

.. Introduction

.. *Historians are storytellers*, custodians of the past, repositories of collective memory, poetic interpreters of what it is to be human. Whether explaining our present or understanding the past on its own terms, their work critically shapes how the past infuses our present. Apart from this somewhat numinous role, their work also has the power to shape our future by informing debates on subjects like the war on terror, gun control, race, women in science, immigration, and so on. Despite this policy relevance, however, their work so often casts a critical light on the current political order that policymakers often willfully ignore it. While we might continue to strain after a world of policymakers well informed by history, the historian's more potent role in public debate is perhaps in speaking to the public, so that people may exert pressure on their elected representatives.

This has not always been the case, however. For much of the modern period, historians have not been critics but abettors of those in power; history (rather than, say, economics) was considered the ideal course of study for a young man with political ambition. This was the culture depicted, critically, in Alan Bennett's award-winning play set in the 1980s, *The History Boys* (2004).¹ It was a time when history was understood to be about great men, and its study the ideal preparation for young boys aspiring to be great men. "History is the school of statesmanship," in the aphoristic words of the influential Victorian historian of the British empire J. R. Seeley.²

This culture was, especially, but not exclusively, a British culture—as captured by Bennett's play. Historians were prominent among the architects of British power from the eighteenth century until very recently, as both policymakers and advisors to other policymakers; the rule of historians

coincided with the era of British imperialism. The most well-known and captivating historian-policy maker was, of course, Winston Churchill, the prime minister who led his people in their darkest hour and who inspires endless biographical fascination year after year. This was no accident, but an artifact of the sway of a particular historical imagination in the unfolding of empire. During the Enlightenment, history emerged as an ethical idiom for the modern period, endowing historians with outsized policymaking influence, from John Stuart Mill to Churchill. The narrative of the British Empire is, thus, also a narrative of the rise and fall of a particular historical sensibility.

After World War II, during the era of decolonization, the historical discipline was increasingly claimed as a site for protest *against* the powers that be. By the time Bennett's play premiered in 2004, the rule of historians had yielded to this new culture, in which history was an instrument of redemption for the victims of modern history. The discipline changed methodologically; stories of people long marginalized by excessive focus on "great men" began to circulate instead. When the academy was the exclusive playground of white men, it had produced the theories of history and civilization that underwrote imperialism abroad and inequality at home. Certainly, contrary perspectives took root, too. But the inclusion of women and people of color proved critical to the production of new knowledge breaking down those long-dominant narratives. Still, the old ethos maintained its influence in popular forms of history, while the cultural hold of the newer, critical brand of academic history has been compromised by a broader "crisis of the humanities" (amid charges of "overspecialization" against historians themselves).³ And yet, historians' voices are emerging from the margins as debates about apologies, restitution, and reparations relating to the colonial past proliferate around the world.

In this book, I recount the twinned story of the history of empire and the history of history. Britain's imperial career from the era of slavery to the current Brexit crisis depended on the sway of a particular historical sensibility that deferred ethical judgment to an unspecified future time. Meanwhile, anticolonial thinkers from William Blake to Mahatma Gandhi to E. P. Thompson began to articulate alternative, "antihistorical" ethical visions that insisted on ethical accountability in the present—ultimately altering the very purpose and outlook of history itself. In braiding these two strands of intellectual history with the narrative of empire, my hope is to guide us to a more constructive vision of historians' possible public

roles today, as we navigate the detritus of empire in the form of climate crisis, global inequalities, racism, diasporas, demands for reparations, and so on.

The nub of the matter is that this wreckage was, famously, unintended. Modern imperialism promised progress. It was grounded in a vision of history understood as necessarily progress-oriented. That was its justification. For the most part, empire was not the work of villains, but of people who believed they acted conscientiously. Certainly, many Europeans were in it for entirely cynical reasons—loot and adventure—but millions persuaded themselves that it was, truly, a “civilizing mission,” that European conquest of the world was about upliftment, that it was fundamentally liberatory, however impossibly far (or illusory) the horizon of freedom. The British Empire, especially, embodied the apparent ideological contradiction of “liberal imperialism.” But this was in fact an approach to conquest that preemptively insured against ethical doubt: the empire was an exploitative and repressive political formation built by men who often sincerely believed they were in the business of spreading liberty.⁴

Of course, it is a simple reality of the human condition that people of conscience often commit unconscionable acts—unwittingly or willfully, in a moment of fury or haplessly swept up in the tumult of their time, tragically and at times farcically. Even the Enlightenment apostle of reason Immanuel Kant recognized: “Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made.”⁵ It is not as though evil did not exist before the modern period, before empire and the nation, before we began to think historically. But the modern era is notably littered with examples of *well-intentioned* plans going awry, of schemes to improve the human condition ending in disaster.⁶ The planetary crossroads at which we now find ourselves emerges from a particular human folly. Fueling much of human activity and invention since the Enlightenment, the conviction that history is necessarily a story of progress has conveyed us to the brink of disaster. We know about historicism’s complicity in the rise of modern imperialism, how it defined progress through the rhetorical exclusion of “others” from that narrative, so that, as Dipesh Chakrabarty told us two decades ago, “historicism enabled European domination of the world in the nineteenth century.”⁷ What we haven’t understood, however, is *how* historicism did this, not only on the level of an idea of progress or the civilizing mission but, practically speaking, in the realm of imperial decision-making—the ethical implications of this epistemic outlook, why protestations of good

intentions have had such force.⁸ To be sure, the sway of this ethical idiom has never been complete. The adage “The road to hell is paved with good intentions” was coined in this very time, an implicit critique of the idea that ethical judgment depends on future results. Britons used it to express their lingering awareness that good intentions do *not* excuse one from responsibility for the ill results of one’s actions.

