

# THE RIGHT SIDE OF HISTORY AND HIGHER-ORDER EVIDENCE

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## ABSTRACT

Appeals to “being on the right side of history” or accusations of being on the wrong side of history are increasingly common on social media, in the media proper, and in the rhetoric of politics. One might well wonder, though, what the value is of invoking history in this manner. Is declaring who is on what side of history merely dramatic shorthand for one’s being right and one’s opponents wrong? Or is there something more to it than that? In this paper, I argue that an appeal to being on the right side of history is best construed as an invocation of higher-order evidence. I do not deny that there are purely rhetorical, non-evidential uses of the right and wrong side of history, but the phrase can be construed in a more substantive manner. I use work on virtual epistemic elections to model these appeals to history. Zeroing in on the kind of higher-order evidence invoked helps us clarify the criterion for better or worse, more or less convincing appeals to it.

I pity [the white supremacist] because I know that he is trying to stop the progress of the world, and because I know that in time the development and the ceaseless advance of humanity will make him ashamed of his weak and narrow position. One might as well try to stop the progress of a mighty railroad train by throwing his body across the tracks, as to try to stop the growth of the world in the direction of giving mankind more intelligence, more culture, more skill, more liberty, and in the direction of extending more sympathy and more brotherly kindness. (Booker T. Washington (1996), *Up From Slavery*)

Appeals to “being on the right side of history” or accusations of being on the wrong side of history are increasingly common on social media, in the media proper, and in the rhetoric of politics. Even when the phrase is not used explicitly, calling certain views, policies or people progressive or regressive seems functionally equivalent and is, if anything, even more common. As appeals to the right side of history become more common, so too do popular think pieces critiquing such appeals.<sup>1</sup>

One might well wonder, though, what is the value of invoking history in this manner. Is declaring who is on what side of history merely dramatic shorthand for one’s being right and one’s opponents wrong, a bit of rhetorical bullying perhaps? Or is there something

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1 Obama’s fondness for the phrase elicited a number of such articles with titles such as “The Wrong Side of ‘the Right Side of History’” (Graham 2015) and “The Pathetic ‘Wrong Side of History’ Plea” (Goldberg 2014), though the Trump era has certainly elicited a few including “The Wrongness of the ‘Right Side of History’” (Anderson 2018) and “The Danger of Knowing You’re On the ‘Right Side of History’” (Sullivan 2017).

more to it than that? In particular, is one's case better supported by identifying it with the right side of history and if so, under what circumstances?<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, I argue that an appeal to being on the right side of history is best construed as an invocation of what is called higher-order evidence. I do not deny that there are purely rhetorical, non-evidential uses of the right and wrong side of history, but the phrase can be construed in a more substantive manner. Moreover, the more substantive use helps to explain how the phrase operates rhetorically. Zeroing in on the kind of higher-order evidence put in play by appealing to history's right side will help us clarify the criterion for better or worse, more or less convincing appeals to it.

## I. HISTORY, HAPPENSTANCE, AND HIGHER PERSPECTIVES

Let us begin by looking at some cases.

### a. Making Progress

Tamara and her mother, Eunice, are on holiday together. They find themselves inexorably drawn into conflicts between Tamara's more progressive moral beliefs and Eunice's culturally conservative ones. Choosing a restaurant turns into debating the merits of veganism. A flyer for a pride parade turns into a back and forth on human sexuality. A miserably hot day occasions a debate over climate change. Unable to budge her mother on any issue, Tamara says exasperated, "Mom, it's you against the world every time. If you go back to some more ignorant, backwards time, then you'd find more people who agree with you. But the more thoughtful and scientifically informed a person is *these days*, the more likely they are to agree with me. Doesn't that tell you something? You're on the wrong side of history!"

### b. History Will Judge Me

When asked about his tenure as President of the United States, George W. Bush frequently appeals to history and the judgments that people in the future will make. The contrast, of course, is between the perspective of future persons and negative opinions of his person or presidency now. Sometimes Bush gives the impression that what is important about his appeal to history is that we simply do not know what the hindsight of history will tell us. We'll be dead before we do. At other times, he seems to predict that in the future people will regard him and/or his more controversial actions positively, at least for his noble intentions but perhaps also for the value of his actions.<sup>3</sup>

2 As a very rough gauge of how appeals to the right or wrong side of history have increased over the past few decades, consider the results of Google's Ngram Viewer (<https://books.google.com/ngrams>). Unfortunately, it doesn't search texts later than 2008, but across the millions of books it does search, the Ngram Viewer detected a three-fold increase of the phrase "the wrong side of history" from 1990 to 2008 and nearly the same for its paired phrase "the right side of history." The phrase is almost completely absent in the first half of the 20th century, gets some minimal, patchy use around the 50s and 70s, but then balloons at the end of the 20th century. Thus, although there have certainly been many times and places where humans have thought themselves to be on the right side of history, it does seem like dividing cultural territory with this distinction holds a special attraction here at the beginning of the 21st century.

