



## Historical thinking, causal explanation and narrative discourse in trainee teachers in Spain<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper examines the historical thinking skills of 283 students studying a Primary Education degree in Spain. In order to achieve this objective, we analysed texts they had written on a substantive historical event: the Christian expansion into the Muslim-ruled territories of the Iberian Peninsula. We employed a qualitative methodology in order to determine the level of presentational complexity according to the knowledge demonstrated, the second-order concepts included in their texts and the way in which the causal application of the process was expressed. This was combined with a quantitative assessment of the levels of complexity and their relationship with the cognitive levels of the texts according to the SOLO taxonomy. The results, demonstrated in the task, confirm that trainee teachers have extremely limited skills relating to history and a simplistic model of causal explanation, based on the contrast between union/hegemony and disintegration/weakness. This discourse is inherited from the national narrative imposed since the times of 19<sup>th</sup> century historiography.

**KEYWORDS:** Historical thinking, narrative analysis, causal explanation, history teaching, teacher training

### **New approaches to the teaching of history: historical thinking, narrative analysis and causal explanation**

A significant amount of recent scientific literature on the teaching of history defends the need for learning based on skills which allow pupils to interpret the past, going beyond mere factual or conceptual knowledge and the memorisation of dates, characters and events (Lévesque, 2008; Peck and Seixas, 2008; VanSledright, 2011; Wineburg, 2001). Such research makes a distinction between two types of historical content. On the one hand, there are substantive contents, also known as first-order contents. These are contents which make reference both to concepts or principles and to dates and specific historical events. On the other hand, there are strategic contents, also known as second-order contents, which are historical metaconcepts or methodological concepts. These are related to the skills of the historian, how historical sources

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are sought, selected and dealt with and his/her empathy and historical perspective (VanSledright, 2014; VanSledright and Limon, 2006).

Second-order contents are related to the definition of historical thinking which has been forged over the course of recent years. According to Seixas and Morton (2013), historical thinking is the creative process performed by historians in order to be able to interpret sources from the past and to generate historical narratives. In order to develop such skills, six key concepts must be taken into consideration: *historical significance*; *historical evidence*; *change and continuity*; *causes and consequences*; *historical perspectives* and the *ethical dimension of history*. The influence of research carried out in USA, Canada and England on the definition of these concepts and their research proposals and application in the classroom cannot be denied (Lee, Ashby and Dickinson, 2004; Lee, 2005; Monte-Sano, 2010; VanSledright, 2011; Wineburg, 2001).

These studies agree on the need for teachers to question the model of cognitive learning in the case of history (VanSledright, 2014). They consider that historical thinking is acquired by means of gradual participation in the practice of the historian (Gómez, Ortuño and Molina, 2014). In this context, recent studies have focused on the argumentation and narrative representation of the past. In fact, this process derives from historiographic discussions regarding the value of narration in the explanation of history (Ankersmith, 2001). As has been pointed out by Carretero and Van Alphen (2014), historical knowledge and the construction of narratives are intimately linked.

Narrative thinking is the basic mental operation which gives meaning to the historical past and enables it to be organised (Carretero and Atorresi, 2008; Ricoeur, 1987; Rösen, 2005). If we ask a student to produce a written synthesis, we can observe what he/she knows about different processes and how he/she represents and organises them. Historical narratives are a relevant source to carry out research on historical knowledge and the ability to provide it with meaning, as has been demonstrated in studies such as those of Barca (2015), Henríquez and Ruíz (2014), Kropman, Van Boxtel and Van Drie (2015), Lévesque, Croteau and Grani (2015) and Sáiz and López Facal (2015 and 2016). The analysis of social representations of the past by means of narratives is a transcendental topic which reaches beyond mere academic curiosity, as has been stated by Klein (2013). It becomes a crucial issue when the narrators are trainee teachers as they are susceptible to reproducing certain stereotypical social representations of the past and of collective memory in their future teaching careers (Pavié, 2011; Souto, 2014). Detecting these elements in the training period of these students will help to improve history teaching and the understanding of social phenomena.

In addition to the social representation of the past, it must be remembered that the use of the temporal dimension, the establishment of causal nexus and a moral perspective are implicit in narrative discourse. Therefore, the use of narratives allows us to reflect on history as a construction (Bage, 1999; Topolski, 2004). Resorting to the construction of narratives is precisely what can enable us to assess the internal processes of historical thinking. According to Bruner's theories (1986; 1990), both the level of substantive knowledge (the enumeration of certain contents regarding an event) and the level of awareness or the level of second-order contents (what is known about beliefs, motives, emotions and will in events which occurred in the past) can be discerned. At the same time, the texts provide information on the progression of learning and the students' ability to organise and understand the past. As McAdams (2006) has shown, the structure of the text, the justifications, causality and paradoxes reflected in the narrative composition are all clear indicators of the maturity of the thinking.