Nevertheless, belief in well-meaning liberal empire remains powerfully exculpatory; that old historical imaginary continues to collude in the afterlife of empire. Today there is neither agreement that the empire produced hell nor agreement that protestations of good intentions are an inadequate excuse. Countless anticolonial thinkers and historians have proven the British Empire’s morally bankrupt foundation in racism, violence, extraction, expropriation, and exploitation. India’s anticolonial leader Mohandas Gandhi adopted a nonviolent protest strategy as the empire’s *opposite*: “Let it be remembered,” he wrote in 1921, “that violence is the keystone of the Government edifice.”⁹ But the hold of this much-documented ugly reality remains slippery. According to a 2016 study, 43 percent of Britons believe the empire was a good thing, and 44 percent consider Britain’s colonial past a source of pride. A 2020 study showed that Britons are more likely than people in France, Germany, Japan, and other former colonial powers to say they would like their country to still have an empire.¹⁰ As Britain prepares for a new role in the international order after Brexit, a report on “Renewing UK Intervention Policy” commissioned by the Ministry of Defence explicitly invokes a nostalgic view of the empire to revive the case for intervention: “Because of its imperial past, Britain retains a tradition of global responsibility and the capability of projecting military power overseas.”¹¹ Britons celebrate the virtuous heroism of the abolition movement that ended British participation in the slave trade in 1807, but often at the expense of remembering Britain’s central role in the slave trade until that point and the many forms of bonded labor it exploited thereafter. The record of British humanitarianism submerges the record of British inhumanity. In public memory, redemptive myths about colonial upliftment persistently mask the empire’s abysmal history of looting and pillage, policy-driven famines, brutal crushing of rebellion, torture, concentration camps, aerial policing, and everyday racism and humiliation. Balance sheets attempt to show that the “pros”—trains, dams, the rule of law—outweighed the “cons”—occasional violent excesses, racism—despite the ambiguous impact of many alleged “pros” and the deeply flawed premise that we can

judge an inherently illegitimate and immoral system by anything other than that illegitimacy and immorality. The end of empire, especially, is extolled as a peaceful, voluntary, and gentlemanly transfer of power. The former Labour prime minister Clement Atlee proclaimed in 1960, "There is only one empire where, without external pressure or weariness at the burden of ruling, the ruling people has voluntarily surrendered its hegemony over subject peoples and has given them their freedom."¹² In fact, decolonization of India, Kenya, Malaysia, Cyprus, Egypt, Palestine, and many other colonies entailed horrendous violence—none of which has been formally memorialized or regretted, unlike other modern crimes against humanity, such as the Holocaust and Hiroshima.¹³

We have not arrived at this forgetting and the easy postimperial conscience it enables by accident. Public memory about the British Empire is hostage to myth partly because historians have not been able to explain how to hold well-meaning Britons involved in its construction accountable. But how can we rightfully gainsay the protests of earnest people confident in their moral soundness and in their incapacity for unjust behavior? "Hypocrisy" helps describe but does not help *explain* such human folly. No one thinks they are a hypocrite. And historical analysis framed as the unmasking of hypocrisy acquires a prosecutorial tone that vitiates understanding. Not all rationalizations are cynical and transparent. We have to take the ethical claims of historical actors seriously to understand how ordinary people acting in particular institutional and cultural frameworks can, despite good intentions, author appalling chapters of human history. The mystery here is genuine: How did Britons understand and manage the ethical dilemmas posed by imperialism? To be sure, there is a story about the "banality of evil" to be told—about the automatic, conformist ways in which ordinary people become complicit in inhumanity. But in the case of the British Empire, the bigger story is perhaps that of inhumanity perpetrated by individuals deeply concerned with their consciences, indeed actively interrogating their consciences. How did such avowedly "good" people live with doing bad things? If we can answer this question, we will be able to solve much of the mystery about the lack of bad conscience about empire among Britons today.

The quip most frequently invoked to depict the empire in charmingly forgiving terms is the Victorian historian J. R. Seeley's line that the British acquired it in "a fit of absence of mind," that they were reluctant imperialists saddled, providentially, with the burden of global rule. But it was not

through absence of *mind* so much as absence, or management, of *conscience* that Britain acquired and held its empire. What we call “good intentions” were often instances of conscience management—a kind of denial—necessary to the expansion of imperialism and industrial capitalism in the modern age. The focus on intentions presumes active, unmediated conscience. We might instead ask how conscience was *managed*, what enabled individuals engaged in such crimes to believe and claim that they were enacting good intentions. Britons did this in a manner that has made historical reckoning with imperialism more complicated than reckoning with, say, the obviously monstrous aims of Nazism. This is ironic given a long-standing diplomatic discourse about “Perfidious Albion”—the idea that the British are natively dishonorable, prone to betray promises (i.e. good intentions). But it was partly the burden of this stereotype that provoked loud protestations of good intentions, which many now credit more than the evidence of their destructive impact. The claim of “good intentions” that *enabled* the violent effects of empire cannot be invoked to redeem them. It would be akin to arguing that greater discretion about their murderous intentions would have somewhat redeemed the Nazis. Nazi objectives were openly murderous—the “cleansing” of Europe—but the ideology of liberal empire required respectable cover, and lasted longer because of it. The real value of claims of good intentions lies in what they reveal about how Britons managed their own conscience about the iniquities of empire.

Historians will continue to expose the hypocrisies of imperialism, but here I want to show how certain intellectual resources, especially a certain kind of historical sensibility, allowed and continue to allow many people to avoid perceiving their ethically inconsistent actions—their hypocrisy—in the modern period. Culture, in the form of particular imaginaries of time and change, shaped the practical unfolding of empire.¹⁴ This is a book about how the historical discipline helped make empire—by making it ethically thinkable—and how empire made and remade the historical discipline. We are looking at how the culture around narrating history shaped the way people participated in the making of history—that area of rich overlap created by the two meanings of “history”: what happened, and the narrative of what happened. Essentializing representations of other places and peoples laid the cultural foundation of empire, but historical thinking empowered Britons to *act* on them.¹⁵ The cultural hold of a certain

understanding of history and historical agency was not innocent but designedly complicit in the making of empire.

I offer this narrative, not as an attack on the historical discipline (whose tools are what allow me to write this book), but to recall how it has figured in the making of our world and how the world it made changed it over time, and to defend its relevance to making new history in the present. Many scholars have tussled over the positive and negative impacts of Enlightenment values and the provincial and universal origins of those values. I want to look under the hood and see how certain notions of history nurtured during the Enlightenment “worked” in the real world and how successive generations have adapted those notions to the moral demands of their time.

