacitus, Hume, Gibbon, and Toynbee—in which they reflect about the art of writing history and about the task of the historian as a reporter and interpreter of the past. They are concerned with the credibility of the stories they tell, with the reliability of the evidence they advance for the interpretations they give, with the significance of the past for the present, and with the utility of studying history. Just as the histories they have written differ in style, so they differ in their accounts of the method or approach deemed proper for the historian.

Included also are quotations from philosophers and others who have thought about the character of history as an intellectual discipline and as a distinct branch of human knowledge. In certain respects, history is said to be more like science than like poetry, at least in the kind of truth it claims to have;

but in other respects, it is said to be more like poetry, not only in its narrative form but also in its reflections on human life. In addition, there are passages that take opposite sides on the question whether biography is the core of history as the record of the influence that great men have had upon the course of events; and passages that express opposite views about whether the human race has ever learned anything from the study of history, or learned enough not to repeat the mistakes that have been made in the past.

Some of the quotations attempt to distinguish different kinds of history by reference to differences in subject matter, and a few propose the project of a universal history—world history or the history of the human race as a whole. There are passing comments here on the laws or factors that govern the course of history, but a fuller treatment of that subject is reserved for Section 15.3.

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1 For myself, my duty is to report all that is said; but I am not obliged to believe it all alike—a remark which may be understood to apply to my whole History.

Herodotus, *History*, VII, 152

2 The way that most men deal with traditions, even traditions of their own country, is to receive them all alike as they are delivered, without applying any critical test whatever.

Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, I, 20

3 With reference to the speeches in this history, some were delivered before the war began, others while it was going on; some I heard myself, others I got from various quarters; it was in all cases difficult to carry them word for word in one's memory, so my habit has been to make the speakers say what was in my opinion demanded of them by the various occasions, of course adhering as closely as possible to the general sense of what

they really said. And with reference to the narrative of events, far from permitting myself to derive it from the first source that came to hand, I did not even trust my own impressions, but it rests partly on what I saw myself, partly on what others saw for me, the accuracy of the report being always tried by the most severe and detailed tests possible. My conclusions have cost me some labour from the want of coincidence between accounts of the same occurrences by different eye-witnesses, arising sometimes from imperfect memory, sometimes from undue partiality for one side or the other. The absence of romance in my history will, I fear, detract somewhat from its interest, but if it be judged useful by those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the interpretation of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it, I shall be content. In fine, I have written my work, not as an essay which is to win the applause of the moment, but as a posses-

- sion for all time.  
Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, I, 22
- 4 *The Corinthians*. There is . . . no advantage in reflections on the past further than may be of service to the present.  
Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, I, 123
- 5 *Socrates*. Because we do not know the truth about ancient times, we make falsehood as much like truth as we can, and so turn it to account.  
Plato, *Republic*, II, 382B
- 6 A history has to deal not with one action, but with one period and all that happened in that to one or more persons, however disconnected the several events may have been.  
Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1459<sup>a</sup>22
- 7 The study of history is in the truest sense an education and a training for political life. . . . The most instructive, or rather the only, method of learning to bear with dignity the vicissitudes of fortune is to recall the catastrophes of others.  
Polybius, *Histories*, I, 1
- 8 By far the greater number of historians concern themselves with isolated wars and the incidents that accompany them: while as to a general and comprehensive scheme of events, their date, origin, and catastrophe, no one as far as I know has undertaken to examine it. I thought it, therefore, distinctly my duty neither to pass by myself, nor allow any one else to pass by, without full study, a characteristic specimen of the dealings of Fortune at once brilliant and instructive in the highest degree.  
Polybius, *Histories*, I, 4
- 9 Men, who are persuaded that they get a competent view of universal from episodic history, are very like persons who should see the limbs of some body, which had once been living and beautiful, scattered and remote; and should imagine that to be quite as good as actually beholding the activity and beauty of the living creature itself.  
Polybius, *Histories*, I, 4
- 10 If you take truth from history what is left is but an idle unprofitable tale. Therefore, one must not shrink either from blaming one's friends or praising one's enemies; nor be afraid of finding fault with and commending the same persons at different times. For it is impossible that men engaged in public affairs should always be right, and unlikely that they should always be wrong. Holding ourselves, therefore, entirely aloof from the actors, we must as historians make statements and pronounce judgment in accordance with the actions themselves.  
Polybius, *Histories*, I, 14
- 11 Surely an historian's object should not be to amaze his readers by a series of thrilling anecdotes; nor should he aim at producing speeches which *might* have been delivered, nor study dramatic propriety in details like a writer of tragedy; but his function is above all to record with fidelity what was actually said or done, however commonplace it may be. For the purposes of history and of the drama are not the same, but widely opposed to each other. In the latter the object is to strike and delight by words as true to nature as possible; in the former to instruct and convince by genuine words and deeds.  
Polybius, *Histories*, II, 56
- 12 To remain ignorant of things that happened before you were born is to remain a child. What is a human life worth unless it is incorporated into the lives of one's ancestors and set in an historical context?  
Cicero, *Orator*, XXXIV
- 13 The study of history is the best medicine for a sick mind; for in history you have a record of the infinite variety of human experience plainly set out for all to see; and in that record you can find for yourself and your country both examples and warnings: fine things to take as models, base things, rotten through and through, to avoid.  
Livy, *Early History of Rome*, I, 1
- 14 In this work of mine, in which I have compared the lives of the greatest men with one another, after passing through those periods which probable reasoning can reach to and real history find a footing in, I might very well say of those that are farther off: "Beyond this there is nothing but prodigies and fictions, the only inhabitants are the poets and inventors of fables; there is no credit, or certainty any farther."  
Plutarch, *Theseus*
- 15 So very difficult a matter is it to trace and find out the truth of anything by history, when, on the one hand, those who afterwards write it find long periods of time intercepting their view, and, on the other hand, the contemporary records of any actions and lives, partly through envy and ill-will, partly through favour and flattery, pervert and distort truth.  
Plutarch, *Pericles*
- 16 It was for the sake of others that I first commenced writing biographies; but I find myself proceeding and attaching myself to it for my own; the virtues of these great men serving me as a sort of looking-glass, in which I may see how to adjust and adorn my own life.  
Plutarch, *Timoleon*
- 17 My method . . . is, by the study of history, and by

