# Remember the Future (1/2)

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# Remember the Future

(1 out of 2)

In *Through the Looking Glass*, that book that children find so amusing and adults so confusing, there is a well-known exchange between Alice and the White Queen. The Queen says, “there is one great advantage in it, that one’s memory works both ways.” And when Alice replies “I’m sure mine only works one way . . . I can’t remember things before they happen,” the Queen remarks, “It’s a poor sort of memory that only works backwards.”

I am not sure what Lewis Carroll had in mind when he wrote these words almost a century and a half ago. What’s more, I am quite sure nobody really knows! But I choose to interpret them as part of a strong yet humorous protest against a modern world that had become all too logical, a world that did not realize how topsy-turvy it would look from a different perspective. In the world in which Carroll lived, a unicorn would have been considered impossible; but in the world that Alice visits, the unicorn looks at her and declares her to be unbelievable.

In the world in which Carroll lived, which has also become our world, everything could be explained on the basis of the past. To “understand” something had become practically the same as to know what previous events caused it. It was mostly a matter of looking at the past to see what caused an event, for all events were the result of past events working within the framework of a set of laws. This was true of physical events, such as a billiard ball moving another; and it was also true of historical events, which supposedly could be understood purely

on the basis of the events that had preceded them.

It is to this orderly world that the White Queen throws her challenge: “It’s a poor sort of memory that only works backwards.”

Again, I don’t know what Carroll had in mind. But as I read these lines I am immediately reminded that when in our modern world we look for causes, what we mean is only what the ancient called “efficient causes,” and not what they would call “teleological causes,” or “final causes.” – or, if you will, “pushing” causes and “pulling” causes. If someone asks, “Why?”, the common answer is “Because.” Why does the sun rise every morning and set in the evening? Because the earth rotates. Why are you reading this particular book? Because the professor told me to do so. Why did the professor tell me to read it? Because when he read it he liked it. Why did he like it? Because it related to an experience he had in his childhood, when he saw a tree fall. Why did the tree fall? Because it had rained too much that year. Why had it rained so much that year? Because down in South America there was a phenomenon called El Niño, when the ocean current change. Why do they change? Because . . . And so if we knew all about the laws of nature we could keep on going backwards back to the big bang, or whatever it was. And then we would still have to ask, Why the big bang?

But the same question, “Why are you reading this book?”, can also be answered in the opposite direction. I am reading this book so as to know what it says. Why do you wish to know what it

says? So that I can be a physician. Why do you wish to be a physician? So that I can help people in distress. And so on.

Thus a “why” question can be answered in two ways. We can say that something happens “because” of prior events; but we can also say that it happens “so that,” with a purpose. When we give a “because” answer, we are working on the basis of a past memory. Or, as the White Queen would say, we are remembering backwards. But when we give a “so that” question we are remembering forward. When that student says he is reading a book because the professor told her to do so, she is remembering backward. And when she says that she is reading the book so she can become a doctor, she is remembering forward; she is reading the book on the basis of a vision of the future, of a purpose.

In more traditional language, or in more academic terms, these two ways of understanding the whys of reality, are traditionally called “efficient causes” and “final” or “teleological” causes.

Today, however, we hardly ever speak of final causes. When we ask for the cause of some phenomenon or event, we look back, trying to find a because. Actually, the demise of speech about final causes is such that if we tell someone that God is the “final cause” of all things what they understand is that God is the first cause before all causes, the first “because” of all things. But, as I’ll try to explain later, during earlier centuries, and throughout most of human history, a “final cause” was something completely different.

The dominance of efficient causes and the parallel eclipse of teleological or final causes is the result of the enormous success of the physical sciences in the last four centuries, and the concomitant success of their application in technology. What the physical sciences study, and then apply, is precisely what the ancients would call “efficient causes.” An efficient cause is, if you will, that which “pushes” an event to happen. A billiard ball falls into a pocket because another ball was hit by a cue. The angle and speed of the cue resulted in the speed and spin of that first ball. That spin and that speed then caused the second ball to move in a particular direction with the necessary force to fall into the pocket.