In key moments in the history of the British Empire covered in this book, Britons involved in the empire appeased and warded off guilty conscience by recourse to certain notions of history, especially those that spotlighted great men helpless before the will of “Providence.” This was not some amoral notion about the ends justifying the means. Machiavellianism is about political gain as its own end, without scruple. My protagonists were deeply concerned with ethical judgment but believed it was impossible without sufficient passage of time. Their understanding of conscience was grounded in different ways in notions of historical change. In the modern era, competing ideas about how such change happens shaped understandings of human agency and thus personal responsibility—the capacity, and thus complicity, of humans in shaping their world.

Much of the “modernity” of the modern period lies in a new self-consciousness about conscience. I don’t mean to imply a secularization of thinking about conscience; in some instances, the historical sensibility informed, supplemented, complemented, or was grafted on to religiously based notions of conscience. (Nor is this a book about dissent or state protection of conscience.) The point is that people were thinking about and managing conscience by reference to proliferating discourses about human history—about how and why history evolves.

For instance, liberal theories of history envisioned “progress” brought about by the will, usually, of great men (chosen and guided by Providence). Marxist theories instead attributed heroic agency to the proletariat (and, to be fair, the bourgeoisie). Both were imbued with certain presumptions about race and economic progress. Such theories of history, carried around

in a nineteenth-century Briton's mind, were motivating—galvanizing the exercise of agency—and exonerating insofar as they invoked higher ultimate ends or “context”—the way circumstances or the *needs* of history constrained agency and thus personal responsibility. My interest is in the cultural force of such notions; the neurological and philosophical understanding of intention and agency comprise a vast terrain of knowledge beyond this scope.

Of course, people also adapt their sense of history to the needs of conscience: an eighteenth-century plantation owner in Barbados might self-servingly celebrate his personal, entrepreneurial agency in transforming his land into an economic powerhouse, giving short shrift to the government policies and inherited wealth that in fact enabled his success. Fast-forward to 1836, after the end of slavery, and we might find his son equally self-servingly downplaying his personal capacity to ensure his continued prosperity without governmental reparations for his loss of property in slaves. The notion that change depended only on individual entrepreneurial prowess was now inconvenient. The vice of historical change in which he was caught did not stem his greed but did broaden his historical imagination so that he could perceive the role of circumstances more than his father could.

I began to perceive the link between conscience management and the historical imagination with a sudden epiphany about the protagonist of my previous book, *Empire of Guns: The Violent Making of the Industrial Revolution* (2018). The most important eighteenth-century British gun-maker was Samuel Galton. He was a Quaker, perhaps the group most associated with questions of conscience in modern Britain. As I recounted in that book, he defended his business to his fellow Quakers in 1796 by arguing that there was nothing he could do in his time and place that would not in some way be related to war—that was the nature of the British economy at the time. I used this insight to assemble a new narrative of the industrial revolution: Galton was telling us that war drove industrial activity in the West Midlands in his time. But was it true that he actually could do nothing else? On later reflection, I realized that his thinking revealed the power of historical arguments in assuaging his conscience. He *believed* that he could do nothing else, given “the situation in which Providence” had placed him.¹⁶ A historically determined reality, in his mind, constrained his desire to fulfill his promises as a Quaker. As it turns out, his logic echoed emerging Enlightenment understandings of history as a system

of ethical thought; Galton's obligations as a Quaker forced him to reveal the workings of cultural notions that were increasingly pervasive. Indeed, they likely underwrote the Quaker sect's own quiet acceptance of his family's business for nearly a century until that point. So began my thinking about this book.

I discerned then that most of my work has been about people preoccupied with history. My first book, *Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain's Covert Empire in the Middle East* (2008), was about a group of scholar-spies in the Middle East, who thought with and through history. I have written also about the alternative historical outlooks of twentieth-century South Asian poets coping with the Partition of British India in 1947 and their influence on the making of British social history, all the while engaging in a recurring effort to articulate the role of historians in public debate today.¹⁷ From my earliest engagement with the discipline, I have grappled inarticulately with the feeling that it was somehow deeply implicated in the colonial history that had shaped me and that I sought to understand—that particular ideas of history, conscience, and agency are intertwined in our habit of understanding the formerly colonized world with balance sheets of empire. Through my work as a historian over the last twenty-odd years, I have finally been able to articulate that discomfort in this book.

In my previous books, I serendipitously homed in on two critical moments in which new ideas about history shaped British understandings of their agency as empire-builders. The material in Chapters 1 and 4 of this book approaches those episodes from a new and wider vantage point, towards the new end of tracing the way evolving ideas about history shaped the unfolding of the British Empire. The quietly shared preoccupation of my previous work has become clear to me over time, and this book distills a synthesis of what I have been trying to say all along. I have long perceived that “conscience” was at the heart of my work as a historian, all my efforts to understand the violence of empire. But only recently have I discerned the common way in which historical thinking shaped ethical decision-making in the distinct and critical moments I have studied.

My geographical coverage in the story that follows is uneven; so, too, is my coverage of particular thinkers. This is by no means an exhaustive account of the discipline, the empire, or the discipline's role in the empire. The episodes recounted here were not the only or the most important moments of scandal or uneasy imperial conscience; management of conscience

was endemic to an enterprise based on a permanent dynamic of oppression and resistance. These stories do, however, represent pivotal moments in the history of empire—expansion, consolidation, containment, reinvention, and decolonization. They represent tortured moments in which the management of conscience became very difficult, scandals that momentarily exposed the dark reality of empire to the glare of public scrutiny and forced an explicit reckoning with conscience. They are culturally, emotionally, temporally, geographically, and topically distinct, but connected by the thread of liberal empire. Together they allow us to explore how importunate rhetoric about good historical intentions persistently stifled awareness of the destructive nature of modern imperialism. Stringing these disparate events into a single story of conscience and history wrings new kinds of truth from them about how the modern historical imagination shaped the unfolding of empire.

The debate about how and whether intentions matter in the biggest crimes against humanity typically pits crimes of the Right—the Nazis—against crimes of the Left—the Soviet Union.¹⁸ In fact, the crimes of the Right and the Left, which were both imperious and imperial in nature, were rooted in a common ethical vision grounded in historical thinking. We know crimes were committed in the name of nationalism and imperialism in the modern period. But nations and empires exercised such persuasive power because they were the objects of a deeply influential mode of ethical thought: historicism.

