Is it Possible to Learn to Be Human From History?

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The paper attempts to explore the way for learning to be human. Everyone desires to be human. But how is it possible? To answer this question, the author will discuss both historical and logical methods as potential keys for that goal. And challenging the effectiveness of these methods, it is proposed another way. The author considers the concepts of history, identity, and freedom as mutually determined entities. In the historical sense, history develops to its culmination, manifests its internal capabilities, and reveals itself and becomes a pure, free, and non-compulsory history. From an anthropological point of view, a person gets rid of internal and external shackles, and acquires or builds his/her true identity and history. In the framework of ontology, first of all, there is a conscious identity that, through the creation of history, records its freedom. This concept provides an opportunity to better understand the human being and his/her history.

**Keywords:** history, human being, humanity, I, freedom, identity

What Can We Learn From History?

The imperative of being human always pushes us back to look at the history in order to get an example from there. And we turn to history in such cases in two senses: First, in order to not “invent a bicycle” and not appear in a ridiculous situation; second, man is a historical being, in the sense that thinking is given to us as a history of thought, hence, to learn to be something we probably go through the history of thinking. So, the author thinks, first of all, it is important to answer the question: “What can one learn from history?” It is important because history is the main source for learning. This also applies to the university education at all. Everywhere the disciplines are taught through a historical scheme. And it creates a number of issues concerning the field of knowledge where, by the way, confidence in history came quite late, in the 19th century, when historism emerged. History had no place in the knowledge for ancient Greek thinkers. Even if we take into account the conditionality of the Ancient history and that it is not as much of a time-describing concept as cultural and metaphysical one, anyway we must admit that it has certain peculiarities. The history was merely a matter for some important events to be remembered. Why? It is explained in a simple way. Because, as Aristotle says,

The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse and in prose. The work of Herodotus might be put into verse, and it would still be a species of history, with meter no less than without it. The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. (1902, p. 35).

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According to Aristotle, history relates about singular events which have nothing to do with the universal laws of existence. It is this circumstance that has served as a reason for Greek philosophers to neglect the history. And Plato, as Collingwood notes, “writes as if Herodotus had never lived” (1992, p. 29). As long as the world had been manifested as a static one in human consciousness, history could not have its “honorable” place in the system of knowledge.

The picture does not change significantly in the Middle Ages. Although in the Middle Ages, Christianity came into being with the linear conception of history, i.e., that the history has a beginning and an end, but nevertheless history was not the main method of cognition, as Christ (which was sense of existence) was not the result of historical evolution, but it is given at once, it is the beginning and the end of history at the same time. Even if Christ is a historical one, then it is still history itself, but not in history. Therefore, the philosophy which is willing to recognize it, such as Thomism, does not consider history as an important means of cognition. In Thomas Aquinas’s “Summa Theologica”, there is not much to say regarding the history.

The situation was almost the same in the Renaissance, where the man came to replace God; and he was not so different from God. Nicholas of Cusa’a idea of “learned ignorance” can be said to be a symbol of cognition in the Renaissance. Surely, in the case of great desire, it is possible to find works standing up for the history both in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, but they were not legitimate in the system of knowledge at their time, otherwise we could easily mention them. Besides, the discovery of such treatises does not mean that the reality at that time was historically itself.

The situation radically changed when historism appeared in the 19th century. It was a period when the first chair of history was opened in Berlin and when Hegel read lectures on world history. Historism, of course, has not been formed in one day and at once; one can observe its long development process, from Shaftesbury to Goethe, for example, in Friedrich Meinecke (1972), where, by the way, it is already talked about the crisis of the historism (p. liv). By historism, the author means nothing more than some principles which allow comprehending life in historical process. That is to say, history gradually gets ontological status: History is no longer merely a registration of some events. This change was due to a number of factors. First of all, we should mention that this change was prepared in various fields—epistemology, social philosophy, ethics, and so on. For instance, to represent the process of recognition more fully the idea of cognitive autonomy was proposed in epistemology. The best demonstration of this idea was Hegel’s doctrine. To understand the fundamental character of the idea of progress and revolutions as well in social philosophy, all discussions were moved to the context of historism. One needs historical approach in ethics to understand human visions, the idea of perfection, etc.