This methodology of looking at efficient causes is similarly used as the proper means to understand all phenomena, physical as well as historical, and then applied in all sorts of technology, from medical devices and treatments to computer science and space travel.



Things are not quite that simple when it comes to history. Historical events are brought about by a number of causes coalescing at a particular time. This is one reason why we can read the past in different ways. One person can look at the history of the Roman Empire and claim that its fall was caused by the influx of the Germanic “barbarians.” But another may look at the same history and claim that the greatness of the Roman Empire was due to the constant influx of new peoples who brought in new ideas, new wealth, and new energies. These divergent interpretations are clearly connected with present-day agendas. But the two interpretations have one thing in common: both try to explain the history of the Roman Empire in terms of

what happened “before,” that is, in terms of efficient causes. The debate is not about whether efficient causes are all there is, but rather about which are the appropriate efficient causes to understand an event. In this particular example, various historians will point to different “becauses.” The Roman Empire fell because the barbarians invaded. The Roman Empire fell because the Romans grew comfortable and lazy. The Roman Empire fell because it became too large to manage. The Roman Empire fell because it had grown and sustained itself by invading relatively rich neighbors, and once all such neighbors were conquered the system no longer worked. The Roman Empire fell because water systems used lead pipes.

All of these explanations, and many others, have been proposed. And, as in the case of the physical sciences and of their application in technology, we must concede that efficient causes are quite helpful in understanding and explaining any particular event. The physical sciences, and the technology that they are able to produce, would not be possible without an understanding of efficient causes. Such causes tell us how things work and what “laws of nature” regulate or produce certain events.

But then, in comes the White Queen with her apparently topsy-turvy remark that “It’s a poor sort of memory that only works backwards.”

With these words she reminds us that our current fixation on efficient causes is a relatively recent phenomenon. Throughout most of human history, people have not thought only in terms

of efficient causes, but also in terms of final causes, of goals or purposes. If today we hear that God is the “final cause” of creation, we tend to understand by this that God is the cause before all other causes. But when medieval thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas spoke of God as being the “final cause” of creation, they did not mean that God is at the beginning of all things. They did believe that, but they would express that point by saying that God is the “first efficient cause” of all things. What they meant by saying that God is the “final cause” of all things was that God is the future to which all things tend, the future that has called them into existence and will take them to their final purpose.

In simpler terms, what all this means is that it is possible to look at things happening, not only “because,” but also “so that”—it is not only that the past pushes events, but also that the future pulls them. These two ways of understanding reality are not mutually incompatible, as is shown by the case of the student who can say both that she is studying something because the professor told her to do so, and that she is doing it so that she may be a physician. To the same question, “Why,” she can answer both that she is reading the book “because” and that she is reading it “so that.”

Think again about that billiard ball falling into the pocket. But think now, as perhaps the White Queen would say, not in terms of efficient causes, but rather in terms of final causes, in terms of purposes. Could it be that the ball falls into the pocket because the pocket pulls it, that it was hit by another ball with a certain speed and a certain spin because it was to go into the pocket,

that the cue hit the first ball in a certain way because the pocket was calling the other ball?

My immediate reaction is to consider this absurd. After all, I have been taught over and over again that things happen because of efficient causes, that what is important is not the pocket, but the cue. But then, I go back to the *Looking Glass*, and I see the unicorn thinking that Alice is a strange creature, and I wonder.

At a more explicit level, both David Hume and Emmanuel Kant have cast serious doubts about the very notion of efficient causality. After all, have you ever seen a billiard ball moving another? No. What we have actually seen is a ball moving, coming to a stop where another is, and the second ball beginning to move. It is our mind that establishes the connection. And it is our emphasis on efficient causes that leads us to think that the first ball pushes the second. But at least in theory it makes just as much sense to think in the opposite direction, and to see the second ball pulling or calling the first to come hit it at a certain angle and with a certain speed and spin.

