The uses of history

***The popular interest in history reflects a desire to know more about ourselves. This is all well and good, but does history possess sufficient value to warrant an extensive formal programme of history instruction in schools? Four experts give their views.***

**Expert A**

A historian is interested in the past because he is interested in life. The true historian’s interest in the past answers a deeply felt need to assure the continuity of human life and discover its meaning, even if the goal is never fully realized. However, the most commonly cited practical reason for studying history is that it improves judgment. It offers the opportunity to avail of the experiences of other times and other nations; it qualifies them as judges of the actions and designs of men. History doesn’t tell us the answers to our questions, but it helps to inform us so that we might make better decisions in the future. And this has never been as important as it is nowadays in this era of the World Wide Web and globalism, when knowledge of the larger world is not only desirable, but increasingly important.

**Expert B**

The use of historical examples is ancient and no doubt predates written language. We can imagine cave dwellers sitting around the evening campfire sharing anecdotes of admired ancestors worthy of emulation. People need models, and historical examples are especially powerful models because they actually existed. Joan of Arc demonstrates the power of individual belief and action. Galileo symbolizes the fight against authority for freedom of thought, while Thomas Becket represents integrity in the face of deadly intimidation. As we know, humans are pattern makers. While many philosophers of history have believed that history is revealed only through its unique events, others have been unable to resist the urge to ascribe pattern to history. One view put forward is that historical cultures, like plants and animals, follow the cycle of growth, flowering and decline. Certainly, history shows us that individuals and empires may rise, but eventually they will fall.

**Expert C**

Some of history’s greatest historians have seen human self-awareness as the very essence of history. Arnold Toynbee said, ‘History is a search for light on the nature and destiny of man.’ The value of history, then, is that it teaches us what man has done and thus what man is. Psychologist Bruno Bettelheim asserted that human self-knowledge is the most important role of formal instruction and that most of all, our schools ought to teach the true nature of man; teach about his troubles with himself, his inner turmoils and about his difficulties in living with others. They should teach the prevalence and the power of both man’s social and anti-social tendencies, and how the one can domesticate the other, without destroying the individual’s independence or self-love.

**Expert D**

The concept of identity is key. Questions of identity are a central concern of psychology, which has found that loss of identity results in loss of significance; without identity there is little meaning and purpose to life. As Beverly Southgate puts it, history – the memories of things past – is of supreme importance in maintaining a sense of identity. In this context, Southgate quotes a character from a Saul Bellow novel who says, ‘Everyone needs his memories. They keep the wolf of insignificance from the door.’ And I think that sums it up rather nicely. Southgate says the need for identity applies to nations as well as to individuals; cultural identity contributes to meaning, purpose and cohesion in society; without it, society would be as rootless and adrift as an individual with amnesia.