the familiarity acquired in writing, to habituate my memory to receive and retain images of the best and worthiest characters. I thus am enabled to free myself from any ignoble, base, or vicious impressions, contracted from the contagion of ill company that I may be unavoidably engaged in, by the remedy of turning my thoughts in a happy and calm temper to view these noble examples.

Plutarch, *Timoleon*

18 As we would wish that a painter who is to draw a beautiful face, in which there is yet some imperfection, should neither wholly leave out, nor yet too pointedly express what is defective, because this would deform it, and that spoil the resemblance; so since it is hard, or indeed perhaps impossible, to show the life of a man wholly free from blemish, in all that is excellent we must follow truth exactly, and give it fully; any lapses or faults that occur, through human passions or political necessities, we may regard rather as the shortcomings of some particular virtue, than as the natural effects of vice; and may be content without introducing them, curiously and officiously, into our narrative, if it be but out of tenderness to the weakness of nature, which has never succeeded in producing any human character so perfect in virtue as to be pure from all admixture and open to no criticism.

Plutarch, *Cimon*

19 Such things as are not commonly known, and lie scattered here and there in other men's writings, or are found amongst the old monuments and archives, I shall endeavour to bring together; not collecting mere useless pieces of learning, but adverting what may make his disposition and habit of mind understood.

Plutarch, *Nicias*

20 If any man undertake to write a history that has to be collected from materials gathered by observation and the reading of works not easy to be got in all places, nor written always in his own language, but many of them foreign and dispersed in other hands, for him, undoubtedly, it is in the first place and above all things most necessary to reside in some city of good note, addicted to liberal arts, and populous; where he may have plenty of all sorts of books, and upon inquiry may hear and inform himself of such particulars as, having escaped the pens of writers, are more faithfully preserved in the memories of men, lest his work be deficient in many things, even those which it can least dispense with.

Plutarch, *Demosthenes*

21 Are you so much better off, O writer of history?  
Surely  
You waste more time and more oil and thousands  
of pages of paper

Costing a fortune: still, the laws of the craft are demanding,  
What with footnotes and research, cross references  
and index.

But how does the harvest pay off? What profit in  
all of this delving?

What historian gets as much as a clerk in a court-  
room?

Juvenal, *Satire VII*

22 This I regard as history's highest function, to let  
no worthy action be uncommemorated, and to  
hold out the reprobation of posterity as a terror to  
evil words and deeds.

Tacitus, *Annals*, III, 65

23 Now, after a revolution, when Rome is nothing  
but the realm of a single despot, there must be  
good in carefully noting and recording this period,  
for it is but few who have the foresight to distin-  
guish right from wrong or what is sound from  
what is hurtful, while most men learn wisdom  
from the fortunes of others. Still, though this is  
instructive, it gives very little pleasure. . . . I have  
to present in succession the merciless biddings of a  
tyrant, incessant prosecutions, faithless friend-  
ships, the ruin of innocence, the same causes issu-  
ing in the same results, and I am everywhere con-  
fronted by a wearisome monotony in my subject  
matter. Then, again, an ancient historian has but  
few disparagers, and no one cares whether you  
praise more heartily the armies of Carthage or  
Rome.

Tacitus, *Annals*, IV, 33

24 This is a fine saying of Plato: That he who is  
discussing about men should look also at earthly  
things as if he viewed them from some higher  
place; should look at them in their assemblies, ar-  
mies, agricultural labours, marriages, treaties,  
births, deaths, noise of the courts of justice, desert  
places, various nations of barbarians, feasts, lam-  
entations, markets, a mixture of all things and an  
orderly combination of contraries.

Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, VII, 48

25 The historian's one task is to tell the thing as it  
happened. This he cannot do if he is Artaxerxes'  
physician, trembling before him, or hoping to get  
a purple cloak, a golden chain, a horse of the Ni-  
saeian breed in payment for his laudations. A fair  
historian, a Xenophon, a Thucydides, will not ac-  
cept that position. He may nurse some private dis-  
likes, but he will attach far more importance to  
the public good, and set the truth high above his  
hate; he may have his favorites, but he will not  
spare their errors. For history, I say again, has this  
and this only for its own; if a man will start upon  
it, he must sacrifice to no god but Truth; he must  
neglect all else; his sole rule and unerring guide is  
this—to think not of those who are listening to

him now, but of the yet unborn who shall seek his converse.

Lucian, *Way to Write History*

- 26 I sometimes fall to thinking whether it befits a theologian, a philosopher, and such people of exquisite and exact conscience and prudence, to write history. How can they stake their fidelity on the fidelity of an ordinary person? How be responsible for the thoughts of persons unknown and give their conjectures as coin of the realm? Of complicated actions that happen in their presence they would refuse to give testimony if placed under oath by a judge; and they know no man so intimately that they would undertake to answer fully for his intentions. I consider it less hazardous to write of things past than present, inasmuch as the writer has only to give an account of a borrowed truth.