3 From a USA Today interview: "There's no need to defend myself. I did what I did and ultimately history will judge" (Keen 2013). From CNN: "History will ultimately judge the decisions that were made for

### c. *Sub Specie Aeternitatis*

A young nobleman, engaged in a dispute with another noble over land they both claim, receives an offer of arbitration from a bishop in the region. The noble feels he has the superior fighting force and is resistant to the bishop's offer. The churchman reminds the noble of his religious fervor as a youth and somewhat audaciously suggests that instead of expanding his land, maybe the noble should divest himself of his possessions and become a monk for the good of his soul. The bishop tells the unimpressed noble that "from the viewpoint of eternity" the choices at issue look differently than they do from a purely earthly perspective.

Only the first case invokes "the right (or wrong) side of history," but I think it is instructive to see the family resemblance across the different speakers and contexts of these examples as well as where exactly they differ. Tamara takes various progressive moral stances to be reflective of a trend across time of people acquiring relevant publicly available evidence and better ways of processing it (e.g. better and more comprehensive climate models), becoming more free from self-serving prejudices (e.g. more awareness of the ethical issues with meat consumption), and gaining more relevant experience (e.g. knowing more people who are openly gay). As a consequence, from Tamara's perspective, history has a morally and epistemically relevant trajectory. We were morally and epistemically worse off, and we can look forward to being morally and epistemically better off in the future as long as history isn't derailed.

Bush, although he's likely to share more of Eunice's moral beliefs than Tamara's, also appears to claim that the temporal position from which one performs a moral evaluation has important epistemic consequences. As was mentioned above, he seems to vacillate between two different claims. The first claim is that in the future there will be people who are in a privileged position from which to judge Bush. When comparing the position of people in the future with the position of people making the same judgments now, one realizes that our current position is an epistemically weak or hazardous one from which to judge. The alternative claim is more positive, which is that in the future people other than Bush will be able to vindicate his intentions, positions, and decision procedures, perhaps even to see that his actions made the world better. Since Bush is not himself a time traveler, one possibility is that he thinks that he is already in a position to know all these things but that he's in a privileged cognitive position vis-à-vis these truths (because of his self-knowledge, access to non-public evidence, etc.). Others will become equivalently well-positioned with sufficient historical hindsight.<sup>4</sup>

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Iraq and I'm just not going to be around to see the final verdict. In other words, I'll be dead" (King 2013). From a Tonight Show appearance: "I relied upon my faith, my family helped a lot and I had a good team around me and did the best I could do. I'm also very comfortable with the fact that it's going to take a while for history to judge whether the decisions I made are consequential or not. And therefore I'm not too worried about it" (Black 2013).

4. Though Bush does not seem to think this, one could, of course, think that future generations might be in an impoverished position to judge Bush's actions. As evidence is lost to history, we lose the opportunity to assess that evidence. This doesn't affect the point being made with the example, which is that we are all familiar with claims about the epistemic importance of one's historical position where the value of that particular historical situation is a purely contingent matter reflective of little beyond the particular, discrete events in question.

There are, then, some points of continuity and discontinuity between Tamara's and Bush's invocation of history. Both Tamara and Bush differ from someone who takes the evidence that they have at a time that directly bears on the truth of a proposition and treats that evidence as definitive of the appropriate epistemic attitude one should take. Just as someone who sees a car accident from one side of an intersection should care about what people with other angles saw even if she finds her own angle convincing, so it is that one should care about how shifting the temporal position of an agent might influence her judgment. On this, Tamara and Bush would agree. A difference between the two is that Tamara presents history as having a trajectory that is itself relevant to what one should think. In contrast, although Bush might see himself as being a champion of freedom and democracy and thereby see himself as having been on the right side of history, the comments on history we've been considering can be construed in a different way. Bush's comments lend themselves to seeing the actions of his presidency as discrete events to be evaluated in terms of the particular circumstances of individual, isolatable choices. Given what he knew and what his intentions were at the time of the decisions he made, he thinks an impartial future judge will be positively inclined towards him. This contrast invites the following question. Is one's position in history merely a vantage point from which one can have a better or worse perspective on isolatable pieces of evidence or can it be something more? And, if the latter, what more would it have to be to support claims like the ones Tamara makes to her mother?

We get a step closer to answering our question by turning to a comparison with our third scenario. In the medieval case, the invocation of a broader frame of reference, the viewpoint from eternity, trades on the value of de-centering one's evaluative perspective from a set of local considerations so as to shift it to a more inclusive evaluative context. The bishop thinks that shifting to the broader frame of reference is not value neutral. On the one hand, the concerns of human beings for their own private advantage seem less important if one bears in mind what a small thing even a noble is in the grand scheme of things. On the other hand, if there are greater purposes at work in earthly history which are visible from the eternal vantage point, then participating in those takes on more force than a young man's territorial ambitions might otherwise allow. This shift to the wider context in which value may show up differently functions in a way similar to the appeal to the right side of history, especially as it relates to situating moral claims within a wider temporal context. As with Bush's case, though, the import of the broader reference frame isn't necessarily that the *trajectory* of history is evidence for where the truth lies. The priest might well suppose that life at his time is much as it ever was. The bishop might even bemoan the increased irreverence of princes, in effect, considering the trajectory of the historical trends informing the noble's behavior to be bad.

