“In fact, history does not belong to us, but we belong to history.”

Hans-Georg Gadamer: Truth and Method

In his statement, Hans-Georg Gadamer claims that history does not, in fact, belong to us, but instead that we belong to history. In this essay I will try to assess this statement and its validity, but in order to do that I think it is important to discuss what is even meant by belonging and the concept of history. By “us”, I will assume that Gadamer means humanity.

How can history “belong” to anyone, and what would it mean for us to belong to history? Directly connecting belonging to ownership in this case makes no sense, but the hierarchy of the owner and the one being owned can perhaps be applied to history and humanity. That is, if history belongs to us, we are its master, and it is ours to shape. And likewise, if we belong to history, we can not intervene in it; instead we are shaped by it.

A distinction can be made between perspectives on history. In daily life, it is common to think of history as something we are in the midst of. It stretches back in time, and it will continue into the future, although, it is important to note, it has not yet done so. From our temporal location, we try to make sense of what has been, and we might perhaps also guess at what is to come. History is a collection of subsequent moments; connected, yes, but not necessarily a unity that could not have been any other way. However, it is also possible to imagine looking at history from the outside-in. This, perhaps, resembles the way in which we can imagine an all-knowing God might look at history. Time as a dimension disappears or is unimportant, and so history does become an unchanging unity.

A common objection against an almighty, all-knowing and ultimately good God is that if He could interfere and change a horrendous action(as he could in this thought-experiment, being almighty) seeing as he already knows, being all-knowing, what any given person will do, say tomorrow, why does he not? A God looking at history from the outside-in, as I described earlier, would in many ways solve this problem. However, I do not see how it solves the problem of free will. It might seem strange, drawing in an imaginary God, but it is simply a way to easier convey my point. If there was no God, looking in at a unity that is history without the concept of time would be harder to imagine, but is does not change the problem:

If history can be seen as an unchanging unity, how can anyone choose to make a change?

The important question regarding history is perhaps as simple as this: Could things have gone otherwise? Given the exact same starting point and conditions, down to the smallest detail, is it even possible that it could have turned out differently? If the answer is no, then it is hard to imagine that i can in the future. Moreover, it sees to me as if everything must be not only a consequence of what has been and what is, but a necessary consequence. However, this entails quite a lot of problems, some of which a have presented above, and some of which I will get back to later.

If the answer to the initial question is that yes, at some point it could have turned out differently, then an action is not necessarily a necessary consequence of something else (or perhaps, rather, everything else). Nevertheless, I still don’t see how this gives room for any actual free will. Any action must either have a reason, or not have a reason. If there are reasons why one chose one action (or for that matter thought, for is there is free will, one must also be free to choose what to think) above all others, I would say that action was a necessary consequence of those reasons. If those reasons could lead to more than one action, why would one chose one above the other? Again, there must either be a reason or not be a reason. If there is a reason, that reason must be added to the other reasons, and this new, bigger quantity of reasons would be a set of reasons that has only one necessary consequence. If an action does not have a reason, it must be a product of coincidence, and I don’t see how that amounts to free will.

In order to argue that Gadamer is right in that history does not belong to us, my main concern has been to argue against the concept of free will. From a mechanistic perspective, this is quite obvious or at least very likely, but my arguing is not directly connected to and relying on this philosophical view, and I believe it wouldn’t need to change were it not the case. However, excluding free will is quite a controversial view, and perhaps one need not go quite so far to support Gadamer’s statement.

Earlier, I suggested that humanity “belonging” to history amongst other things includes us being shaped by history, and I think it is hard to argue against that. No one is living in a vacuum, and our experiences, the people and environment around us in combination with our genes are crucial for who we are. If someone, for that matter, was, in fact, living i a vacuum, that person would definitely be affected by that.

However, a concept can not have free will, and so the concept of history in on itself clearly has no more free will than humans do or do not have. How then can we belong to history, if our lack of free will prevents history from belonging to us? Part of the problem, i think, is that humans are a part of history. Looking at history from the outside-in, as an unchanging unity, it is obvious that history can not shape humans without ultimately changing itself. Consequently saying both that history does not belong to us and that we belong to history is paradoxical when using my earlier definition.

“It’s all about perspective” one might say, and in this case it seems like it might be. “History does not belong to us, but we belong to history”, Gadamer states. Considering history as an unchanging unity, neither seems to be the case. Yet my perception is that we are shaped by history, as seen above, and there are countless examples of people who have changed history. They might or might not have done it by actual free will (whatever that is), but they changed history nevertheless. The problem with looking at history as an unchanging unit, or looking from the outside-in as I said earlier, not matter how sensible it may seem or even if it actually is the case that any action is a necessary consequence of something else, is that the fact remains that our perspective *is* from the inside. Consequently, that is perhaps the only sensible way to live. From this perspective, it seems to me that we belong to history, yes, but history belongs to us as well.

Moreover, believing that the world does “belong to us” leaves a great deal more room for moral responsibility than the opposite. It can be debated whether there even is such a thing as right or wrong, but regardless of the “true” answer to any of these questions, if there even are such answers, it seems to me that abandoning morality altogether is ultimately a bad idea.