Montaigne, *Essays*, I, 21, Power of the Imagination

- 27 I like historians who are either very simple or outstanding. The simple, who have not the wherewithal to mix in anything of their own, and who bring to it only the care and diligence to collect all that comes to their attention and to record everything faithfully without choice or discrimination, leave our judgment intact to discern the truth. . . .

The really outstanding ones have the capacity to choose what is worth knowing; they can pick out of two reports the one that is more likely. From the nature and humors of princes they infer their intentions and attribute appropriate words to them. They are right to assume the authority to regulate our belief by their own; but certainly this privilege belongs to very few people.

Those in between (which are the commonest sort) spoil everything for us. They want to chew our morsels for us; they give themselves the right to judge, and consequently to slant history to their fancy; for once the judgment leans to one side, one cannot help turning and twisting the narrative to that bias. They undertake to choose the things worth knowing, and often conceal from us a given word, a given private action, that would instruct us better; they omit as incredible the things they do not understand. . . . Let them boldly display their eloquence and their reasonings, let them judge all they like; but let them also leave us the wherewithal to judge after them, and not alter or arrange by their abridgments and selection anything of the substance of the matter, but pass it on to us pure and entire in all its dimensions.

Montaigne, *Essays*, II, 10, Of Books

- 28 The only good histories are those that have been written by the very men who were in command in the affairs, or who were participants in the con-

duct of them, or who at least have had the fortune to conduct others of the same sort. . . . What can you expect of a doctor discussing war, or a school-boy discussing the intentions of princes?

Montaigne, *Essays*, II, 10, Of Books

- 29 We have not the thousandth part of the writings of the ancients: it is Fortune that gives them life, longer or shorter according to her favor; and it is permissible to wonder whether what we have is not the worst, since we have not seen the rest.

Montaigne, *Essays*, II, 16, Of Glory

- 30 *King*. O God! that one might read the book of fate,

And see the revolution of the times  
Make mountains level, and the continent,  
Weary of solid firmness, melt itself  
Into the sea! and, other times, to see  
The beachy girdle of the ocean  
Too wide for Neptune's hips; how chances mock,  
And changes fill the cup of alteration  
With divers liquors! O, if this were seen,  
The happiest youth, viewing his progress through,  
What perils past, what crosses to ensue,  
Would shut the book, and sit him down and die.

Shakespeare, *II Henry IV*, III, i, 45

- 31 As it happeneth sometimes that the grandchild, or other descendant, resembleth the ancestor more than the son; so many times occurrences of present times may sort better with ancient examples than with those of the later or immediate times.

Bacon, *Advancement of Learning*, Bk. I, II, 3

- 32 History is natural, civil, ecclesiastical, and literary; whereof the three first I allow as extant, the fourth I note as deficient. For no man hath propounded to himself the general state of learning to be described and represented from age to age, as many have done the works of nature, and the state civil and ecclesiastical; without which the history of the world seemeth to me to be as the statue of Polyphemus with his eye out; that part being wanting which doth most show the spirit and life of the person. And yet I am not ignorant that in divers particular sciences, as of the juriconsults, the mathematicians, the rhetoricians, the philosophers, there are set down some small memorials of the schools, authors, and books; and so likewise some barren relations touching the invention of arts or usages. But a just story of learning, containing the antiquities and originals of knowledges and their sects, their inventions, their traditions, their diverse administrations and managings, their flourishings, their oppositions, decays, depressions, oblivions, removes, with the causes and occasions of them, and all other events concerning learning, throughout the ages of the world, I may truly affirm to be wanting. The use and end of which work I do not so much design

for curiosity or satisfaction of those that are the lovers of learning, but chiefly for a more serious and grave purpose, which is this in few words, that it will make learned men wise in the use and administration of learning.

Bacon, *Advancement of Learning*, Bk. II, I, 2

- 33 It is the true office of history to represent the events themselves together with the counsels, and to leave the observations and conclusions thereupon to the liberty and faculty of every man's judgement.

Bacon, *Advancement of Learning*, Bk. II, II, 12

- 34 It is good to know something of the customs of different peoples in order to judge more sanely of our own, and not to think that everything of a fashion not ours is absurd and contrary to reason, as do those who have seen nothing. But when one employs too much time in travelling, one becomes a stranger in one's own country, and when one is too curious about things which were practised in past centuries, one is usually very ignorant about those which are practised in our own time. Besides, fables make one imagine many events possible which in reality are not so, and even the most accurate of histories, if they do not exactly misrepresent or exaggerate the value of things in order to render them more worthy of being read, at least omit in them all the circumstances which are basest and least notable; and from this fact it follows that what is retained is not portrayed as it really is, and that those who regulate their conduct by examples which they derive from such a source, are liable to fall into the extravagances of the knights-errant of Romance, and form projects beyond their power of performance.

Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, I

- 35 In a good history, the judgement must be eminent; because the goodness consisteth in the method, in the truth, and in the choice of the actions that are most profitable to be known. Fancy has no place, but only in adorning the style.

Hobbes, *Leviathan*, I, 8

- 36 When testimonies contradict common experience, and the reports of history and witnesses clash with the ordinary course of nature, or with one another; there it is, where diligence, attention, and exactness are required, to form a right judgment, and to proportion the assent to the different evidence and probability of the thing: which rises and falls, according as those two foundations of credibility, viz. *common observation in like cases*, and *particular testimonies in that particular instance*, favour or contradict it.