The encouragement to align one's perspective with the eternal differs from an appeal to being on the right side of history in that in one way or another the former appeals to the value of bracketing the currents of history in which one is caught up whereas the latter asks one to recognize an evidential value in those currents. The two don't have to compete, though. One might try to consider an issue from a "God's eye point of view" so as to discern whether history has an epistemically or morally relevant trajectory. In fact, it's hard to think of how one might justify the opinion that one is on the right side of history without implicitly claiming the ability to make a reliable judgment from a meta-historical perspective. One needs to be able to affirm

that history is making progress in a particular domain and that one's position is reflective of that progress. That might not require an eternal viewpoint, but it must be one that mimics the ability to take up a critical distance from the flow of history in which one is caught up.

Thus, we can provisionally conclude that an appeal to the right side of history is one kind of an appeal to the relation between evidence and socio-cultural-historical positioning. What distinguishes this species from others is the nature of the epistemic relevance of the historical position being invoked. When making an appeal to the right or wrong side of history, one is not simply claiming that certain positional relations are favorable and others aren't. Instead, the assumption in play is that history itself has a trajectory such that *ceteris paribus* one should be more likely to discover the truth as one moves forward in time. Instead of thinking that it is a purely contingent matter whether one's historical position is a reliable or unreliable one from which to make a judgment, being on the right side of history implies a more intimate connection between what is definitive of that historical position and truth. Much like one sometimes sees a distinction drawn between a positional and a directional influence to explain a biased handling of evidence (e.g. luckily stumbling upon evidence vs a biased search for evidence) (cf. Avnur and Scott-Kakures 2015), so one might think that an appeal to history's right side commits one to the claim that the influence of history on the matter in question is a positive directional influence. It is in this sense that a claim to be on the right side of history claims more than that one has a favorable temporal frame of reference. History ends up not simply providing a kind of topography that determines what one can see from any given position in it. Instead, history has a current. It pushes one towards the truth or so goes the appeal to the right side of history.

For the person appealing to being on the right side of history, the historical position she claims is inherently contrastive because, after all, it is important to one's claim that history has a trajectory of improvement. One's position must be better than the positions available in the past or some relevant subset of those available in the past. The arch of improvement also needs to have passed some absolute threshold of reliability, however, such that invoking one's improved position relative to the past is reason to take a positive stance on the truth of a proposition or the choiceworthiness of a given action. One doesn't have to be Zeno to think that continual progress is consistent with not having reached one's goal. Recognizing that we have justly put the humoral theory of disease in our past didn't make the miasma theory likely to be true. Consequently, claiming to be on the right side of history requires contrastive and absolute reliability such that one's reliability compares favorably both with other (mostly past) thinkers and with an absolute standard for knowledge or reasonableness (depending on how demanding one wants to make one's standard for belief or action). Moreover, *invoking* one's being on the right side of history presumes an ability not only to reap the benefits of a certain epistemically relevant historical trajectory but an ability to recognize the existence, relevance, and sufficient advancement of this trajectory.

Lest one draw the wrong moral at this stage of the paper, it is worth noting that cultural narratives cast in terms of progress aren't the only ones that make epistemically ambitious claims. Contrast the dynamic in play here with a parallel dynamic one sometimes finds in conservative approaches to culture, situating our position vis-à-vis a golden age through a narrative of decline. Think, for example, of the way Alasdair MacIntyre famously opens *After Virtue* depicting the state of contemporary ethics with the imagery

of apocalypse as he begins his advocacy of a more Aegean perspective, specifically that of Sophocles (MacIntyre 1981). Whether the supposed golden age we fix on is ancient Greece, the Middle Ages, pre-sexual revolution America, or what have you, there is a contrastive judgment made here too establishing an arc of regress as well as an implicit judgment that we're in a bad state now and were in a good state that passed some interesting absolute threshold before. In many ways, the narrative of decline just as clearly draws a line between a right and wrong side of history. It simply exchanges the optimistic exuberance of the champion of human progress for the dour cynicism of nostalgia. Arguably, the epistemic bar to clear to be entitled to either form of master narrative is comparably high.

There is a still more general moral one might draw from our discussion thus far though. One that will help us take the next step in getting clear on the phenomenon. That moral is that appeals to the right side of history are appeals to a special kind of higher-order evidence.

