

# Psychology, History and Human Rights

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Can it be a surprise that the study of history owes a lot to the work of psychologists? Think of the insights that come from the study of motives for human conduct: psychologists made historians aware that it is far from simple to pinpoint motives unambiguously or that individuals demonstrate a quasi-universal tendency to rationalize their behavior after the fact. The subtle but cardinal distinctions between motive, intention and purpose sharpened the historian's attention to the underestimated phenomenon of unintended consequences. The history of mentalities flourished as a new field once it became clear that not only historical facts matter but also what people once believed about them. And research into "public opinion" or "collective memory" is plainly unthinkable without some basic knowledge of social psychology. Political leadership studies advanced when psychologists developed their perspectives on [wisdom](#). Or take, randomly, the [finding](#) that humans are judgmental from an early age and that even [infants](#) at the age of six months already make value judgments about actions and agents – an insight that helps us better understand how people pass moral judgment – a hot potato for historians.

Psychology did not only deepen our understanding of the conduct of historical figures, but also our grasp of the mind-set of historians themselves, in particular their cognitive illusions. Classics are the memory bias (memories are selective and distorted) and other biases derived from it, such as the "[peak-end rule](#)" (one remembers best the peaks and outcomes of past experiences) and "[duration neglect](#)" (the underestimation of how long experiences last, especially all the boring moments that resemble each other). A most dramatic moment for historians, I find, was the first conceptualization of the [hindsight bias](#) in the mid-1970s. When people act, they usually have several options. But looking backward, historians tend to focus on the option that the former eventually picked. Therefore, they discover patterns everywhere, more than there actually were, and neglect the available options and the role of accident *before* the person decided to choose one course of action. The idea that we understand the patterns of the past makes for compelling stories, but are they true? That arrogant illusion of wisdom by looking backward is our greatest enemy. The existence of the hindsight bias, of outcome knowledge, corrupts historical knowledge at its core. Historians should be grateful to psychologists for mercilessly putting them in a state of eternal vigilance to combat their biases.

There is one lingering prejudice, however, which should be confronted with more tenacity. I refer to what has been called the *social discount rate* previously and is increasingly known as *short-termism* now. Philosopher Derek Parfit described the [social discount rate](#) as the tendency to care less about the effects of one's behavior in the more remote future. The present moral importance of future events, especially benefits and losses, declines at a rate of  $n$  per cent per year. Parfit thought that there were no good reasons for this. And recently, Roman Krznaric, another philosopher, published [The Good Ancestor: How to Think Long](#)

*Term in a Short-Term World*, in which he makes a passionate and well-argued plea to leave the earth behind as good ancestors would do. In the same vein, psychologists have developed ideas about the [arithmetic of compassion](#) and historians have cultivated historical awareness of our predicament through concepts such as [big history](#). But is this enough?

Consider the following two baffling historical facts. Astronomers like Martin Rees have calculated that [the sun](#) is less than halfway through its life: it formed 4.5 billion years ago and it has still 6 billion years to go. Far more time lies ahead than has elapsed up until now: we are not even halfway. So we better start making solid plans for the future. Another startling fact is triggered by the question of how many people have ever lived on earth – incidentally one of the questions most asked on the internet today. Demographer Carl Haub has calculated the answer various times since 1995. He famously [guesstimated](#) that the total number of people who have ever been born since the dawn of humanity is 108 billion. Of these, 7.5 billion are alive and about 100 billion dead. Others have calculated the [number of future people](#) on earth. Even if we look at only the next 50,000 years, the numbers are enormous. If the birth rate over that period stayed the same as it has been in this century, the unborn would count around 6.75 trillion people.

When talking about past and future generations, we are confronted with a deep [philosophical problem about human rights](#). The dead (100 billion) are no more alive and the unborn (6.75 trillion) are not yet alive. This means that they are not human beings but either *past* or *future* human beings. The dead and the unborn are reminiscent of, but ontologically different from, the living. This paradox has one tremendous consequence: because they are not human beings but past or future human beings, the dead and the unborn do *not* have human rights. The fact that the dead and the unborn do not possess and cannot claim human rights, however, does not mean that we do not have duties to them. We have – and these are duties of respect and protection. There is every reason to stretch our care to the many generations before and after us. Past and future generations need guardians to defend their latent interests in the face of capricious short-term policy decisions. There are thousands of problems out there waiting to be solved and we will need all the available brains to solve them and help advance our blue planet a little bit – or, at the very least, not let it crumble away under short-sighted policies. The struggle for human rights takes place [here and now](#), certainly, but it is part of a broader intergenerational framework. This is the only setting that gives real meaning to the expression “humanity at large.”

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