To be sure, historians were crucial to proving the case against empire, especially (but not only) after the turn of the twentieth century. But even then they did not dispense altogether with the discipline's old narratives and categories. History was remade in the crucible of twentieth-century anticolonialism, but the discipline has yet to come to terms with its role as time's monster. Backlash against its remaking, such as the recent nostalgic conference on "Applied History" at Stanford's Hoover Institution, exemplifies our continued cultural attachment to the historical imagination that drove the making of empire.¹⁹ Of course, we want policymakers and politicians today to think more historically, to be mindful of the past, but that reengagement requires first understanding the damaging ways in which policymakers have drawn on historical thinking in the past and the significance, and limitations, of their subsequent estrangement from the discipline.²⁰

Because the historical sensibility that enabled imperialism is still intact, despite the seeming end of empire, we have been unable to sustain a con-

sensus around the moral case against empire. Understanding how historical thinking conspired in imperialism offers a way out of this impasse. By uncovering how ideas of history influenced the actual unfolding of imperial history, we might dispel the perceived ambiguity around the moral case against empire *and* feel our way towards new modes of historical thinking less likely to blind us to the crimes of empire.

How we remember the British Empire matters. It shapes how we assess the seeming “failures” of postcolonial countries to “move on” from their colonial past, how we make sense of Britain’s efforts to reinvent its place in the world in the current Brexit crisis, and how we think about imperial activity today.²¹ The stakes for clearing up the moral fog that clings to imperialism are especially high in the formerly colonized world, where the moral case against empire encounters stubborn ambivalence despite the history of anticolonial struggle. The post-independence Indian government never really questioned the moral and intellectual underpinnings of the colonial project from which it emerged. This is as evident in its developmentalist commitments and imperial subjugation of borderlands as in its meek attitude towards securing amends for the historical wrongs of colonialism. Such ambivalence is, of course, the very mark of that state’s “post-colonial” nature, the seemingly incurable hangover of colonialism. In Indian laments about the country’s embarrassing failure to “catch up” after seventy years of independence lurks the fear that British assessments of their independent potential were true.

Through a series of stories about empire, we will grasp how understandings of conscience, derived from a historical sensibility, mattered in the unfolding of modern history.²² The major forces of that history—imperialism, industrial capitalism, nationalism—were justified by notions of progress and thus liable to rationalizations about noble ends justifying ignoble means. Even those who embraced such utilitarian calculations depended on new intellectual and cultural resources that emerged to manage the conscience. Key among them was the evolving discipline of history. Instead of taking conscience and its exercise as essentially human qualities and therefore timeless, we are probing their historically contingent nature. Attending to the little voice, to conscience, has depended not only on conscientiousness but also on context. In situations of unequal power and amid legacies of imperial paternalism, love itself has led to ethical travesties.

.. The Progress of War

“History has its eyes on you.”

—George Washington to Alexander Hamilton,
in Lin-Manuel Miranda, *Hamilton* (2015)

.. Let us take “ethics” to mean the moral principles, the concepts of right and wrong, that guide a person’s behavior, including a person’s sense of the capacity to act, what we call “free will.” Conscience is a cognitive process of rational and emotional responses to an act or situation based on that value system. Science can tell us much about its genetic and cultural foundations, but the latter requires historical explanation, too. We are occupied here with that cultural quotient. Before the modern era and the introduction of historical systems of ethical accountability, we had access to many others, which remain with us. Most were religious, and most religious traditions assume their value system to be inherent in all humans, that is, not culturally or historically specific. Many religious systems of ethical accountability took narrative form, as history does. Humans are hardwired for narrative: We tell stories to make sense of existence, and among the stories we tell are those that encompass ourselves as worldly actors, that explain how and why our own lives unfold the way they do, that tell us what stirs the cauldron of change.

Take, for instance, cosmic theories of agency, like astrology, which tell us that the positions and movements of heavenly bodies determine our nature and future. Human agency is tightly constrained in such theories;

we are pawns in a cosmic game. A believer in astrology, armed with his birth chart, would behave differently, and have a different sense of his agency, from someone ignorant of his position in that cosmic tapestry. There are several possibilities: He may be more passive, waiting for the stars to shape his destiny as predicted. Or he may use the chart as a guide on how best to cocreate with the cosmic energies at work in his life and in the world. Or, if he has kept the chart in a drawer and forgotten it, it may belatedly help him cope when his independently motivated exercise of his agency meets with defeat: the consolation that he has not failed but that it was simply not in the stars. He is aware that he is in a story whose action cannot exceed the frame made by the positions of the planets and stars at his birth; the chart shapes the script he imagines his actions to fulfill. It both shapes his sense of agency and provides *ex post* rationalizations of his actions and their outcomes.

Beyond the stars, for many, God is shaping how and why change happens, how life unfolds. Divine intervention—the act of God—is the ultimate force before which human agency is nothing, is annihilated. It has enormous powers to clear the conscience, the clearest basis on which to claim “It wasn’t me.” A belief in reincarnation might, on the other hand, mold our actions by challenging us to imagine how they might catch up with us: If we act without empathy towards someone today, will we pay karmically in the next life? Is my destiny inextricably linked to the fate of others?¹ Other religious traditions promise ethical accountability in an otherworldly afterlife—heaven or hell. The sway of original sin and the capacity for free will and redeeming grace preyed on the conscience of major Christian philosophers, most notably Saint Augustine. In the eschatological worldview of many sects within the Abrahamic tradition, the final account, Judgment Day, will come at the end of times, the last day of history. The testaments that tell us all this are related *as* histories—chronicles of human events in which the divine is an active participant.

In Hindu thought, guidance on human agency emerges from a mythical prelude to the era of human history. Our current era, the Kali Yuga, roughly coinciding with the timescale of the historical discipline, is part of a cycle of four yugas, or epochs. It is an age of darkness and destruction and relatively short human life that will be followed by a return of the Satya Yuga, an age of truth and perfection, and the cycle will continue. This yuga began in the fourth century BCE upon the end of the war recounted in the cyclical mythology of the epic poem known as the *Mahabharata*. This story

of the previous yuga includes a battlefield conversation between the warrior Arjuna and Lord Krishna, in the role of charioteer. The chapters that make up this conversation comprise the *Gita*, a guide to the virtuous exercise of agency. Arjuna is unsettled at the idea that the war demands that he kill members of his own family. He cannot bear the idea of being responsible for the deaths of those he loves. Krishna persuades him that he must fulfill his duty as a warrior and engage the enemy, regardless. He must act out of duty without regard to consequence. Here is a path to absolution of conscience, an escape from bad karma, passed from a previous yuga to ours as a cultural inheritance, swept from myth into mortal, historical time, where countless people have drawn on it in decisions about when and how to act.