## 2. VIRTUAL ELECTIONS AND THE DEMOCRACY OF THE DEAD

Higher-order evidence or “evidence about one’s evidence” is ubiquitous when one begins to think about it.<sup>5</sup> Whether it’s discounting conclusions reached when fatigued, assuming that appearances are deceiving at a magic show, refusing to lend a book to a student because of the bad track-record of prior students, or checking the donor list of a politician for potential conflicts of interest, we are in the business not only of keeping track of the evidence that bears on a proposition of interest but of keeping track of those things that help us figure out how valuable our evidence is. Even if it doesn’t bear directly on the proposition we’re investigating, as Richard Feldman says, “evidence of evidence is evidence” (Feldman 2014).<sup>6</sup>

Higher-order evidence has played an especially significant role in the epistemology of disagreement. To take a standard case in the literature (originally from Christensen 2007), suppose that two people A and B share a meal at a restaurant and that this is not the first time they have done so. They each look at the tab, and, performing a quick mental calculation, form a belief about what half the amount is. A has each person’s share at \$43, and B has it at \$45. One would expect A to redo his calculation upon discovering the disagreement. The rationale for the recalculation is that the discovery of the disagreement with B gives A new evidence. In particular, it gives A evidence that his reasoning might have been wrong. The disagreement gives him new evidence about the nature of his evidence.

In the restaurant case, A and B provide each other with a potential defeater, but it is worth noticing that A and B both contribute evidence as to the amount of each person’s share whether they disagree or not. Suppose that the next time they get together, this time

5 Cf. the account of higher-order evidence in Christensen (2010). Christensen’s essay nicely highlights the diversity and ubiquity of higher-order evidence. I note in passing though that the claim in his essay that higher-order evidence is “prone to being rationally toxic: that is, once the agent has it, she is doomed to fall short of some rational ideal” (212) is in some tension with the positive function of appeals to the right side of history investigated here.

6 How to formulate Feldman’s slogan into a defensible epistemic principle is a matter of some debate. For critical engagement with Feldman’s work on the topic, see, for example, Fitelson (2012) as well as Tal and Comesana (2017).

at a more economical restaurant, they each calculate that their shares of the tab are exactly \$17.68. Just as the disagreement was evidence against their conclusions in the first case, so here A and B acquire new evidence that the correct partitioning of the bill is \$17.68 apiece. In this scenario, A receives evidence that her calculation was a good one since the most likely explanation for their coming to the same conclusion is that it is the right one. Thus, higher-order evidence need not provide defeaters; it can enhance the epistemic pedigree of the evidence one already has.

Obviously, the restaurant cases do not reflect the variety of our disputes with others. The restaurant cases are one-off events with particular others concerned with some empirical question that both sides are conceiving of the same way. Our disagreements can be long-running. They may be focused on whoever would defend a (potentially vague) region of the available logical space opposed to one's own. They encompass not only our recognized peers but persons whose epistemic status vis-à-vis our own is very much a part of one's dispute. The way each side is inclined to frame what the disagreement concerns or what it would take to resolve the disagreement may vary, and if the disagreement is extended across time, the framing of the disagreement within the camp of each party in the dispute may evolve in important ways as well, making it harder to gauge the relevance of past participants of the disagreement to the state of the higher-order evidence. The disagreeing parties may focus on issues that do not allow for any uncontroversial adjudication in terms of publicly available information or empirical prediction.<sup>7</sup> In short, all manner of disagreements are potential sources of higher-order evidence, but not all higher-order evidence is as easy to weigh as the evidence in the restaurant case is. Disagreements in which one might be tempted to invoke history's having a right and wrong side tend not to be like the restaurant case. Rather, they tend to be high stakes, controversial cases that extend over time to cover diverse groups of people thinking and arguing in very different cultural contexts.

Brandon Carey and Jonathan Matheson, in a 2013 piece, employ a device that is useful for thinking about a claim to be on the right side of history in terms of higher-order evidence. They call it the "epistemic election." Suppose one is faced with an epistemic superior who disagrees with one on some proposition *p*. Carey and Matheson's example is disagreeing with Graham Priest over whether contradictions can be true. One might think that one would have to defer since the other person is an acknowledged superior on the matter at hand. If, however, one takes into consideration what a relevant set of others would vote as regards *p*, then one can give an epistemic superior his or her due while nonetheless retaining one's original belief. Even if Priest is brilliant at logic, trusting the majority of philosophers might be epistemically safer. Thus, if one thinks that one is well-positioned to know how such an election would turn out, one is justified in not deferring to an epistemic superior through reliance on such a virtual election.

Carey and Matheson are clear that epistemic elections aren't purely democratic. Rather, one can weight each vote according to the worthiness of the voter.

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7 In the disagreement literature, complicating factors for judging the strength of higher-order evidence are often couched in terms of difficulties establishing who counts as an epistemic peer though it should be obvious that another person can offer significant higher-order evidence even if one is not in a position to judge that they count as a peer (cf. King 2012).