But what is the possibility of learning from history? Can we learn from history anything? Learning from history means to consider the concept of what we are interested in and sometimes try to reproduce it.

A few centuries ago, Hegel taught us that the only thing we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history. A little later, Nietzsche emphasized the burden of history and pointed out that the cultivation of history is one of the greatest obstacles to creativity and even happiness.

Man … braces himself against the great and ever greater pressure of what is past: it pushes him down or bends him sideways, it encumbers his steps as a, dark, invisible burden which he can sometimes appear to disown and which in traffic with his fellow men he is only too glad to disown, so as to excite their envy. (Nietzsche, 2007, p. 61)
So, in order to determine the historical knowledge, we need to understand what the subject of history is and what we can learn from history. For example, it is almost impossible to know about nature from history because nature is always the same; the laws of nature do not change, even if the appearance of the nature and the way of its manifestation change. Besides, history does not mean merely a change or a description of change as positivists asserted. There is no need to demonstrate that the positivist conception of history has already been overcome which had been regarded history as a discipline about only events. Let us just make only one anti-positivist argument: History does not tell about arbitrary events, those events are, of course, linked to a certain principle or connection; so, the history is rather about the idea that connects the event. Collingwood describes it as follows:

History … is not, as it has often been mid-described, a story of successive events or an account of change. Unlike the natural scientist, the historian is not concerned with events as such at all. He is only concerned with those events which are the outward expression of thoughts. (Collingwood, 1992, p. 217)

That is to say, the historical process is a process of thought. History is, first of all, a history of thought. Only the mind has a history as an experience. When we speak of, for instance, the history of Rome, we mean not Rome itself (with its material manifestations, spatial coordinates, etc.), but Rome reconstructed in our consciousness. Hegel’s above mentioned thought also shows that at least one idea can be learned from history, that is, nothing can be learned.

**What Is Human in the Human Being?**

So, now the author would like to extrapolate these ideas into the human history and speak about the history of human being. From this point of view, let us look at the problem of human being: Is there a human history and is it enough by knowing it to become a true human being? Surely, conditions of human life differ at various times, and what we call a human being is differently understood: from *zoon politikon* to *homo ludens* or *homo faber* and so on. But this does not mean that man was a *zoon politikon* and then became a *homo faber*, but it rather means that human beings were considered to be political animals at one time, and then sociologically argued that the essence of man was goods producing. Now, the problem is how to find out what is the most human in human beings, which of those features is more accurately characterized the essence of human being? Is history a key to the answer to that question? We should mention with Collingwood that “the idea that man, apart from his self-conscious historical life, is different from the rest of creation in being a rational animal is a mere superstition” (1992, p. 227).

There is an important point here that precedes this last question. On the one hand, while calling human history, we suppose that we know what or who is a human being and follow its development, but on the other hand, we want, at first, to understand who human being is, to grasp the idea of a human being by observing the history. So, first we need to understand what it means to have a history of human being. A vicious circle! After all, as the history of the literature is not a sequence of words, so the history of man is not a reproduction of “two-legged animal”.

The other criticism of learning from history concerns the point that history may not be over yet or has not reached its peak; therefore, the development is not over of what history we speak about. In this case, maybe the creature whom we call human being has not yet fully exhausted its internal potential and capabilities, and consequently, it is not human being yet. Here, let us consider the art by analogy. For instance, according to
Malevich, pure art starts when there are no any likenesses of reality, nature. Similarly, the true music begins when there is no excitement on audience. It means that there was no possibility to know what the pure art is from history several centuries ago. The issue becomes more complicated when we speak of being human. As for the human being, one can assert that the development of human being has not finished yet, and it is too early for Foucault’s announcement about the imminent death of man (2005, p. 422).

One can often hear about three moral outrages upon humanity: The first was from Copernicus’s hands when he asserted that the earth was not the center of the universe but only a tiny speck in an endless space; the second was Darwin’s doctrine according which man has not been specially created but only a result of the animal evolution. But man’s craving for grandiosity is now suffering the third and most bitter blow from present-day psychological research which is endeavoring to prove the ‘ego’ of each one of us that he is not even master in his own house. (Freud, 1923, p. 241). Therefore, maybe there is nothing in the human being that is purely human? Pure humanity is supposed because there is a human consciousness which raises such a question and it seems cannot fit itself within the id or within the nature; the classifier always needs to be classified above the class. That is the reason why in the 20th century, philosophers were asked to interpret the human being from the point of view of pure humanity.