Locke, *Concerning Human Understanding*, Bk. IV, XVI, 9

- 37 I would not be thought here to lessen the credit

and use of history: it is all the light we have in many cases, and we receive from it a great part of the useful truths we have, with a convincing evidence. I think nothing more valuable than the records of antiquity: I wish we had more of them, and more uncorrupted. But this truth itself forces me to say, That no probability can rise higher than its first original. What has no other evidence than the single testimony of one only witness must stand or fall by his only testimony, whether good, bad, or indifferent; and though cited afterwards by hundreds of others, one after another, is so far from receiving any strength thereby, that it is only the weaker. Passion, interest, inadvertency, mistake of his meaning, and a thousand odd reasons, or capricious, men's minds are acted by, (impossible to be discovered,) may make one man quote another man's words or meaning wrong. He that has but ever so little examined the citations of writers, cannot doubt how little credit the quotations deserve, where the originals are wanting; and consequently how much less quotations of quotations can be relied on. This is certain, that what in one age was affirmed upon slight grounds, can never after come to be more valid in future ages by being often repeated. But the further still it is from the original, the less valid it is, and has always less force in the mouth or writing of him that last made use of it than in his from whom he received it.

Locke, *Concerning Human Understanding*, Bk. IV, XVI, 11

- 38 Our new Science must . . . be a demonstration, so to speak, of the historical fact of providence, for it must be a history of the forms of order which, without human discernment or intent, and often against the designs of men, providence has given to this great city of the human race. For though this world has been created in time and particular, the orders established therein by providence are universal and eternal.

Vico, *The New Science*, I

- 39 In monarchies extremely absolute, historians betray the truth, because they are not at liberty to speak it; in states remarkably free, they betray the truth, because of their liberty itself; which always produces divisions, every one becoming as great a slave to the prejudices of his faction as he could be in a despotic state.

Montesquieu, *Spirit of Laws*, XIX, 27

- 40 Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular. Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature, by showing men in all varieties of circumstances and situations, and furnishing us with materials from which we may form our observations and become acquainted with the regu-

lar springs of human action and behaviour. These records of wars, intrigues, factions, and revolutions, are so many collections of experiments, by which the politician or moral philosopher fixes the principles of his science, in the same manner as the physician or natural philosopher becomes acquainted with the nature of plants, minerals, and other external objects, by the experiments which he forms concerning them.

Hume, *Concerning Human Understanding*, VIII, 65

- 41 In reality, what more agreeable entertainment to the mind, than to be transported into the remotest ages of the world, and to observe human society, in its infancy, making the first faint essays towards the arts and sciences; to see the policy of government, and the civility of conversation refining by degrees, and every thing which is ornamental to human life advancing toward its perfection? To remark the rise, progress, declension, and final extinction of the most flourishing empires; the virtues which contributed to their greatness, and the vices which drew on their ruin? In short, to see all the human race, from the beginning of time, pass, as it were, in review before us, appearing in their true colours, without any of those disguises which, during their lifetime, so much perplexed the judgment of the beholders. What spectacle can be imagined so magnificent, so various, so interesting? What amusement, either of the senses or imagination, can be compared with it?
- Hume, *Of the Study of History*
- 42 History is not only a valuable part of knowledge, but opens the door to many other parts, and affords materials to most of the sciences. And, indeed, if we consider the shortness of human life, and our limited knowledge, even of what passes in our own time, we must be sensible that we should be forever children in understanding, were it not for this invention, which extends our experience to all past ages, and to the most distant nations; making them contribute as much to our improvement in wisdom, as if they had actually lain under our observation. A man acquainted with history may, in some respect, be said to have lived from the beginning of the world, and to have been making continual additions to his stock of knowledge in every century.
- Hume, *Of the Study of History*
- 43 Historians have been, almost without exception, the true friends of virtue, and have always represented it in its proper colours, however they may have erred in their judgments of particular persons.
- Hume, *Of the Study of History*
- 44 The first foundations of all history are the recitals of the fathers to the children, transmitted afterward from one generation to another; at their origin they are at the very most probable, when they do not shock common sense, and they lose one degree of probability in each generation. With time the fable grows and the truth grows less; from this it comes that all the origins of peoples are absurd.
- Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*: History
- 45 Let us judge of what can be done by what has been done.
- Rousseau, *Social Contract*, III, 12
- 46 What are all the records of history but narratives of successive villainies, of treasons and usurpations, massacres and wars?
- Johnson, *Rambler No. 175*
- 47 *Johnson*. Great abilities are not requisite for an historian; for in historical composition, all the greatest powers of the human mind are quiescent. He has facts ready to his hand; so there is no exercise of invention. Imagination is not required in any high degree; only about as much as is used in the lower kinds of poetry. Some penetration, accuracy, and colouring will fit a man for the task, if he can give the application which is necessary.
- Boswell, *Life of Johnson (July 6, 1763)*
- 48 *Johnson*. We must consider how very little history there is; I mean real authentick history. That certain Kings reigned, and certain battles were fought, we can depend upon as true; but all the colouring, all the philosophy of history is conjecture.
- Boswell, *Life of Johnson (Apr. 18, 1775)*
- 49 Antoninus diffused order and tranquillity over the greatest part of the earth. His reign is marked by the rare advantage of furnishing very few materials for history; which is, indeed, little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind.
- Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, III
- 50 There is not anywhere upon the globe a large tract of country which we have discovered destitute of inhabitants, or whose first population can be fixed with any degree of historical certainty. And yet, as the most philosophic minds can seldom refrain from investigating the infancy of great nations, our curiosity consumes itself in toilsome and disappointed efforts.
- Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, IX
- 51 The confusion of the times, and the scarcity of authentic memorials, oppose equal difficulties to the historian, who attempts to preserve a clear

and unbroken thread of narration. Surrounded with imperfect fragments, always concise, often obscure, and sometimes contradictory, he is reduced to collect, to compare, and to conjecture: and though he ought never to place his conjectures in the rank of facts, yet the knowledge of human nature, and of the sure operation of its fierce and unrestrained passions, might, on some occasions, supply the want of historical materials.

Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, X

- 52 A being of the nature of man, endowed with the same faculties, but with a longer measure of existence, would cast down a smile of pity and contempt on the crimes and follies of human ambition, so eager, in a narrow span, to grasp at a precarious and short-lived enjoyment. It is thus that the experience of history exalts and enlarges the horizon of our intellectual view. In a composition of some days, in a perusal of some hours, six hundred years have rolled away, and the duration of a life or reign is contracted to a fleeting moment: the grave is ever beside the throne; the success of a criminal is almost instantly followed by the loss of his prize.

Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, XLVIII

- 53 The Greeks of Constantinople, after purging away the impurities of their vulgar speech, acquired the free use of their ancient language, the most happy composition of human art, and a familiar knowledge of the sublime masters who had pleased or instructed the first of nations. But these advantages only tend to aggravate the reproach and shame of a degenerate people. They held in their lifeless hands the riches of their fathers, without inheriting the spirit which had created and improved that sacred patrimony: they read, they praised, they compiled, but their languid souls seemed alike incapable of thought and action. In the revolution of ten centuries, not a single discovery was made to exalt the dignity or promote the happiness of mankind. Not a single idea has been added to the speculative systems of antiquity, and a succession of patient disciples became in their turn the dogmatic teachers of the next servile generation.

Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, LIII

- 54 It was at Rome, on the 15th of October, 1764, as I sat musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol, while the barefoot friars were singing vespers in the Temple of Jupiter, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the city first started to my mind.

Gibbon, *Autobiography*

- 55 I have presumed to mark the moment of concep-

tion: I shall now commemorate the hour of my final deliverance. It was on the day, or rather night, of the 27th of June 1787, between the hours of eleven and twelve, that I wrote the last lines of the last page, in a summer-house in my garden. After laying down my pen I took several turns in a *berceau*, or covered walk of acacias, which commands a prospect of the country, the lake, and the mountains. The air was temperate, the sky was serene, the silver orb of the moon was reflected from the waters, and all nature was silent. I will not dissemble the first emotions of joy on recovery of my freedom, and, perhaps, the establishment of my fame. But my pride was soon humbled, and a sober melancholy was spread over my mind, by the idea that I had taken an everlasting leave of an old and agreeable companion, and that, whatsoever might be the future date of my *History*, the life of the historian must be short and precarious.

Gibbon, *Autobiography*

- 56 My English text is chaste, and all licentious passages are left in the decent obscurity of a learned language.

Gibbon, *Autobiography*

- 57 Men, viewed as a whole, are not guided in their efforts merely by instinct, like the lower animals; nor do they proceed in their actions, like the citizens of a purely rational world, according to a preconcerted plan. And so it appears as if no regular systematic history of mankind would be possible, as in the case, for instance, of bees and beavers. Nor can one help feeling a certain repugnance in looking at the conduct of men as it is exhibited on the great stage of the world. With glimpses of wisdom appearing in individuals here and there, it seems, on examining it externally as if the whole web of human history were woven out of folly and childish vanity and the frenzy of destruction, so that at the end one hardly knows what idea to form of our race, albeit so proud of its prerogatives.

Kant, *Idea of a Universal History*, Intro.

- 58 A philosophical attempt to work out the universal history of the world according to the plan of nature in its aiming at a perfect civil union must be regarded as possible, and as even capable of helping forward the purpose of nature.

Kant, *Idea of a Universal History*, IX

- 59 How admirably calculated is this picture of the human race, freed from all these chains, secure from the domination of chance, as from that of the enemies of its progress, and advancing with firm and sure steps towards the attainment of truth, virtue, and happiness, to present to the philosopher a spectacle which shall console him for the errors, the crimes, the injustice, with which the earth is still polluted, and whose victim he

often is! It is in the contemplation of this picture that he receives the reward of his efforts towards the progress of reason and the defense of liberty. He dares then to link these with the eternal chain of human destiny; and thereby he finds virtue's true recompense, the joy of having performed a lasting service, which no fatality can ever destroy by restoring the evils of prejudice and slavery. This contemplation is for him a place of refuge, whither the memory of his persecutors cannot follow him, where, living in imagination with man restored to his rights and his natural dignity, he forgets him whom greed, fear, or envy torment and corrupt; there it is that he exists in truth with his kin, in an elysium which his reason has been able to create for him, and which his love for humanity enhances with the purest enjoyments.

Condorcet, *Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, 10

- 60 Original historians . . . change the events, the deeds, and the states of society with which they are conversant, into an object for the conceptive faculty.

Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, Introduction, 1

- 61 A history which aspires to traverse long periods of time, or to be universal, must . . . forego the attempt to give individual representations of the past as it actually existed. It must foreshorten its pictures by abstractions; and this includes not merely the omission of events and deeds, but whatever is involved in the fact that thought is, after all, the most trenchant epitomist. A battle, a great victory, a siege, no longer maintains its original proportions, but is put off with a bare mention.

Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, Introduction, 2

- 62 What experience and history teach is this—that peoples and governments never have learned anything from history, or acted on principles deduced from it.

Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, Introduction, 2

- 63 The history of the world begins with its general aim, the realization of the idea of spirit, only in an *implicit* form, that is, as nature; a hidden, most profoundly hidden, unconscious instinct; and the whole process of history (as already observed) is directed to rendering this unconscious impulse a conscious one. Thus appearing in the form of merely natural existence, natural will—that which has been called the subjective side—physical craving, instinct, passion, private interest, as also opinion and subjective conception—spontaneously present themselves at the very commencement. This vast congeries of volitions, interests and activities, constitute the instruments and means of the world-spirit for attaining its object; bringing it to consciousness, and realizing it. And

this aim is none other than finding itself, coming to itself, and contemplating itself in concrete actuality. But that those manifestations of vitality on the part of individuals and peoples, in which they seek and satisfy their own purposes, are, at the same time, the means and instruments of a higher and broader purpose of which they know nothing—which they realize unconsciously—might be made a matter of question; rather has been questioned, and in every variety of form negated, decried and contemned as mere dreaming and “philosophy.” But on this point I announced my view at the very outset, and asserted our hypothesis—which, however, will appear in the sequel, in the form of a legitimate inference—and our belief that reason governs the world, and has consequently governed its history. In relation to this independently universal and substantial existence—all else is subordinate, subservient to it, and the means for its development.

Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, Introduction, 3

- 64 Light is a simply self-involved existence; but though possessing thus in itself universality, it exists at the same time as an individuality in the sun. Imagination has often pictured to itself the emotions of a blind man suddenly becoming possessed of sight, beholding the bright glimmering of the dawn, the growing light, and the flaming glory of the ascending sun. The boundless forgetfulness of his individuality in this pure splendor, is his first feeling—utter astonishment. But when the sun is risen, this astonishment is diminished; objects around are perceived, and from them the individual proceeds to the contemplation of his own inner being, and thereby the advance is made to the perception of the relation between the two. Then inactive contemplation is quitted for activity; by the close of day man has erected a building constructed from his own inner sun; and when in the evening he contemplates this, he esteems it more highly than the original external sun. For now he stands in a *conscious relation* to his spirit, and therefore a *free* relation. If we hold this image fast in mind, we shall find it symbolizing the course of history, the great day's work of spirit.

Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, Intro.

- 65 History, which I like to think of as the contrary of poetry [*historoumenon* (investigated)—*pepoiemenon* (invented)], is for time what geography is for space; and it is no more to be called a science, in any strict sense of the word, than is geography, because it does not deal with universal truths but only with particular details. History has always been the favorite study of those who wish to learn something without having to face the effort demanded by any branch of real knowledge, which taxes the intelligence.

Schopenhauer, *Some Forms of Literature*



- 66 The preference shown for history by the greater public in all ages may be illustrated by the kind of conversation which is so much in vogue everywhere in society. It generally consists in one person relating something and then another person relating something else; so that in this way everyone is sure of receiving attention. Both here and in the case of history it is plain that the mind is occupied with particular details. But as in science, so also in every worthy conversation, the mind rises to the consideration of some general truth.
- This objection does not, however, deprive history of its value. Human life is short and fleeting, and many millions of individuals share in it, who are swallowed by that monster of oblivion which is waiting for them with ever open jaws. It is thus a very thankworthy task to try to rescue something—the memory of interesting and important events, or the leading features and personages of some epoch—from the general shipwreck of the world.
- From another point of view, we might look upon history as the sequel to zoology; for while with all other animals it is enough to observe the species, with man individuals, and therefore individual events, have to be studied; because every man possesses a character as an individual. And since individuals and events are without number or end, an essential imperfection attaches to history. In the study of it, all that a man learns never contributes to lessen that which he has still to learn. With any real science, a perfection of knowledge is, at any rate, conceivable.
- Schopenhauer, *Some Forms of Literature*
- 67 Only through history does a nation become completely conscious of itself. Accordingly history is to be regarded as the rational consciousness of the human race, and is to the race what the reflected and connected consciousness is to the individual who is conditioned by reason, a consciousness through the want of which the brute is confined to the narrow, perceptible present. . . . In this sense, then, history . . . takes the place of an immediate self-consciousness common to the whole race, so that only by virtue of it does the human race come to be a whole, come to be a humanity. This is the true value of history.
- Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, III, 38
- 68 Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here.
- Carlyle, *The Hero as Divinity*
- 69 I have no expectation that any man will read history aright who thinks that what was done in a remote age, by men whose names have resounded far, has any deeper sense than what he is doing to-day.
- Emerson, *History*
- 70 All history becomes subjective; in other words there is properly no history, only biography.
- Emerson, *History*
- 71 The advancing man discovers how deep a property he has in literature—in all fable as well as in all history. . . . His own secret biography he finds in lines wonderfully intelligible to him, dotted down before he was born. One after another he comes up in his private adventures with every fable of Aesop, of Homer, of Hafiz, of Ariosto, of Chaucer, of Scott, and verifies them with his own head and hands.
- Emerson, *History*
- 72 Whence then this worship of the past? The centuries are conspirators against the sanity and authority of the soul. Time and space are but physiological colors which the eye makes, but the soul is light: where it is, is day; where it was, is night; and history is an impertinence and an injury if it be any thing more than a cheerful apologue or parable of my being and becoming.
- Emerson, *Self-Reliance*
- 73 We go eastward to realize history and study the works of art and literature, retracing the steps of the race; we go westward as into the future, with a spirit of enterprise and adventure.
- Thoreau, *Walking*
- 74 Many are concerned about the monuments of the West and the East—to know who built them. For my part, I should like to know who in those days did not build them.
- Thoreau, *Walden: Economy*
- 75 One nation can and should learn from others. And even when a society has got upon the right track for the discovery of the natural laws of its movement . . . it can neither clear by bold leaps, nor remove by legal enactments, the obstacles offered by the successive phases of its normal development. But it can shorten and lessen the birth-pangs.
- Marx, *Capital*, Pref. to 1st Ed.
- 76 Where speculation ends—in real life—there real, positive science begins: the representation of the practical activity, of the practical process of development of men. Empty talk about consciousness ceases, and real knowledge has to take its place. When reality is depicted, philosophy as an independent branch of activity loses its medium of existence. At the best its place can only be taken by a summing-up of the most general results, abstractions which arise from the observation of the historical development of men. Viewed apart from

