



[A Neuro-Philosophy of History: “Sustainable History”; with Dignity, and without Directionality](#)

[August 20, 2018](#) by [Blog Contributor](#)

By Nayef Al-Rodhan



Philosophies of history tend to assume one form or another of directionality. For an important number of philosophers, History has been understood to have a definite trajectory, moving forward to some specified end-state. These end-states have varied, from idealized conceptions of social and political harmony, to dystopian visions of anarchism. The remarkable fact is that many such theories shared a common assumption: the seeds of future stages of history already existed in the present

arrangement of things, and with the right “science” of history, we could predict “off the page” what comes next. When this prediction fails to manifest, “historical determinism” is strongly criticized. These reactions leave out two important points. First, any deterministic characterization of history is at odds with effective human agency. Second, and partly for these reasons, the idea of historical determinism denies the crucial role of dignity in History—a central tenet of what I have elsewhere defined as [Sustainable History](#). The quest for [dignity](#) in public life can lead to seismic changes in national and [global politics](#), overturning established regimes, sometimes more rapidly than expected. Dignity very often underlies the call for political change. When a directional interpretation of history is abandoned, greater clarity emerges with regard to relation between individual dignity and political stability.

In this short series, I cover the neurophilosophical aspects of history, human nature, International Relations, security, trans-humanism, dignity and governance, and peace and war.

Origins of Directional History

The tradition of interpreting history in patterned ways, whether linear or cyclical, has ancient roots: Hesiod, the supposed poetic competitor to Homer, lamented that his contemporaries in the 7th century B.C. had been born in the twilight of the [“heroic age”](#), long after the superior gold, silver, and bronze ages, and prior to an irredeemable iron age. The famed 5th century anecdote of Thucydides—that the strong do as they will and the poor must endure what they must—might be

interpreted as a lamentation of the extent of Greece's cultural degradation, despite the author's ultimate affinity for Athens in the Peloponnesian War. Later when the discipline of International Relations consolidated in the 20th century, a generation of Realists took on his anecdote as their mantra and imbued it with the status of timeless truth — in a tone reminiscent of the fatalism of the great tragedians. In Sophocles, perhaps most of all, the sense of an epoch of traceable history coming to a close is palpable.

Parallel interpretations can be given to some of the best-known Christian philosophers, particularly Augustine, Aquinas, and Boethius, given their shared commitment to a conception of the 'end of days' inherent in their religiosity. Nevertheless, it was later, with Hegel and Marx that the phenomenon of "directional" history reached its zenith and its most fully elaborated form in the western canon. The two had very different conceptions of the direction and end of history. [Hegel](#) characterized history as fundamentally progressing toward the realization of the "modern" state, in which a true ethical disposition could finally arise and flourish. Marx supposed that the self-destructive nature of capitalism was inevitably going to lead to revolution, so that communism would ultimately prevail. More specifically, the conditions of the dispossessed proletariat were bound to devolve until the exploitation to which they were subjected would become unbearable. There are, of course, profound insights in both these theories of history: firstly, the communal and individual goods realized in the liberal democratic state, while imperfect, are real, and secondly, Marx's concerns with the potentially dehumanizing aspects of capitalism, exploitation, and the standing army of the unemployed remain as relevant as ever. However, notions of historical inevitability have generally been dismissed. Whatever traction the ideas of Hegel and Marx gained at the close of the 19th century, the two world wars interrupted any predictive accounts of history. The temptation remained, however, to incorporate the lessons of the 20th century into a philosophy of history that provided some justification or explanation for particular political events, and to conclude that another sort of historical end-state had been reached.

The historical backdrop had thus been set for Fukuyama in 1989 to declare that [the end of history](#) had been reached with the proliferation of democracy and the conclusion of the Cold War. The specific content of the claim might have been new—that the ultimate social and political structure ideally for people had been found to be liberal democracy. However, the notion that historicity implies direction, and that an objective account of what was to come could be adequately provided through the right kind of analysis, was well-established. The intervening decades since the publication of *The End of History and the Last Man* have, however, once again brought such suppositions into question, including by Fukuyama himself. It is now widely-accepted that western-style liberal democracy cannot be so easily exported to circumstances of widely varying cultural and political histories. Despite its theoretically more noble intentions, in retrospect, the assumption of a universal applicability of liberal democratic values in fact resembled the Commonwealth reasoning from the latter days of empire. Furthermore, even in mature democracies, deficiencies in the current form of [liberal democracy](#) remain sorely unaddressed, deepening insecurity and social fractures.