Along with such religious, mythical, and astrological understandings of agency, we have inherited the idea that the worldly narrative of history can guide the exercise of agency. It emerged in the eighteenth century from the Enlightenment search for a universal system of ethical evaluation based on reason that might exist apart from both organized religious belief and the internal impulses that signal the workings of conscience—a more worldly, if not secular, ethics.² History became central to the Enlightenment episteme of ethics, or “moral philosophy,” the branch of philosophy focused on systematizing concepts of right and wrong conduct. In his *Letters on the Study and Use of History* (written in 1735 and published in 1752), the Tory politician and man of letters Lord Bolingbroke explained history’s uses as moral philosophy: “These are certain general principles, and rules of life and conduct, which always must be true, because they are conformable to the invariable nature of things. He who studies history as he would study philosophy, will soon distinguish and collect them, and by doing so will soon form to himself a general system of ethics and politics on the surest foundations, on the trial of these principles and rules in all ages, and on the confirmation of them by universal experience.”³ The evolution of the work of the Scottish moral philosopher Adam Smith offers a useful example of the eighteenth-century gravitation towards history as a system of moral judgment. His first attempt at explaining moral sentiments with the 1759 version of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* was almost entirely unhistorical. Smith expressed the experience of moral judgment primarily by recourse to visual metaphors about the internal eye, seeing inside. However, over the thirty years that Smith spent revising it, the text became profoundly historical. By 1790, it was as much about

observing outside events: "It asserted a sequence over time in moral judgment, in which individuals start by judging other people, and then judge themselves," explains the historian Emma Rothschild. Smith piled in more and more "illustrations" from history showing the experience of moral judgment, explicitly noting history's uses in moral reflection, the way we absorb ethical values by imaginative connection with lives in the past. For him, writes Rothschild, moral sentiments were "an experiment in historical observation, and historical imagination." Observation of one's own society, in one's own time and place, might yield only a parochial rather than universal morality; history insured against this risk by offering illustrations from the lives of the great.⁴

Smith's turn to history as a mode of moral reflection was the product of the philosophical universe in which he moved. His closest associates, like his fellow Scotsman David Hume, were producing works of history. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant was most likely familiar with Smith's work.⁵ In 1784, he, too, described history's potential as a guide to moral action in his "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Point of View." He explicitly intended this philosophy of history to help history reach the cosmopolitan end it theorized. It would proleptically guide history's unfolding along the very lines it described: Among Kant's avowed motives in attempting his philosophical history was that it might "direct the ambitions of sovereigns and their agents" towards contributing to the goal of world citizenship as "the only means by which their fame can be spread to later ages." In short, rulers might better serve history with an eye towards history's judgment of them.⁶ Like Smith, he anticipated that their own encounter with historical accounts of earlier governments' contributions towards the goal would nurture their awareness of history's prospective judgment of themselves. And his very narrating of this "idea" would help it come true. It did not perhaps even matter whether the story ever came true, whether humankind achieved its cosmopolitan purpose; Kant offered it partly to prompt ethical action now by goading political figures to act as if history had its eyes on them (as his contemporary George Washington is imagined to remind Alexander Hamilton in the epigraph to this chapter). Moral sentiments now depended on observing oneself internally, observing others in the past, *and* being aware of future observation of oneself. As one scholar summarizes, "Philosophical history thus functions like the lives of the saints in the Catholic church."⁷ This was history's new power as a system of ethical accountability.

Up to this point, “history” had connoted a story or narrative, such as an account of a battle or journey. The idea of history as “something that equally comprises past and future as states of a continuous subject, so that we may speak of *the* history, of history as such,” emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century.⁸ Like religious systems of ethical thought, history in this new incarnation had its idols: As Kant’s preoccupation with sovereigns suggests, it was, expressly, an ethical system whose sacred object was the nation. In the eighteenth century, the meaning of “nation” changed “from a fact of nature to a product of political will”⁹—something that could be made by historically minded men like Washington. Hume, author of the monumentally successful six-volume *History of England* (1754–1762), confided to his publisher in 1770, “I believe this is the historical Age and this the historical Nation.”¹⁰ The imagined community of the nation possessed a worldly past narratable in secular time.¹¹ How did history come to acquire this power in this moment? A full account of the history of history is beyond the scope of this book; the following sketch is telescopic but necessary to understanding how the eighteenth-century embrace of history as a system of ethical thought came to fit alongside other, inherited modes of ethical accountability.

Like most Enlightenment thinkers who saw themselves as continuing the work of inquiry and illumination of the classical era, historians traced their intellectual lineage to the ancient Greek authors Thucydides and Herodotus. The latter was a fifth-century BCE historian of the Greco-Persian wars of that century. He conceived of divine and human agency as interrelated, and his history was laced with fable and ethnographic material.¹² In this sense, the worldly discipline of history emerged from the ancient swirl of poetic myth, texts like the *Mahabharata* and the *Odyssey* that defy easy categorization as fact or fiction, theological texts or humanistic artifacts. Thucydides followed in the same century; but in his account of the Peloponnesian War between Sparta and Athens, this Athenian general explicitly set out to dispense with myth and divine agency. He is taken as the father of the modern idea of history as a series of causes and effects that might be explained without invocation of divine or supernatural intervention in order to reveal timeless truth about human affairs.