The idea appears to be widespread that the explanation of history is characterised by an allusion to causal explanation (cause and consequence); in other words, to the multiplicity of

causes which intervene in a complex manner in the course of historical facts and which, in turn, give rise to the consequences which make up historical evolution (Buxton, 2016; Woodcock, 2011). Chapman (2013) distinguishes between categories of a descriptive nature (those with temporal content and duration) and those which are explanatory in nature (function and importance). Along the same lines, Seixas and Morton (2013) establish five guidelines regarding what should characterise causal historical explanation: the origin of the change is found in the multiplicity of causes and results in a multiplicity of consequences; the influence or repercussion of the causes is variable; the historical events are explained by the interrelation of the historical characters concerned and the social, political economic, etc. conditions; the possibility of there being unpredictable consequences and that events in history were not inevitable.

Taking the proposals of Seixas and Morton (2013) as the analytical basis for historical thinking, a series of categories of methodological concepts have been chosen in order to analyse the texts produced by the students of the Primary Education degree: *historical significance, causes and consequences, change and continuity* and *ethical dimension*. A further field of analysis derived from SOLO taxonomy, used to establish levels of cognitive complexity in narratives from higher education (Biggs, Tangs, 2007), can be added to these categories. We have also used these narratives to analyse the most widely-used model of causal explanation and the continued existence of the national narrative inherited from the 19<sup>th</sup> century when articulating the causes and consequences of that process.

## **Methodology**

### ***Objectives***

The objective of this study is to identify levels of historical competence and models of causal explanation in texts written by trainee primary education teachers. In order to achieve this aim, five specific objectives were proposed:

- To ascertain the use of methodological historical concepts in their narratives as indicators of *how* they organise the contents historically.
- To classify the complexity and coherence of their discourse employing the SOLO taxonomy.
- To determine the level of substantive contents which they present in their texts.
- To analyse the typology of causal explanation employed by the trainee teachers in their texts.
- To recognise the characters of the national narrative present in their writing by means of the aforementioned causal explanation.

### ***Population and sample***

The study population are students from a Primary Education degree studying the last obligatory subject of the area of social science teaching in the universities of Murcia and Valencia. The sample was probabilistic in nature: all of the groups which studied the subjects had the same probabilities of being selected. It was a non-stratified sample. Six groups of fourteen students studying these subjects were selected, making up 42% of the total population.

	Frequency	Percentage
University of Murcia	151	53.4
University of Valencia	132	46.6
Total	283	100.0

Table 1: Participants in this research

### *Analytical tools and categorisation*

The university students were asked to write a text synthesising the process of the Christian conquest of Muslim territory in the Iberian Peninsula during Medieval times. This task was to be carried out during class time of a subject on social science teaching at the beginning of the academic year (September-October 2013). They were given no instructions regarding length, content or structure in order to minimise interference in their discourse. This type of master narrative is an appropriate tool for assessing methodological historical concepts and for analysing social representations of the past and their relationship with collective memory. The requested contents (the Christian expansion into Muslim-ruled territories in the Middle Ages in the Iberian Peninsula) have been a key element in Spain's national narrative from its origin as a metanarrative in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Sáiz, 2015).

The validity of the data gathering tool (a narrative of historical synthesis) in order to achieve the proposed aims was based on studies such as those of Bage (1999), Carretero and Bermúdez (2012), Carretero and Van Alphen (2014) and López, Carretero and Rodríguez-Moneo (2015). In spite of the dominance of qualitative methods, from the perspective of social psychology, advances are being made by combining them with quantitative methods which allow social representations to be investigated by way of narratives. Studies such as those of Fülöp and László (2013), László (2008), Liu and László (2007), McAdams (2006) and Schiff (2007) make detailed analyses of social representations of history and the use of tools for making inferences and valid interpretations by means of narrative research. The pertinence of this tool has been validated by experts in the teaching of social sciences from three Spanish universities, according to the steps proposed by Alfageme, Miralles and Monteagudo (2010). The qualitative data was gathered and analysed in the Filemaker Pro database, which allowed us to improve the formulation of the categories and the limits between them as we worked. The quantitative data was then codified in the SPSS v.19.0 statistical package.

The next step was to establish different categories of data, which were, in turn, divided into levels. In order to examine the methodological historical concepts presented in the texts, the four categories for classification established by Seixas and Morton (2013) were used, in order to distinguish different levels of progression (null, low, medium and high). The first methodological concept analysed was historical relevance; the evaluation of the degree of importance attributed to a historical phenomenon. Secondly, the concept of causality was examined, which implies the capacity to explain the historical phenomenon by resorting to the complex network of multiple causes and consequences on which it is based. Thirdly, historical time (change and continuity) was examined. This consists of describing changes via the appropriate use of sequencing. Finally, we analysed the concept of ethical dimension, which implies the ability to make explicit or implicit ethical value judgements on the phenomenon.