A Return to Agency

In spite of his—largely discredited—conception of historical determinism, the political instability generated by radical inequality, and concerns about power relations and the means of production have guaranteed Marx's enduring relevance. More importantly, for our purposes, Marx also

recognized the implications of determinism for *agency*. Marx argued that one is made free through an awareness of the forces that impinge upon one's freedom. If one understood the historical and political forces that impose limits to free action, one gained a kind of power over these forces and was no longer at their mercy—, or at least not to the same extent. The fallacy in such thinking has been widely commented upon: as [Isaiah Berlin](#) explained, neither the awareness of forcesforcers that limit freedom, nor the willingness to accept them does anything to increase freedom, either politically or metaphysically. Human agency is instead preserved in two ways. Metaphysically, it is preserved by the denial of directional history or other modes of determinism. Politically, it is preserved through robust protections for [the dignity of all persons](#) in all circumstances. Particular political arrangements are not ordained by nature, they are always human creations and for that reason they need to respond to human needs.

Facing and Resolving Dignity Deficits

Successive political upheavals in the past few decades and notably in the first decade and a half of the 21st century have occurred in diverse circumstances, but a common feature to nearly all of them is the presence of what I refer to as [dignity deficits](#). These arise from complex factors, and they are more severely felt in those circumstances where dignity has not been recognized as a human need—whether by internal or external forces. What I mean by *dignity* here it not just the absence of humiliation but the presence of recognition, and a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding that covers [nine fundamental needs](#): *reason, security, human rights, accountability, transparence, justice, opportunity, innovation and inclusiveness*.

Securing dignity for human beings requires appreciating its relation with the [emotional, amoral, egoist](#) features of human nature. Insights from neuroscience in recent decades point to these underlying traits in human nature and human morality. Our human nature manifests these characteristics as a consequence of what I term the [predisposed tabula rasa](#); we are born, as Locke believed, as significantly blank slates. However, and breaking with the Lockean model, we have a basic predisposition, and that is to seek our own survival, and perhaps that of our genetic kin, as part of our evolutionary inheritance. If the threshold for survival is hard to attain, humans will strive to do whatever it takes, including acts that appear seemingly immoral, such as preemptive violence, only to survive. The human moral compass fluctuates in the course of existence, and [good governance](#) is the best predictor of human nature being at its best.

This understanding of human nature, as [emotional, amoral and egoistic](#), has significant consequences regarding a conception of history, both at individual and state levels. Because human beings are profoundly 'unfinished' prior to their socialization, they are very much at the mercy of circumstance – most of them, and most of the time. Where dignity and other essential needs are met, human development can flourish and this flourishing, in turn, promotes social and political stability. Because human nature is not static and can be molded to work toward cooperation or to sharpen its egoism at the expense of others, it is critical to accentuate positive circumstances globally, not just nationally, in order to ensure positive outcomes. Furthermore, and to build on the Realist analogy men-states, the emotional amoral egoism of individuals is also reflected at the state-level. Far from being rational actors, [states are emotional, amoral and egoistic actors](#) too, and their histories, collective memory and identity, become distinctly expressed through [strategic culture](#). The

consequence is that states, as collective entities, demand dignity and respect on the international scene.

For any sustainable trajectory for the future of humanity, dignity in its holistic form of nine needs mentioned above (individual and collective), must be placed at the core of governance (politics, policy, and security). This imperative will become even more urgent in the coming decades, as humanity will be faced with new frontiers, both in terms of its own [biological limitations](#) and in a more literal sense, with the [exploration of outer space](#).

In my next post, I will address the neurophilosophy of dignity-based governance.

[Prof. Nayef Al-Rodhan \(@SustainHistory\)](#) is a Neuroscientist, Philosopher and Geostrategist. He is an [Honorary Fellow at St Antony's College](#), University of Oxford, and Senior Fellow and Head of the Geopolitics and Global Futures Programme at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, Geneva, Switzerland.

Prof Al-Rodhan is a Prize-winning scholar who was trained in neuroscience and neurosurgery at Harvard, Yale, and the Mayo Clinic, before turning in the early 2000s to the interplay of philosophy, International Relations and global security at Oxford and Geneva. Through many innovative books and articles, he has made significant conceptual contributions to the application of the field of Neurophilosophy to human nature, history, contemporary geopolitics, international relations, cultural studies, future studies, and war and peace.