Thucydides saw the contest between Sparta and Athens as a universal history—the contest between barbarism and civilization played out within the Greek world. He asks whether justice has power in the world. Athens is unapologetically imperialistic. The Athenians’ assumption is that no di-

vine powers enforce justice by rewarding the just and punishing the unjust; there is no moral accountability for the exercise of agency. Self-interest alone must guide action. Sparta, seemingly altruistically, takes on the cause of liberating Greek cities from Athenian tyranny. In fact, Thucydides says, the Spartans fought out of fear of Athens's growing power. They, too, violate sacred oaths in pursuit of this self-interest; they hypocritically maintain their own hidden slave empire at home. Between Sparta and Athens, it is unclear which power behaves with greater inhumanity. Sparta, confident of the morality of its cause, presumes all opponents to be unjust, swiftly condemning them. The Athenians, without this presumption of justness, instead perceive all as acting out of necessity in pursuit of their own interest and do not therefore morally condemn those who oppose them. But this amoral posture does not serve them nearly as well as even disingenuous moral commitments serve the Spartans in the contest; human nature simply proves too unreasonable. Thucydides's account ends abruptly, twenty years into the twenty-six-year war, with the Athenians considerably diminished but still hopeful.¹³ Yet, ultimately, Sparta prevailed. The Athenians surrender to arrogance, rage, vengeance, and suspicion in ways that do not further their interests. In their certainty that they *deserved* imperial success by virtue of their superiority, they, too, implicitly believed in justice. They are not, then, as amoral or realist as they imagine themselves to be.

This timeless truth is, paradoxically, revealed only thanks to the passage of time. In this seemingly secular account focused on questions of ethical judgment, the judge of virtue is not God but time. In most systems of ethical accountability, the morally virtuous choice is evident in the moment itself, even if justice—punishment or reward—may arrive later, in the afterlife. But Thucydides gives us the notion that “history,” or time itself, *vindicates* virtuous actions whose virtue may not be apparent in the moment itself. It is not obvious, *prima facie*, whether the ethical orientation of the Athenians or that of the Spartans is superior; only with the passage of time and the ultimate Spartan victory does it become clear that the Spartan outlook was the right one. History thus becomes, in this text, a system of ethical accountability in itself; the end of a historical narrative framed around a contest was a kind of secular Judgment Day that revealed the ethical merit of the sides involved. It *turned out* in the end that Athens was wrong. Time showed this, eventually. There may be no necessary relationship between goodness and victory, but the triumph of good

fulfills a certain *narrative* necessity common to many systems of ethical accountability.

Different conceptions of history followed. The Stoics embraced a cyclical view of history more akin to Hindu conceptions. Christian theology gave rise to theodicies that attempted to reconcile the existence of evil in the world with the existence of God. In that context, philosophers like Saint Augustine found compelling the idea that history was ultimately progressive, leading to an eschatological end—apocalypse and Judgment Day. Medieval chronicles, on the other hand, were an exercise in fairly pragmatic historical record-keeping in western Europe. No doctrinal structure was imposed on them; they did not look for meaning in the passage of time. The idea that this was a time of “the Crusades,” a Christian response to Muslim incursion on Christian lands, was a later, modern invention.¹⁴ So, too, were narratives that cast Iberian explorers in the New World as latter-day crusaders continuing the struggle to take the peninsula back from the “Moors.” In fact, they were desperately searching for new commercial outlets (profiting from a technological edge in navigation cultivated in Moorish Spain) after the 1453 fall of Christian Constantinople shut Western Christendom out of old trade routes.

It was the Reformation that launched a retrospective search for meaning in past events. Protestant theologian-historians looked for and found God’s hand in history.¹⁵ The very rupture of Reformation fueled the notion that they were at an epochal turning point. Martin Luther’s perception that the Church had departed over time from its scriptural foundations was an argument about history framed within biblical time. Viewing the rupture as providential also helped justify it. Sixteenth-century Protestant chroniclers did not apply this prophetic view of history only to the Church but also to events beyond the reach of the Christian world in time and space. Theologians like Philip Melancthon supplied retrospective meaning to medieval chronicles by attaching forewords to new editions, in which they affirmed that history shows how God rewards and punishes earthly kingdoms. Periodization—the search for turning points in a meaningful structure headed towards the final moment, the eschaton—emerged as a Protestant passion. Catholic thinkers did not embrace a dramatic historical narrative of decline and recovery but the continual march of the true Church. Sixteenth-century accounts of explorer-missionary-conquistadors did, however, bequeath the modern age early templates for great-man history.

The tumultuous religio-political struggles of seventeenth-century England informed and were informed by the millenarian Protestant outlook, the expectation of the imminent eruption of God's power in the world.¹⁶ To Puritans, the Reformation had not gone far enough, forcing the revolution and civil wars of the 1640s. These ideas encouraged a willingness to entertain change to political arrangements. As the historian David Como's work shows, English thinkers who wrote about the "common liberties" that we take as the essence of secular democracy did so while articulating apocalyptic notions about their time. Their capacity to dream up novel political and social arrangements depended on their faith that Christ's kingdom was about to come, that human governance might be perfected in line with the perfection of God's will.

This early modern ferment of religio-historical thought left a deep imprint on Enlightenment ideas of history. Cyclical notions of history did not disappear entirely, but history came to be understood as linear and irreversible and, especially, progressive. Classical works of history recovered during the Renaissance, thanks to Muslim preservation of those works, were appropriated into this new understanding. The works of Thucydides and Herodotus were claimed as the foundational texts for a discipline that was now all about telling the stories of nations, especially through the lives of their political makers. These narratives conferred legitimacy on national leaders and national claims to sovereignty, going well beyond earlier narratives tracing the genealogical and divine descent of individual sovereigns to substantiate their claims to rule.¹⁷ In Britain, legitimizing the national project doubled with legitimizing the imperial one, beginning as it did with incorporation of the "four nations" of the British Isles (the Scots, Welsh, Irish, and English) into a new British "nation." Though both Thucydides and Herodotus framed their works as narratives of the contest between barbarism and civilization, the geographical assignment of barbarism to the Persian East and civilization to more westerly Greece in Herodotus's account would become foundational to British historicism; it began with and depended on the dichotomy of East and West. Indeed, as we shall see throughout this book, European philosophers' ideas about moral action were crucially shaped by orientalist engagement with alternative understandings of agency encountered abroad.