The pilot empirical analysis enabled us to codify four levels of complexity in markers of historical thinking. Level 0, or null, implies the absence of methodological concepts, coinciding

with a lack of substantive information and/or considerable historical errors. Level 1, or basic, was attributed to the texts which were limited to describing a minimum level of historical information, presented in a linear way or with at least one marker of historical thinking, albeit with an extremely low level. Level 2, or medium, corresponds to writing employing at least two markers of historical thinking, one with a medium level and the other with a low level. Finally, we established level 3 for texts demonstrating a high degree of historical thinking by integrating one or more markers with a high level of consolidation in terms of explanation. Table 2 summarises these levels and their respective criteria.

	<b>LEVEL 0</b>	<b>LEVEL 1</b>	<b>LEVEL 2</b>	<b>LEVEL 3</b>
<b>Causality</b>	The narrative does not contain any causes or consequences of the historical process.	The narrative contains one cause of the evolution of the historical process.	The narrative contains several causes which justify the historical process, though without establishing a hierarchy.	The narrative visualises the ability to explain the historical phenomenon by resorting to a complex network of multiple causes and consequences in an integrated and hierarchical way.
<b>Historical time (Change and continuity)</b>	The narrative contains no allusion to the changes and continuities which were brought about by the historical process in society.	The narrative contains some kind of allusion to a significant change from which the historical process originated.	Several significant processes of change are presented in the narrative and reference is made to long-term continuities.	The narrative visualises an appropriate use of sequencing. Flexible criteria of periodisation have been employed and temporal interconnections in the changes and continuities alluded to have been established.
<b>Historical relevance</b>	The narrative contains no allusion to the relevance of the historical phenomenon in terms of understanding social, economic or political processes.	The narrative contains some degree of allusion to the relevance of the historical process, although neither its significance nor the scope of its relevance is determined.	The narrative mentions several elements of the significance of the historical phenomenon in differing social, economic or political spheres, albeit without establishing a hierarchy.	The narrative demonstrates the importance of the historical phenomenon in understanding society today and historical changes. These narratives show the connection between the specific historical process and others.
<b>The ethical dimension of history</b>	The narrative contains no value judgements on the historical phenomenon.	A certain degree of implicit value judgement is made in the narrative regarding the historical phenomenon, although it is not correctly explained.	The narrative contains explicit value judgements on the historical phenomenon, although no temporal or explanatory interconnection is established.	The narrative contains explicit ethical value judgements on the historical phenomenon. The texts relate the historical process with the present whilst still understanding it within its own context.

Table 2. Levels of complexity in the methodological concepts of the narratives

As far as the substantive contents are concerned, four additional levels were established. Level 0 corresponds to those texts which contained significant historical vacuums, the absence of or serious errors in information, either due to not providing any data or by presenting irrelevant information. Level 1 refers to texts which merely present descriptive information with a linear organisation, providing information regarding certain events or facts in a correctly ordered manner. Basically, this level is concerned with selected political and territorial events, from the Muslim invasion of the Iberian Peninsula in 711 to the Christian conquest of the kingdom of Granada in 1492. Level 2 consists of texts containing the same basic narrative of political events but which combine the former with social, economic and cultural information and, even, evaluations of the Muslim legacy or of the period itself. Level 3 corresponds to those texts containing a greater wealth of information, integrating explanations of political contents with other, well-structured, information of a more socio-economic and cultural nature.

Finally, the analysis was completed by examining the level of complexity of the narratives according to the SOLO taxonomy (Biggs and Tangs, 2007), employing the categories established in this model: pre-structural (level 0), uni-structural (level 1), multi-structural (level 2) and relational and extended abstract (level 3).

### ***Analytical methods and techniques***

Due to the nature of the research topic and the data gathering tool, it became necessary to adopt a methodological design combining techniques and strategies which can be classified as non-experimental methods. More specifically, this design lies within the framework of a mixed, or holistic, model as it integrates both qualitative and quantitative methodological perspectives and allows for proposals for improvement to be made based on the systematic, rigorous, credible, trustworthy and valid gathering of information and evidence (Lukas and Santiago, 2009). With this approach, the comprehensive-transformative potential of qualitative research is brought together with the explanatory-predictive value of quantitative research (Sabariego and Bisquerra, 2012). The most important research on history teaching from this area of knowledge also insists on the complementary nature of quantitative and qualitative approaches (Barca, 2005; Barton, 2005 and 2012).