real history, these abstractions have in themselves no value whatsoever. They can only serve to facilitate the arrangement of historical material, to indicate the sequence of its separate strata. But they by no means afford a recipe or schema, as does philosophy, for neatly trimming the epochs of history. On the contrary, our difficulties begin only when we set about the observation and the arrangement—the real depiction—of our historical material, whether of a past epoch or of the present.

Marx and Engels, *German Ideology*, I, 1

- 77 "Yes, universal history! It's the study of the successive follies of mankind and nothing more. The only subjects I respect are mathematics and natural science," said Kolya.

Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, Pt. IV, X, 5

- 78 In historic events, the so-called great men are labels giving names to events, and like labels they have but the smallest connection with the event itself.

Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, IX, 1

- 79 The movement of humanity, arising as it does from innumerable arbitrary human wills, is continuous.

To understand the laws of this continuous movement is the aim of history. But to arrive at these laws, resulting from the sum of all those human wills, man's mind postulates arbitrary and disconnected units. The first method of history is to take an arbitrarily selected series of continuous events and examine it apart from others, though there is and can be no *beginning* to any event, for one event always flows uninterruptedly from another.

The second method is to consider the actions of some one man—a king or a commander—as equivalent to the sum of many individual wills; whereas the sum of individual wills is never expressed by the activity of a single historic personage.

Historical science in its endeavor to draw nearer to truth continually takes smaller and smaller units for examination. But however small the units it takes, we feel that to take any unit disconnected from others, or to assume a *beginning* of any phenomenon, or to say that the will of many men is expressed by the actions of any one historic personage, is in itself false.

It needs no critical exertion to reduce utterly to dust any deductions drawn from history. It is merely necessary to select some larger or smaller unit as the subject of observation—as criticism has every right to do, seeing that whatever unit history observes must always be arbitrarily selected.

Only by taking infinitesimally small units for observation (the differential of history, that is, the

individual tendencies of men) and attaining to the art of integrating them (that is, finding the sum of these infinitesimals) can we hope to arrive at the laws of history.

Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, XI, 1

- 80 In historic events the rule forbidding us to eat of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge is specially applicable. Only unconscious action bears fruit, and he who plays a part in an historic event never understands its significance. If he tries to realize it his efforts are fruitless.

Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, XII, 4

- 81 Man's mind cannot grasp the causes of events in their completeness, but the desire to find those causes is implanted in man's soul. And without considering the multiplicity and complexity of the conditions any one of which taken separately may seem to be the cause, he snatches at the first approximation to a cause that seems to him intelligible and says: "This is the cause!" In historical events (where the actions of men are the subject of observation) the first and most primitive approximation to present itself was the will of the gods and, after that, the will of those who stood in the most prominent position—the heroes of history. But we need only penetrate to the essence of any historic event—which lies in the activity of the general mass of men who take part in it—to be convinced that the will of the historic hero does not control the actions of the mass but is itself continually controlled. It may seem to be a matter of indifference whether we understand the meaning of historical events this way or that; yet there is the same difference between a man who says that the people of the West moved on the East because Napoleon wished it and a man who says that this happened because it had to happen, as there is between those who declared that the earth was stationary and that the planets moved round it and those who admitted that they did not know what upheld the earth, but knew there were laws directing its movement and that of the other planets. There is, and can be, no cause of an historical event except the one cause of all causes. But there are laws directing events, and some of these laws are known to us while we are conscious of others we cannot comprehend. The discovery of these laws is only possible when we have quite abandoned the attempt to find the cause in the will of some one man, just as the discovery of the laws of the motion of the planets was possible only when men abandoned the conception of the fixity of the earth.

Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, XIII, 1

- 82 Science does not admit the conception of the ancients as to the direct participation of the Deity in human affairs, and therefore history ought to give other answers.

Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, II Epilogue, I

- 83 If the will of every man were free, that is, if each man could act as he pleased, all history would be a series of disconnected incidents.  
Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, II Epilogue, VIII
- 84 A contemporary event seems to us to be indubitably the doing of all the known participants, but with a more remote event we already see its inevitable results which prevent our considering anything else possible. And the farther we go back in examining events the less arbitrary do they appear.  
Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, II Epilogue, IX
- 85 The recognition of man's free will as something capable of influencing historical events, that is, as not subject to laws, is the same for history as the recognition of a free force moving the heavenly bodies would be for astronomy.  
Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, II Epilogue, XI
- 86 It is folly . . . to speak of the "laws of history" as of something inevitable, which science has only to discover, and whose consequences anyone can then foretell but do nothing to alter or avert. Why, the very laws of physics are conditional, and deal with *ifs*. The physicist does not say, "The water will boil anyhow;" he only says it will boil if a fire be kindled beneath it. And so the utmost the student of sociology can ever predict is that *if* a genius of a certain sort shows the way, society will be sure to follow.  
William James, *Great Men and Their Environment*
- 87 Alas! Hegel was right when he said that we learn from history that men never learn anything from history.  
Shaw, *Heartbreak House*, Pref.
- 88 This notion of historians, of history devoid of aesthetic prejudice, of history devoid of any reliance on metaphysical principles and cosmological generalizations, is a figment of the imagination. The belief in it can only occur to minds steeped in provinciality,—the provinciality of an epoch, of a race, of a school of learning, of a trend of interest—, minds unable to divine their own unspoken limitations.  
Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, I, 1
- 89 The historian in his description of the past depends on his own judgment as to what constitutes the importance of human life. Even when he has rigorously confined himself to one selected aspect, political or cultural, he still depends on some decision as to what constitutes the culmination of that phase of human experience and as to what constitutes its degradation.  
Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, I, 1
- 90 It is a curious delusion that the rock upon which our beliefs can be founded is an historical investigation. You can only interpret the past in terms of the present. The present is all that you have; and unless in this present you can find general principles which interpret the present as including a representation of the whole community of existents, you cannot move a step beyond your little patch of immediacy.  
Thus history presupposes a metaphysic. It can be objected that we believe in the past and talk about it without settling our metaphysical principles. That is certainly the case. But you can only deduce metaphysical dogmas from your interpretation of the past on the basis of a prior metaphysical interpretation of the present.  
In so far as your metaphysical beliefs are implicit, you vaguely interpret the past on the lines of the present. But when it comes to the primary metaphysical data, the world of which you are immediately conscious is the whole datum.  
Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, III, 1
- 91 History, in every country, is so taught as to magnify that country: children learn to believe that their own country has always been in the right and almost always victorious, that it has produced almost all the great men, and that it is in all respects superior to all other countries.  
Russell, *Education*
- 92 For whom is there History? The question is seemingly paradoxical, for history is obviously for everyone to this extent, that every man, with his whole existence and consciousness, is a part of history. But it makes a great difference whether anyone lives under the constant impression that his life is an element in a far wider life-course that goes on for hundreds and thousands of years, or conceives of himself as something rounded off and self-contained. For the latter type of consciousness there is certainly no world-history, no *world-as-history*.  
Spengler, *Decline of the West*, I, 1
- 93 Memory itself is an internal rumour; and when to this hearsay within the mind we add the falsified echoes that reach us from others, we have but a shifting and unseizable basis to build upon. The picture we frame of the past changes continually and grows every day less similar to the original experience which it purports to describe.  
Santayana, *Life of Reason*, V, 2
- 94 The historian's politics, philosophy, or romantic imagination furnishes a vital nucleus for reflection. All that falls within that particular vortex is included in the mental picture, the rest is passed over and tends to drop out of sight. It is not possi-

ble to say, nor to think, everything at once; and the private interest which guides a man in selecting his materials imposes itself inevitably on the events he relates and especially on their grouping and significance.

History is always written wrong, and so always needs to be rewritten.

Santayana, *Life of Reason*, V, 2

- 95 Historical investigation has for its aim to fix the order and character of events throughout past time in all places. The task is frankly superhuman, because no block of real existence, with its infinitesimal detail, can be recorded, nor if somehow recorded could it be dominated by the mind; and to carry on a survey of this social continuum *ad infinitum* would multiply the difficulty.

Santayana, *Life of Reason*, V, 2

- 96 It is not enough to say that history is historical judgment, it is necessary to add that every judgment is an historical judgment or, quite simply, history. If judgment is a relation between a subject and a predicate, then the subject or the event, whatever it is that is being judged, is always an historical fact, a becoming, a process under way, for there are no immobile facts nor can such things be envisaged in the world of reality. Historical judgment is embodied even in the merest perception of the judging mind (if it did not judge there would not even be perception but merely blind and dumb sensation). . . .

Historical judgment is not a variety of knowledge, but it is knowledge itself; it is the form which completely fills and exhausts the field of knowing, leaving no room for anything else.

Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty*, I, 5

- 97 We are products of the past and we live immersed in the past, which encompasses us. How can we move towards the new life, how create new activities without getting out of the past and without placing ourselves above it? And how can we place ourselves above the past if we are in it and it is in us? There is no other way out except through thought, which does not break off relations with the past but rises ideally above it and converts it

into knowledge. The past must be faced or, not to speak in metaphors, it must be reduced to a mental problem which can find its solution in a proposition of truth, the ideal premise for our new activity and our new life. This is how we daily behave, when, instead of being prostrated by the vexations which beset us, and of bewailing and being shamed by errors we have committed, we examine what has happened, analyse its origin, follow its history, and, with an informed conscience and under an intimate inspiration, we outline what ought and should be undertaken and willingly and brightly get ready to undertake it.

Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty*, I, 8

- 98 The writing of histories—as Goethe once noted—is one way of getting rid of the weight of the past. . . . The writing of history liberates us from history.

Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty*, I, 8

- 99 I find it hard to have patience with historians who boast, as some modern Western historians do, that they keep entirely to the facts of history and don't go in for theories. Why, every so-called fact that they present to you had some pattern of theory behind it. Historians who genuinely believe they have no general ideas about history are, I would suggest to them, simply ignorant of the workings of their own minds, and such willful ignorance is, isn't it, really unpardonable.

Toynbee, *Radio Debate* (1948)

- 100 Historians generally illustrate rather than correct the ideas of the communities within which they live and work.

Toynbee, *A Study of History*, I, 1

- 101 History, in the sense of the histories of the human societies called civilizations, revealed itself as a sheaf of parallel, contemporary, and recent essays in a new enterprise: a score of attempts, up to date, to transcend the level of primitive human life at which man, after having become himself, had apparently lain torpid for some hundreds of thousands of years.

Toynbee, *Civilization on Trial*, I