Thus, even as eighteenth-century historians adopted Thucydides's view of history as an arena of human action, they did not dispense altogether

with God.¹⁸ Instead they theorized new understandings of God's Providence. In 1710, the German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz fused a belief in the contingent nature of history with his belief in the idea that "God nevertheless exercises providential care."¹⁹ God chooses among contingencies created by man or nature. Those contingent events are thus both accidental and chosen at once. God does not cause events but chooses among randomly occurring variations. As the literary scholar Catherine Gallagher explains, this twist on providential history created room for imagining the effects were God to choose alternative contingencies. There might be other "possible worlds." The accidents of history thus illuminated the process of divine planning. God's consciousness included countless unrealized contingencies. By speculating about (necessarily inferior) other possible worlds, we gain a clearer view of Providence's hand in our world.²⁰

Leibniz's meditation on history was part of a work titled *Theodicy*, a term he coined to refer to the effort to understand why a good God permits evil in the world. In this book, we are trying to understand why good people do bad things, but he, like Augustine and other philosophers, asked why a good God tolerates bad things. His theodicy rested on the notion that our world may be imperfect but was at least guaranteed by Providence to be the best among all possible worlds. No better world must be possible according to His lights. God may be omnipotent and omniscient, but his human creations are limited; they will act erringly. The evil in the world is the necessary consequence of this metaphysical imperfection, existing so that humans might seek redemption and perceive true good. In short, the methods of modern historical thought emerged as part of an effort to make ethical sense of a world still understood to be divinely enchanted. But it was enchanted in a different way than the ancient world: The gods of antiquity acted directly in the world; the modern Christian cosmos relegated God to a supernatural realm distinct from rather than entwined with a "natural" realm governed by its own laws.²¹

And yet those laws were also divinely ordained—at first. In his 1784 essay, Kant theorized history as deterministic, destined to end in a federation of republican states at peace. His philosophy was chiliastic, he owned, "but not Utopian" since (as we have seen) it counted on itself to help the millennium come to pass.²² Providence unfolds in human history itself, not only in sacred history (as it does for Augustine).²³ For Kant, natural laws must be guiding human evolution, precisely because of the flawed nature—or "crooked timber"—of humanity: No philosopher could find conscious

individual purpose behind the malice and folly that guided men in their “great drama”; he perforce must conclude that some “natural purpose” drove “this idiotic course of things human.” The need for meaning thus arises out of Christian belief in the fallen nature of man, but, as the philosopher Rüdiger Bittner explains, “Kant does not re-sell Christian thought under a philosophical wrapping. He erects a philosophy that is to allay worries induced by Christianity.”²⁴ He is pessimistic about the rationality of individuals, but optimistic about reason’s efficacy in humankind’s long-run evolution.²⁵ For him, “reason cannot develop fully within the lifetime of any individual, but only gradually in the species as a whole,” one scholar explains.²⁶ Human perfection might be the end of history rather than a supernatural end; the species might be perfectible in the long run, if not the individual.²⁷ All men are headed towards this end, unbeknownst even to themselves. They exercise free will—agency—and yet, unwittingly, act “as if following some guiding thread,” furthering progress towards that end of history “even if they would set little store by it if they did know it.”²⁸ The guiding thread of universal reason is the work of “Nature—or, better, . . . Providence.” Man’s unsocial, or evil, propensities generate antagonism in society, driving each to achieve status within it; man’s “selfish pretensions” fuel his creativity.²⁹ Evil thus produces good, dialectically. Human history simply *must* fulfill some such immanent narrative structure; it cannot be without meaning. Without faith in such redeeming purpose, Kant explained, so much of human history would seem such an “unceasing reproach” to the “majesty and wisdom of Creation” that we would turn from it in disgust and hope for meaning only in another world. Kant’s philosophy of history was in this sense an “expression of rational hope,” writes the philosopher Manfred Kuehn. The Last Judgment was supposed to reward right and wrong, but Kant asks us not to look for meaning in another world and rather to rely on history to reveal that truth. The modern effort to sweep religion into its own sphere thus created a space for a secular ethics that depended critically on a historical imagination.

In Birmingham, England, the Dissenting clergyman and Enlightenment philosopher Joseph Priestley shared these views. Early on, his 1788 *Lectures on History* reproduces Bolingbroke’s description of history’s usefulness in forming a system of ethics. Priestley was certain that proper study of history would always vindicate virtue and prove the folly of vice: “So consistent is the order of Divine Providence, that, if the scheme be fairly and completely represented, we may depend upon it that nothing

will be exhibited from which it may be justly concluded, that vice is eligible upon the whole." Thus, history "*must* have an effect that is favourable to virtue." Priestley's work was also a theodicy: He affirms that by imagining the other possible worlds that might have been, we will come to recognize the rightness of God's decisions in shaping the world as it was. If there seemed to be evil in the world, such historical imagining showed that "all evils lead to, and terminate in, a greater good."³⁰ As Catherine Gallagher puts it, Priestley saw history as a "large-scale mechanism of incremental betterment, which makes use of the very ills it ultimately overcomes."³¹ His theory of history was a halfway house between Leibniz's theory of divinely controlled contingency and the nineteenth-century German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel's secular dialectical philosophy of history. To him, God's goodness was evident in the general rule of human development *over time*, not in the everyday particulars of human life. Thus, he concludes, the study of history will compel us to look upon all events positively, which in itself will cultivate our virtue: "The more we study history . . . the more thoroughly shall we be satisfied with our situation and connexions, the more will our gratitude to the wise and kind author of the universe be inflamed, and the more desirous shall we be to promote, by our conduct, and by methods of operation, of which we are able to judge, that end, which we perceive the Divine Being is pursuing, though by methods of operation of which we are not always competent judges, and which, therefore, we ought not to attempt to imitate." He calls on readers to practice ordinary virtue and to defer judgment on seemingly vicious happenings: "Let the plain duties of morality be our rule of life. We see and experience their happy effects. But let us acquiesce in the Divine conduct, when we see him producing the same good and glorious ends, by means which are apt at first to alarm our narrow apprehensions, on account of their seeming to have a contrary tendency." He does not see this as a moral double standard but simply a temporalizing of ethical judgment, an acknowledgment of an ethical quotient that only history can reveal. For great progressive events were often "brought about contrary to the intention of the persons who were the chief instruments of them, and by the very means which were intended to produce a contrary effect." This is an early version of what Hegel would call the "cunning of reason," styled here as the cunning of God. Priestley thus advises the historian explicitly to "attend to every instance of improvement, and a better state of things being brought about, by the events which are presented to him in history,

and let him ascribe those events to an *intention* in the Divine Being to bring about that better state of things by means of those events; and if he cannot see the same benevolent tendency in all other appearances, *let him remain in suspense with regard to them.*"³²