**Human Being as an “I”**

Now, since history does not lead us to a credible knowledge of man, we should try to recognize human beings, so to speak, face to face, that is to consider a human being as an “I”. Nevertheless, how is possible to understand the human being if not from history? Traditionally, the alternative method to that of historical is the logical one. To comprehend a human being logically means to define the very idea, essence, and eidos of human being.

As it was mentioned above, man or human being was defined as *homo sapiens, homo faber, homo ludens*, etc. But what do these definitions give us from a point of view of exaltation of human being? Or do they promote better living? On the other hand, all these definitions or predicates would not be virtues of man (but would be only part of nature as, for instance, the stomach of a man), if there is no one essential feature, namely freedom, because only with freedom those features become virtues. So, the very human in human being is a freedom first of all. If there is no freedom, then we speak of nature. Like, for instance, when talking about our stomach or nervous system, we must take into account that it is part of nature, not of our “I”, because it does not have any freedom. In principle, it is possible to dispute the position that man is separate from nature. Perhaps human beings are just part of nature, and what we call freedom is merely the consciousness of necessity, as it was commonly thought in the 17th century. But as a thoughtful creature, and moreover, as a perceived creature, the author feels some freedom, which does not seem to be in nature. The freedom of the other, that is, the nature, does not satisfy me as an acting and moral creature. Otherwise, the author cannot be perfected by the will, or would not consider the perfection to be worthwhile.

Both doctrines are defective in terms of foundation, and this is rather a matter of choice, and not of rational choice, but emotional and moral one. Which of these two attitudes should man adopt? Is he/she free and independent or is he/she nothing in heself/herself, and merely the manifestation of another power?

I can never become conscious either of the external powers, by which, in the system of universal necessity, I am determined; nor of my own power, by which, on the system of freedom, I determine myself…. The system of freedom satisfies my heart; the opposite system destroys and annihilates it. (Fichte, 1906, p. 32)
This kind of dignity is the reason why there is a natural tendency in man to claim that there is freedom to act.

And what is freedom? Can we define freedom logically too? One can speak of freedom as an idea and as a reality. The logical method leads to the idea of freedom. In the case of reality, freedom must be unique in the sense that it should not be a pattern, otherwise it will be an imitation of some kind or model of freedom which implies that it is not an inner freedom but a mere reaction. As Rudolf Steiner writes, “Everyone who claims to have grown beyond the kindergarten stage of science appears to know nowadays that freedom cannot consist in choosing, at one’s pleasure, one or other of two possible courses of action” (1916, p. 10). It means that the true freedom comes from the “I” of human being. And “I” is not merely a notion but also experience, emotion, etc. Therefore, speaking of human in human being, we should mean his/her own ego or “I”. And the ego or “I” avoids all the ideas. Ideas are something in general, but we have to experience our own “I” as unique one. As Meister Eckhart has said, only God can say “I”. Here is the ideal for men, to be like God, that is, to say “I”. Lock and Hume also spoke of “I”, arguing that there is no “I” as such, it is merely a whole complex of perceptions; however, as Otto Weininger notices, “There have been no truly great men who were not persuaded of the existence of the ‘I’; a man who denies it cannot be a great man” (1906, p. 164). By the way, this is also the ideal of Nietzsche, which he sang in Zarathustra. His superman is a being who is free from all norms and rules and who wants to be no longer the image and likeness of God, not a godly being, but just himself/herself and nothing else. “God is a conjecture: but I do not wish your conjecturing to reach beyond your creating will. Could you create a God? Then, I pray you, be silent about all Gods! But you could well create the Superman”, says Nietzsche (2006, p. 65). Man considers himself realized, when he feels different to anyone, when he does not find himself in the formulations of human being, for him something always lacks in them.