The election doesn't give everyone a vote (for instance, small children are left out), and it has it that some votes count more than others (for instance, the relevant experts' opinions count for more). The better one's epistemic position on the matter, the more weight one's vote gets. (Carey and Matheson 2013: 136)

Carey and Matheson use the idea of the epistemic election to defend the claim that taking the disagreement of others quite seriously (endorsing the "Equal Weight View") does not lead to an implausible form of skepticism. They point out that, in the case of non-controversial disagreements, relying on an epistemic election will allow most people to hold onto their beliefs. After all, the weighted majority will win an election in which everyone votes, and since the procedure is a virtual election, voter turnout won't be a problem. Having to defer to the majority may be unattractive to the minority party in the dispute, but the result is, as Carey and Matheson point out, not skeptical.

When it comes to controversial matters, however, Carey and Matheson point out that we often don't know what the results of an epistemic election would be. We know that it would likely favor one party over the other, but we don't know which one. Carey and Matheson take this finding to underwrite a local skepticism restricted to a subclass of controversial claims. It will apply only to a subclass because there are some cases where one takes oneself to know how an epistemic election would turn out even though the matter at hand is in some sense controversial. Carey and Matheson's example is the debate over whether vaccines cause autism. Even though controversial, it seems clear that the weighted majority of the population would deny that vaccines cause autism.

This last class of cases is worth highlighting for our purposes. It's not an accident that one could easily imagine telling someone who is opposed to vaccinating children that they are on the wrong side of history. Even though Carey and Matheson express some reticence about our ability to judge the outcomes of epistemic elections vis-à-vis controversial matters, one might expect that appeals to the right side of history would have to occupy that sweet spot where one has reason to think one does know what result an epistemic election would yield on a debated matter of importance. If one were unsure of the relative distribution of "votes" for one's position across history, it would be hard to see how one's appeal to being on the right side of history would be well-founded. Conversely, if one is in a position to tell that one is on the right side of history, it seems like one should also be in a position to speak to the distribution of votes for one's position across time. It is worth exploring, then, how one might employ epistemic elections to model the phenomenon. As we'll see, modeling appeals to the right side of history requires applying Carey and Matheson's tool in a special way.

Once we've decided to use epistemic elections, the next question is who gets to vote and how can their votes be weighted fairly? An appeal to the right side of history is especially tricky as regards both. On the one hand, it would make sense to count the votes of future persons in one's virtual vote since the appeal to history presumes a trajectory such that even more people will agree with one in the future than do now or have in the past agreed, and they will do so because of their superior epistemic position. It isn't clear, however, how one could have an independent basis for projecting what those votes will be that isn't grounded in the evidence reflected in the current moment and the past. If, for instance, one predicted that future voters will vote overwhelmingly for the thesis that global warming is real but one's basis for projecting those future votes is the forward implications of the evidence for global warming at present, then it's not clear that one is adding



new evidence by considering the votes of future persons so much as that one is covertly boosting the weight of some class of present voters. Consequently, it's not clear that it would be evidentially useful to count the votes of virtual future persons in an epistemic election.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, the idea that being on the right side of history involves a trajectory that culminates in superior epistemic positions like one's own implies that the further back in the past one reaches for voters for one's epistemic election, the more one will have to allow misguided voters to vote. After all, if people get more enlightened as regards *x* over time, then a virtual election that extends back into the past will incorporate more voters with benighted perspectives on *x* the farther back it extends. One could, of course, give less weight to past voters, but one would still be diminishing the support for one's position by incorporating past voters into the election. Furthermore, the ability of the election to add to one's evidence will be compromised if one counts the votes of past persons for less without a good independent reason for doing so. Thus, we get the curious consequence that an epistemic election meant to model who is on the right or wrong side of history looks like it can't extend the voting bloc forward or backwards in time lest either one beg the question against one's opponent or diminish one's epistemic support.

There is in fact a way to model being on the right side of history with epistemic elections, but it requires being a little creative with the tool. To capture the dynamic in play, one would have to convert epistemic elections into an epidemiological instrument in the following manner. Imagine a self-contained epistemic election being conducted at various points in the past *x*, *y*, and *z* as well as one done at the present *r*. Instead of tallying the votes from *x*, *y*, *z*, and *r* as one would normally do in an epistemic election, one can instead treat them as successive elections. In comparing these elections, one can look for a pattern across the individual tallies for *x*, *y*, *z*, and *r* suggestive of a move in the direction of consensus. One then has to ask whether the most probable explanation of the move towards consensus is that the pattern is converging on the truth (e.g., "we're more reliable judges of what social justice demands now because more marginalized voices are part of the conversation"). Modelling the appeal to being on the right side of history in terms of patterns across iterated epistemic elections helps us appreciate the uniqueness of such appeals.