While this may seem strange to us, the truth is that even though in theory we explain things only by their *because*, in truth we arrange our lives, even in their most minute details, *so that*. A student burns the midnight oil not only *because* the teacher told her she had to learn this material, but also *so that* some day she may fulfil a dream and become a doctor. When yesterday I left my driveway and turned left, I did not do so *because* I was coming out of the

house, but rather *so that* I might get to the airport; and I got to the airport so that I could be here today. When in the morning I brush my teeth I do so not only *because* my mother taught me to brush my teeth, but also *so that* my mouth might feel better.

Significantly, as I read Scripture I find at least as many *so thats* as I find *becauses*. Indeed, the theme of a calling from the future is prevalent in Scripture—from God's calling creation into being by the divine Word to Jesus calling some fisherfolk to fish in other waters. Things are brought into existence by the Word of God calling them: "let there be." In Matthew 1.22, the birth of Jesus is explained by its purpose: "*so that* what had been spoken would be fulfilled." In 2.15, the flight into Egypt takes place *so that* the prophecy will be fulfilled. And a few verses later we are told that the family settled in Nazareth *because* of a certain political situation, but also "*so that* what had been spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled." And other examples abound.



However, while these various events take place *so that*, there is in them also an antecedent, a past promise that is to be fulfilled. The future from which God calls is not a capricious, unforeseeable future. It is a future that has been announced. There is a dialectic between the past and the future. The past announces the future, while the future calls the past to its fulfilment. The future is promised in the past. And precisely because the future is promised efficient causes work in order to bring about the announced future, the *so that*, the final cause.

“It’s a poor sort of memory that only works backwards,” says the White Queen. And she is right. She is part of a chess set, and a chess player who can only think in one direction, letting the pieces move only as if by efficient causes, will be a very poor player. The player has to envision the future, and from it move back to the present and to past moves. Although apparently moving only on the basis of its previous moves, the White Queen moves from the goal of checkmating the Black King.

“It’s a poor sort of memory that only works backwards.” And it is a poor sort of faith that only works from efficient causes, while forgetting the promised end. Because faith is grounded on the promises of God, the memory of faith also moves forward. What faith remembers is not only the past that has been experienced, but also the future that has been promised. As people of faith, we are called to live not only out of the past, but also out of the future.



This is why I have said repeatedly that history is never written solely from the past that someone recorded, but also from the present where the historian stands, and from the future that the historian hopes for or fears. The church history I write today is very different from the church history I first studied sixty years ago. This is so because true memory is generative. Memory is not just the past pure and simple. It is that past as it lives in us today. In my case a different present and a different future have led me to a different past; I now read that history from a different future —or, as the White Queen would have put it, from a different memory of the future.

Since I spoke earlier of the Roman Empire, the example of Eusebius of Caesarea comes to mind. Eusebius lived some of his early years during the regime of Diocletian, whose persecution of Christianity was both the last and the worst under the Roman Empire. His pastor, mentor, and friend Pamphilus of Caesarea was martyred in the year 309, when Eusebius was some 46 years old. Five years later, in 314, Eusebius became bishop of Caesarea. But the situation was now radically different, for just a few months earlier Emperor Constantine had put an end to persecution, and was now giving increasing signs of his inclination to support Christianity. When Eusebius wrote his famous *Church History*, he had access to vast written sources, and he used them to write his history of the church. But as he put these sources together he was not simply trying to record what they said. He was putting all his sources into a story; and a story has a movement, a direction, and a goal. As Eusebius saw things, with the new era that had dawned with Constantine and the peace of the church God's purpose had been attained, to bring together church and empire. Indeed, the empire had been created by God with a view to this glorious day; and so had the church. This announced a new future, and Eusebius was telling a story that had not been only pushed forward by prophets, apostles and martyrs, but had also been pulled, called forth from that future that he saw dawning with Constantine.