Eighteenth-century thinkers rationalized trade, driven by self-interest, productive of luxury and fraud, as a "necessary evil" for the sake of the nation's progress.³³ But by mid-century, war, so central to the making of the British nation, became *the* testing ground for ethics for Enlightenment thinkers invested in the idea that reason, rather than violence and emotion, lit the path of progress. Of course, war has in many times and places been understood as the proving ground of ethical merit. In medieval European chronicles, it was understood as a contest of good and evil. Its outcome revealed which side was just and virtuous, favored by God.³⁴ This idea remained influential in the modern period: The British interpreted their defeat by the American colonies in 1783 as a sign of providential disfavor, proof of their compromised virtue. A similar moral vocabulary continues to frame discussions of the world wars, Cold War conflicts like Vietnam, and the war on terror today. In the battlefield context of the *Gita*, however, it is not clear that a particular "side" in the conflict is destined to win because of superior virtue. Rather, war is the testing ground of the ethical exercise of agency. The battlefield functions as the moral testing ground for the individual warrior—the account is mytho-history but also an allegory for any situation of moral confusion. Similarly, though the parties in the Peloponnesian War laid competitive claim to the favor of the gods, Thucydides expressly denied the obvious or automatic moral superiority of either side or the practical superiority of a morally infused outlook at all. "Higher standards" were a luxury of peacetime, he wrote. War nurtured savage instincts: people "do things the wrong way round," thinking only after acting.³⁵ In the age of Enlightenment, however, the question was different—not whether war would reveal the relative justness of the combating parties or whether soldiers would act ethically in war, but the ethical status of war itself: Was it something that could or even should be resisted? This was a question of pressing practical consequence in Britain, a polity almost continually at war in the eighteenth century. On the one hand, the liberal moral philosopher Adam Smith stipulated peace as the condition of progress, but many thinkers considered war a historical necessity towards that end of peace and progress, the working of some natural law that well-meaning humans might only

futilely attempt to resist. Indeed, even Smith's work indulged this idea, as we shall see.

Priestley discerned the challenge that the seemingly perpetual "state of war" posed to the perception of divine beneficence. He offered the assuring counterfactual that those who died in war might have died from disease anyway; at least, "provided posterity be in any respect better for the war, the lives lost in it were very well lost." Class snobbery offered further solace: Considering the sort of people who made up "our armies," Priestley was confident that "in no other way could they have done their country so much service." His judgments stemmed here from the presumption that "their country"—the nation—was the obvious object of history's progress. In this light, war, far from a regrettable evil and the cause of needless suffering, was a powerful mechanism of historical change. Most especially, it was a primary engine of scientific discovery: The "salutary alarms of war . . . roused the activity, and excited the ingenuity, of men." They made things that found peaceful application after war, too. Without this motivation mankind would sink into a state of "such gross bestiality" as to risk the species' survival. The dynamic of technological progress that war unleashed and the culture of intellectual pleasure that it fostered would eventually reach such a level as to make war unnecessary for further advancement. They would arrive at a Christian millennium of equality and peace. Thus, seemingly disastrous events could efficaciously bring about "the most happy and desirable state of things."³⁶ Priestley's arguments about war echoed Kant's assurance that despite its immediately devastating effects, war was ultimately useful to history; competitive mobilization of forces produced cultural advances.

Priestley's ideas about history were perhaps influenced by his observations, partly as a scientist and historian of technology, of the war-driven industrial change in and around Birmingham in this time.³⁷ He may also have been influenced by personal attachments to arms makers: His sister was married to the prominent cannon contractor John Wilkinson, and his great friend and champion was Samuel Galton, proprietor of the single most important gun-manufacturing business in the country. Priestley had been Galton's teacher at the prominent school for religious Dissenters, Warrington Academy. The lectures on which he based his 1788 work were given there in the 1760s, when Galton was his student. He and Galton were both members of Birmingham's celebrated club of Enlightenment thinkers, the Lunar Society. Galton helped fund Priestley's discovery of oxygen and gave

him shelter when his advocacy of equal rights for Dissenters provoked massive riots in Birmingham in 1791. In 1796, in defending his business to his Quaker community, who considered it in violation of their belief in the unchristian nature of war, Galton drew on arguments similar to Priestley's. His defense shows us how eighteenth-century people came to see the war-driven economic realities of their time as irrevocable, as historically inevitable in a manner that deprived them, as individuals, of the capacity for agency.

In printing and circulating his written defense, Galton exhibited a strong sense of his own agency, but when it came to the idea of closing the gun business, his sense of agency virtually evaporated. He protested that he could do nothing to remedy the situation. His astonishment at his censure in 1795, after his family had pursued the gun business for nearly a century, suggests that his conscience had genuinely been clear up till then. As much as he may have influenced Priestley's thought, Priestley's thought may likewise have influenced him and his sense of straitjacketed agency in a providentially ordained historical process. Arguing that everyone, including his fellow Quakers, participated in war, ineluctably, he invoked the hand of "Providence" to make a point about the particular *historical* moment in which they found themselves. He lamented to his judges, "the *Practice* of your principles, is not compatible with the situation in which Providence has placed us."³⁸ To him, the "situation" was that of a military-industrial society progressing by leaps and bounds thanks to the spur of war. Even his supposed redeemers were complicit in it: Sampson Lloyd, one of the Friends charged with his disownment process, was the scion of a family that had long supplied iron for his gun manufactory. From where Galton sat, the industrial transformation unfolding around him was a war-driven phenomenon beyond the power of any single industrialist to change. It is not that he failed to imagine an alternate universe in which the state expended funds on peaceable "development"; historical progress, to him and many eighteenth-century men, *depended* on war. War might be unchristian, but it was the incontrovertible historical reality of their time. A generation earlier, Galton's relative the Quaker banker Joseph Freame had explained his tolerance of war-driven profits by pleading a lack of room for maneuver: "What can't be cured must be endured."³⁹ Galton's arguments endowed this adage designed to clear the conscience with the philosophical authority of the emerging historical discipline. Relying on providential notions of history as an ethical guide allowed Galton and other participants in the new economy to make peace with violation of