Typically, in the case of disagreement, the force of the disagreement to change one's mind lies in the requirement to treat other thinkers as one's epistemic equals unless one has a good reason not to. That's not how the higher-order evidence is working in this case. If it were, then the correct way to model the evidence would be to aggregate the votes cast at *x*, *y*, *z*, and *r* in a single over-arching election. That may be apt for an appeal to "the democracy of the dead," but it's not a way to capture the sense that one is on the right side of history. Instead one has to ascend a level of abstraction and objectify the votes cast at the different time points, treating those votes not as equivalent to one's own but as

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8 It may be that it would be useful to consider virtual future voters in other kinds of election. Consider, for example, a parallel procedure in which we imagine future generations having a vote on what policies we adopt on environmental regulation. In fact, John Rawls includes a mechanism of virtual representation for future generations in *A Theory of Justice* (Rawls 1971: 288–92). The reason I think giving future voters a vote in the context of justice is more viable than in the epistemic context is that one can discern how policies might be differentially related to the short-term interests of one's own and future generations, even if there is still likely some degree to which one projects one's own perspective onto the situation of the future persons in question.

jointly bringing about a new piece of evidence consisting of the voting pattern across time. A pattern is a pattern whether it's modeling rational agents or viruses. Rather than exploiting an assumption of parity between oneself and those with whom one has disputes, this epidemiological move is a way of breaking parity by enfolding one's disputants within a larger evaluative context with a pattern that favors one's position.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. OBSTACLES AND OPPORTUNITIES

In the two foregoing sections, I have sought to gain some clarity on what it would mean to appeal to being on the right side of history in a substantive manner. The answer I have given is that such appeals rely on a special form of higher-order evidence. They ask the individual to situate her evaluation of the evidence within a wider historical frame which, when properly appreciated, should lead one to see that history itself has an epistemically, if not morally, relevant trajectory. That trajectory can be modeled in terms of a series of epistemic elections conducted across time which show a move in the direction of convergence, where the best explanation of that convergence is that people are converging on the truth. In this section, I want to turn to the question of when it might be useful to make such an appeal to history and when it isn't.

Our analysis has set us up to recognize some vulnerabilities of an appeal to the right or wrong side of history. Here are five. First, establishing that there is a pattern to be invoked is a non-trivial task. History has lots of noise, and one has to beware of the temptation to appropriate it selectively. There is no value in p-hacking history. Difficult decisions will have to be made concerning how far back one will look, what one will take as indicative of what people have thought and why they have thought it, and how one will weight differing opinions both at a time and across time.

Second, any consistent set of moral attitudes should affirm the following. There have been people in the past who had every reason to think, from their perspective, that they were on the right side of history, and those people were dead wrong. If history appears to be converging on the permissibility or inevitability of the exploitation of some

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9 One might object that the characterization of appeals to the right-side of history does not account for this kind of argument. "What is happening now (x) is analogous to y from the past. Since y had moral or epistemic property r, one ought to conclude that x has r." In this case, no trajectory need be presumed for history. One just needs there to be some past event that ended up being wrong as judged by history that is analogous to a present day event. One might think that my model should cover such an argument form since contemporary arguments about topics where we take progress to be an issue often take that form. When made about contested matters, I think that there is almost always a historical narrative in the background that is supposed to connect the prior analogue to the present day. To invoke interracial marriage in the service of same-sex marriage, for example, is to diagnose the opponent of same-sex marriage as subject to prejudices that one knows a reasonable 21st century interlocutor will put a lot of stock in having overcome. The force of the analogy presumes a historical narrative that connects past views of the one type of marriage with some present views of the other. Similarity relations abound between all kinds of things. Fixing on this particular similarity relation can only be explained by an implicit historical narrative that is underwriting the relevance and power of the analogy. Thus, even though I think the argument form described generically isn't captured by my model, I think the instances of the argument form that intuitively should count as appeals to the right-side of history probably can be assimilated to my model when one takes into account the background necessary to make sense of them. Thanks to Teri Merrick for this objection.

indigenous population, that consensus isn't a window into the moral value of anything. Even if one finds a pattern across time that shows that people are more likely to accept one's position, that doesn't yet show whether that's a point in favor of one's position since a consensus can be bad or neutral. An easier objective would be to establish that one's overall position is robustly self-supporting such that one is personally justified in taking oneself to be on the right side of history. What is more difficult, however, is making a case that history is on one's side in a way that someone who disagrees with oneself should accept. Establishing the epistemic relevance of a pattern of consensus-building without already presuming one's position can be quite difficult.<sup>10</sup>

Third, the mere fact that one can abstract from a disagreement so as to enfold it within a rich narrative of how we got to the present moment does not necessarily decide a disagreement in one's favor. One needs to know what other competing narratives are available. Even if one's opponent does not have such a narrative on tap, the fact remains that it may be possible to construct one from her perspective for her or that a narrative that did not favor either position could cover the relevant facts. Just as one can draw an infinite number of curves through data points on a graph, one can tell many, many narratives that explain the connections one wants to appeal to in order to substantiate a claim to be on the right side of history. The curve-fitting problem doesn't keep scientists from modeling data with pragmatically useful and epistemically defensible functions over the relevant variables, of course. The same is no doubt also true of narratives and historical data, but defending one's narrative may, once again, prove a non-trivial task depending on the richness of the pattern one is appealing to and the degree of fit between it and the narrative one has to tell about it.