In brief, Eusebius' *Church History*, like any other history, was written not only out of the past represented in Origen's library and other sources, but also from the future that Eusebius was expecting and celebrating. It was written from the perspective of a "so that." Things happened so that something else could happen, so that we could come to the present and the future of

the church as Eusebius envisioned them. This was an imperial future, a future in which the empire and the church would march hand-in-hand. Given this perspective, it is no wonder that Eusebius had little use for that last book in Scripture, the book of Revelation, where angels proclaim, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!,” and where the imperial city that sits on seven hills is supplanted by the New Jerusalem that descends from heaven. What John of Patmos remembered was a long history in which the people of God had been freed from slavery in Egypt, then to be led into exile by the Babylonians, then to be conquered first by the Macedonians and then by the Romans. Therefore it is no wonder that while in exile at Patmos John can read history from the perspective of the fall of all empires.

The present in which Eusebius lived was very different from the present in which John lived. The future that Eusebius remembered was very different from the future that John of Patmos remembered. And therefore the pasts that they remembered were also different.

This should not surprise us. To this day, when an election approaches, each party reads past history from the perspective of its own agenda and hopes for the future. And so we end up with what amounts to at least two different George Washingtons, two different Constitutional Assemblies, and two different Abraham Lincolns.

I am not saying all of this in order to promote skepticism, much less a cynical indifferentism. There is an objective reality to the past that no historian can simply ignore. The past is like a

landscape to which different people are looking, each standing at a different place. Not one of them can see the landscape "as it really is," without the benefit and limitation of a perspective derived from a particular place. If any think or claim that what they see is the landscape as it is in itself, they either lie, or delude themselves, or both. The landscape is always filtered through a particular perspective. And, if any really think that their perspective is normative, that the landscape can only be understood from their particular place, this probably is because their place is a place of privilege, and their perspective is therefore an imperial perspective.

But still, the landscape is there. No matter at what place we stand, and no matter how much we would like to ignore some things, or inject others, there is an objectivity to the landscape. We cannot simply invent a landscape. The landscape is normative. It is canon, if you will. If it is a tropical landscape, we cannot put a polar bear into it. If it is an Arctic landscape, we cannot put a coconut palm in it.



What is true of the political history of a nation is also true of the history of the church. Almost a century and a half ago, historian Philip Schaff, a professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York city, put it in stark terms:

> The central current and ultimate aim of universal history is the Kingdom of God established by Jesus Christ. This is the grandest and most comprehensive institution in the world, as vast as humanity and as enduring as eternity. All other institutions are made subservient to it, and in its interest the whole world is governed. It is no afterthought of God, no subsequent emendation of the plan of creation, but is the eternal forethought, the controlling idea, the beginning, the middle, and the end of all his ways and works.[1]

[1]Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1886), 3.

From the point of view of today's canons of academic endeavor, this seems preposterous. A church historian making such claims would have difficulty receiving tenure today. It is possible – indeed, it is common procedure – to study the history of Christianity as one studies the history of any other social phenomenon. Things happen because other things happened before. But then, remember the unicorn. What is baffling to Alice makes perfect sense to the unicorn. And what from Alice's perspective is normal is monstrous to the eyes of the unicorn. Perhaps it is indeed a poor memory that can be remembered only in one direction. But in truth, although with different ways, what Schaff wrote is the same claim that Christians make every day as they attend church, as they pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done," as they seek to live the present life out of a promised future.

And what is true of nations and of the church is also true of individual people. Why are you here at this school? You are not here only because you were a good student, or because you received a scholarship, or because your parents pushed you in this direction. You are also here out of a future. It may be a future you have not even glimpsed yet. But you are here "so that" a future may become a reality. Your main task as a human being is to remember that future. And if you have difficulty envisioning that, remember that it is a poor memory that works only in one direction.