The ideal “human being” is realized when the Christian view is overturned in the statement: “I, this unique, am the human being”. The conceptual question: “What is the human being?” has then changed into the personal question: “Who is the human being?” With “what” one looks for the concept in order to realize it; with “who” there is no longer any question at all, but the answer present personally in the questioner himself: the question itself answers itself. (Stirner, 2017, p. 377)

Kierkegaard also speaks of the same thing while explaining the temptation and the unique faith of Abraham. At first glance, it is morality that human being keeps a human; but that is only the case in everyday life, and not at marginal situations. Abraham who following the requirement of God was ready to kill his son Isaac, was not morally clean; moreover, he can be considered immoral as any murderer. But he was closer to God than any “ordinary moral man”; and from Abraham, in fact, the “Christian community” begins. Kierkegaard writes:

Faith is precisely this paradox, that the individual as the particular is higher than the universal, is justified over against it, is not subordinate but superior—yet in such a way, be it observed, that it is the particular individual who, after he has been subordinated as the particular to the universal, now through the universal becomes the individual who as the particular is superior to the universal, for the fact that the individual as the particular stands in an absolute relation to the absolute. (1994, pp. 46-47).

And faith is the closest thing to “I”.

**Freedom, Identity, and History**

Continuing our reasoning, we should assert that freedom is a central category, as the reality is. This is not just a publicist statement, since it is based on a German classic tradition—that is, a true person is really free one, otherwise we deal with just a natural organism, as we said above. If we consider freedom as a necessity or
coincidence, we are deprived of a full concept of human being because human being is the creature who can act freely by definition. In Hegel’s words, “the essence of spirit is freedom” (Hegel, 2001, p. 31). Moreover, freedom inevitably exists as a reality in itself: As intermediate illusions hinder the achievement of reality, the same applies to freedom. It is clear that freedom is not directly given to us; many internal realities present themselves to us as freedom. This process can be presented in different terms. If we choose anthroposophic one, we have to say that there are two basic versions of false freedom: Luciferian and Arimanian. In the first case, “I” frees itself from everything and confirms itself as an absolute existence. In the second case, on the contrary, freedom is established outside, and the internal “I” remains non-free.

By the way, the idea of freedom, from this point of view, becomes more cogitative and concrete when it combines with two other adjacent concepts that are identity and history. These three concepts essentially mean the same thing. Putting them in one row is conditioned by many circumstances. First of all, metaphysical reflection on all of them is necessarily born in the case of a problem or crisis. Freedom becomes a topic, since there is a transition from non-freedom to freedom, as a non-free person once aware of his non-freedom. Identity recalls when there is a crisis of identity or the risk to lose it. And you are dealing with history as there is a need to fill in the gap therein.

More substantially, these three are all three sides of the same thing or, in other words, different layers of the same process. From an ontological point of view, first of all, there is a conscious identity, which records its freedom by creating a history. From an historical point of view, historical process extends to its peak, manifests all its inner potential, finds its identity, and becomes a pure and free history; and the history that is being freed from external occasional circumstances becomes a myth, that is, comes out of time and becomes eternal. From an anthropological point of view, a man gets free from internal and external bonds, acquires or reaches his true identity, and builds his own history. If what has been said about history and myth is to transfer to a human realm, we should say that Jesus is a history and Christ is a myth that existed before Jesus. Here is where freedom is identified with identity or we may say selfness. To be oneself means to be free. Furthermore, freedom is not only a negative thing in itself, i.e., freedom from something, but also a positive, freedom for something (for creation, for love, etc.).

And here is the main point. If freedom is the possibility of acting freely, then we can assert with Hegel the “the history of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of freedom” or vice versa. It turns out that freedom is the potential history. In history, the spirit is manifested in human form, and we are intrigued by the true nature of the latter when we take into account that human being is the one who is free, that the human in man is the freedom. As Ortega y Gasset writes, “man has no nature, what he has … is history” (1936, p. 313).

Thereby, if it is not possible learning to be human from history, then one should become a history to be a real human being. To write a history is possible only if you become a history yourself. One can discover all human in himself if he/she becomes a history himself/herself. So every formulation of being a human is just an obstacle to finding yourself and becoming a free creature.

**Conclusion**

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And freedom exists in a possible history or, more rigorously, freedom is a possible history. On the other hand, the spirit in history is manifested in a form human of human being, and the true essence of the latter can be understood if we take into account that man is the one who is free, that the very human in a human being is freedom.

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