Fourth, as our analysis shows, there will be two competing procedures available for accounting for the views of the past in terms of higher-order evidence – a comprehensive epistemic election and an epidemiological explanation of patterns that show up across iterated epistemic elections. Even if there really is a pattern across time slices that shows a movement towards convergence, that doesn't automatically entail that the epidemiological alternative is preferable. Suppose in a given presidential election that those who voted early on election day tended to vote disproportionately for candidate A, but that as the day progressed, the votes swung gradually in favor of candidate B. We wouldn't throw out the early voters in a political election even if we acknowledged that the pattern was real. What one takes to be the state of the higher-order evidence will come out very differently depending on which aggregation method one adopts. In fact, any time there is a pattern of convergence over time, one should expect that the epidemiological approach and the cumulative election approach will produce conclusions that point in different directions. The epidemiological approach will favor the option that is more prevalent at the present time and in time slices close to the present, but a comprehensive vote will

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10 This point about the need to interpret the meaning of a convergence is all the more important because of the desirability of finding independent evidence to adjudicate disagreements. One might be tempted to think that the fact of convergence over time is just the kind of independent evidence that should settle a dispute between peers. As the literature on peer disagreement shows, establishing peerhood is often harder than one might think (cf. King 2012; Matheson 2014), and it is especially hard when the parties to the disagreement differ on their core commitments in no small part because it's hard to figure out what should count as evidence without appealing to a common set of more fundamental commitments (cf. Elga 2007; Pittard 2018).

weaken the support for that option if not reverse the outcome. The risk of begging the question against an opponent in one's choice of how to aggregate the data is high.

Furthermore, the moral risk of objectifying past persons instead of treating them as an equal is not to be taken lightly. One should not lightly discount the epistemic perspective of those who are spatially distant from oneself just because of their physical location. It is morally risky to assume that the fact of difference between oneself and another is a reason to discount the other's perspective. In addition to slighting the other, one might harm oneself by failing to respect those at distance. Soliciting diverse perspectives can, of course, act as a check against biases one shares with those like oneself. What goes for spatial distance goes for temporal distance, however. Temporal distance can be relevant, of course, but throwing out the opinion of those who have gone before requires a good reason.

Fifth and finally, one could pass the first four hurdles and still fall short of the absolute reliability required for knowledge if not lower-shelf epistemic goods as well. It is possible to have a very strong contrastive case for one's position and yet have nothing more than the most reliable of the unreliable options. Again, a little reflection suffices to show that there have been times at which, by our standards, all the options have been dubious or worse. Perhaps being the least odious misogynist or having the most measured approach to blood feuds is worth something, but it's not worth much. In fact, taking the trajectory of history to support one's position in a case like this can be epistemically harmful by making one more likely to be content with one's position. Even the best and most nuanced miasma theory is probably a dead end.

So, one might wonder, when is it useful to appeal to the right side of history? I don't claim to have an exhaustive list to offer. I think the following four cases are worth highlighting, however, and that bearing in mind both the dangers listed above and the good cases listed below could help increase the value of appeals to history in popular discourse. Let "R" stand for an interlocutor and "p" be a disputed proposition.

First, suppose one shares a common perspective with R on the general relationship of the present to the past vis-à-vis issues like p. Given the degree to which one shares a historical supporting narrative with R, one can take on the more tractable project of situating p within the agreed upon story rather than trying to motivate a narrative from the ground up. Even if R tries to make a case for not-p in terms of the common story, it is less likely that p and not p will fit equally well in the same substantive general story of human progress (or regress) than it is that one can find substantially different stories that favor p and not p respectively.<sup>11</sup>

Second, suppose there is initial agreement on the other end. R endorses p but has a lower credence in p than one thinks is warranted. In this case, one can seek to heighten the epistemic credentials of p by bringing an explanatory story to bear as to why R should think of herself as well-situated relative to p. The move here would be parallel to the way in which one might justify reliance upon some human faculty by showing that there is

11 Compare the point here to Vavova's (2014) analysis of peer disagreement on moral matters. In that article, Vavova argues that one is required to split the difference with a peer when one disagrees but that such a commitment about what one ought to do with peer disagreement does not lead to moral skepticism because of how much people's moral judgments actually overlap at least with respect to persons we think of as our peers. Elga's (2007) discussion tends to cast the point in a more negative light. To the extent that one has fundamental moral disagreements with another person, one will not consider him or her a peer, at least when it comes to moral matters.

reason to think it was selected for reliability sometime in the past. R already takes her evidence to favor *p*, but one can employ one's backstory to provide her a reason to think better of that evidence, to provide her new evidence, or to defeat some of her potential defeaters for *p*.

Third, take a case in which R claims to be on the right side of history but in which it is not clear to R that it's possible to tell a different story about how we got where we are. Perhaps R hasn't realized that there are other ways of construing her historical evidence, has neglected inconvenient facts relevant to her historical tale, has simply told a truncated historical tale, or has failed to notice that construing the higher-order evidence epidemiologically instead of democratically was a substantive choice. Even if the prospects of changing R's mind are slim, it can help R re-calibrate her higher-order evidence to know that there are defensible alternatives to the story she endorses. Even in an extreme case, such as a case of indoctrination, an individual may be incapable of seriously entertaining the possibility that she's wrong, while nonetheless being capable of following an alternative tale. Coming to appreciate that someone else has a self-consistent, substantive narrative that conflicts with her own is itself evidence even if the person is so wrapped up in her own narrative that de-conversion is not yet a feasible option.

Fourth, if *p* is a purely empirical question, especially one that is amenable to scientific investigation, then the prospects of an appeal to the right side of history should be more promising, but take a slightly more complicated case.<sup>12</sup> Suppose that the empirical and the normative dimensions of a debate over *p* are such that a historical narrative about a normative matter piggybacks on empirical claims, even though *p* itself is not a claim that can be decided in any straightforward empirical manner. As progress is made in the empirical domain, it could well be that parity between the competing narratives is broken as it becomes harder for at least one of the stories to fit the evolving empirical picture in any sort of parsimonious manner. One can then, at least in theory, leverage the objectivity of the empirical progress as the independent arbiter between the competing narratives. Just as in our first case one can leverage a common narrative to exert pressure on R to accept *p*, so one can use a common allegiance to the empirical facts to exert pressure on R to take a normative story piggybacking on those facts seriously.<sup>13</sup>

The good cases and the bad cases for making appeals to the right and wrong side of history should be taken together. If one stops to think about it, most people find some

12 Of course, we are sometimes wrong about what is a "purely empirical" question. One might well have Kuhnian worries at this juncture. A given question might only count as empirical in virtue of a theoretical background, which itself can be drawn into a dispute. Likewise, our empirical knowledge and our sense of its completeness and perspicuity is something that can evolve over time in ways that can be hard to foresee. I think a referee for raising ways in which appeals to the empirical can also be problematic.

13 If one takes the so-called "Flynn effect" as showing that people have been getting better at abstract reasoning over time (Flynn 1987), one might think that there's a general case to be made for the claim that contemporary convergence of opinion is truth-apt across a wide range of topics even when an increase in relevant background information is not involved. I think making this move would be putting rather too much weight on the Flynn effect, but what does seem plausible is that cognitive abilities change over time in ways that might be relevant to at least some claims about the epistemic import of history. For example, it may well be that the change from oral culture to written culture changed our cognitive abilities in ways that made some claims we could have trusted in the past unreliable when made now and vice versa (cf. Ong 2002). Thanks to Amy Harms for bringing the Flynn effect to my attention.

claims to be on the right side of history sensible and others obnoxious. If a reader doubts this, I again invite them to recall the various episodes in history in which some group of people have thought themselves to have been on the right side of history. It isn't possible to agree consistently with everyone who has ever thought they were on the right side of history. Likewise, it would be a rather radical take on the human condition to suppose that we never make epistemic or moral progress on anything. Consequently, we all think some claims to be on the right side of history are well-founded and important and that others are bogus. I maintain that taking the good and bad cases together along with the background theory that explains why they are good or bad should help one navigate this middle ground judiciously.

As the paper draws to a close, it is helpful to see the dynamics at play in this paper as the axiological inverse to what are called "etiological challenges to belief" (Avnur and Scott-Kakures 2015; DiPaolo and Simpson 2016; Vavova 2018).<sup>14</sup> Much like our discussion began with an investigation of what it means to be on the "right side of history," so etiological challenges often begin with a discussion of what it means to cast aspersions on someone else's belief by saying "you only believe that because x." An etiological challenge claims that factors that are potentially epistemically irrelevant explain why one holds a given belief (e.g. "you only believe that because you're from the South/ because you were raised by hippies/ because you've never experienced what poverty is really like"). In this literature, the biasing influence of one's socio-cultural-historical position is taken to call one's beliefs into question. These same kinds of positional influences that are appealed to as threatening can be seen in a positive light as priming, as putting one in a favorable position vis-à-vis finding the truth. If etiological influences incline one towards the truth, then we get etiological opportunities instead of challenges. The question of which we are faced with in virtue of our historical situatedness, an opportunity or a challenge, not coincidentally, is often the frame in which one finds people most inclined to define the terrain in terms of who is on the right and wrong side of history.

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