The research began with an exploratory cross-sectional design via a group (15% of the data gathered). Following this initial exploration, we moved on to a descriptive cross-sectional design. Quantitative analysis techniques were applied via the codification of the categories which allowed for this, using the SPSS statistical package: the analysis of frequencies, averages, percentages, chi-squared tests, contingency tables and the analysis of the dependence between variables. The aim of this analysis was to reveal the underlying structure of the subjects' narratives and to verify the different contrasts between the thematic categories which we considered to be of interest.

From this holistic approach, qualitative methodology was also integrated from a phenomenological point of view. This concerns describing, comparing, explaining and understanding the reality being studied from the point of view of the participants (in this case future primary school teachers). By carrying out the phenomenological study, we attempted to discover those aspects linked to the problems of our research which appear to be pertinent and significant in the perceptions, beliefs, feelings and actions of the socio-educational agents following an inductive procedure, as recommended by Sandín (2003) and Sabariego, Massot and Dorio (2012).

The handling of the qualitative data was carried out via an analysis of the conceptual and narrative complexity of the students' writing and its later codification via the aforementioned markers (see table 2). In order to achieve this in the case of this study, it was deemed appropriate to carry out an open codification when determining the content of the discourses and to be able to determine the levels within the categories and the analytical concepts taken into consideration, thereby following strategies derived from *grounded theory* (Strauss and Corbin 1991; Flick, 2007), which have also been used in other studies on history teaching based on narratives (Barca, 2005 and 2010; Barca and Schmidt, 2013).

## Results

### *The historical thinking skills of future teachers*

An initial reading of the results obtained (tables 3, 4 and 5) reveals the low level of knowledge regarding history of the students studying the Primary Education degree, both in the data extracted from the University of Murcia and in that of the University of Valencia. First of all, this can be observed in the lack of substantive contents, *what* they know regarding the historical content they were asked to reproduce, in spite of the fact that this should come from their basic education and be present in their informal knowledge. Secondly, this can be considered to be due to the absence of skill in organising a narrative in terms of history, *how* they narrate or present such content. More than half of the students did not provide any information worthy of mention and the same percentage did not have a minimum level of presentational skills. These narratives (around half of the sample) lacked a logical narrative structure and were full of historical errors.

	Frequency	Percentage
Null (0)	142	50.2
Basic (1)	107	37.8
Medium (2)	33	11.7
High (3)	1	0.4
Total	283	100.0

Table 3. Level of historical contents in the narratives

	Frequency	Percentage
Null (0)	139	49.1
Basic (1)	119	42.0
Medium (2)	24	8.5
High (3)	1	0.4
Total	283	100.0

Table 4. Level of concepts of historical thinking in the narratives

	Frequency	Percentage
Pre-structural	131	46.3
Uni-structural	120	42.4
Multi-structural	31	11.0
Relational	1	0.4
Total	283	100.0

Table 5. Level of the narratives according to the SOLO taxonomy

If we focus the analysis on historical thinking skills (table 4), only 9% of the students have shown in their texts that they have control of one or several second-order concepts in a consistent manner (levels 2 and 3). It is significant that 91% of the students do not appear to have knowledge of, and, therefore, do not make appropriate use of historical metaconcepts or the capacity of organising their discourse (the accumulated percentage of levels 0 and 1). This group of students largely coincides with the 88% who demonstrated lower levels of presentational complexity in their discourse according to the SOLO taxonomy (table 5); the accumulated percentage of narratives classified as pre-structural (with a null or erroneous approach) and uni-structural (with a simple, linear narrative focused on just one concept).

In the texts produced by the students there is a great scarcity of such basic second-order concepts as the explanation of the causes and consequences of a historical process or the allusion to the social, economic, political and cultural changes and continuities. As can be observed in table 6, 70% of the narratives contain no markers to show the relevance of the historical process in their discourse, 85% do not allude to the causes and consequences which led to the advance of the Christian kingdoms into Muslim-ruled territory or to the different temporal rhythms of the process. In the same way, 86% of the narratives do not present contents regarding the changes and continuities associated with the historical process in question and 96% do not show any markers associated with the concept of the ethical dimension of history. In other words, they do not employ value judgements which interconnect past facts with the present-day social, economic, political or cultural context. Furthermore, the students who did use these historical metaconcepts in their narratives did so, on the whole, at a very low level.

Categorisation	Relevance	Causality	Historical time	Ethical dimension
Null	198 70%	243 85.8%	244 86.2%	272 96.1%
Low	66 23.3%	25 8.9%	31 11%	7 2.5%
Medium	19 6.7%	14 5%	8 2.8%	4 1.4%
High	0 0	1 0.3%	0 0	0 0
Total	283 100%	283 100%	283 100%	283 100%

Table 6. Second-order concepts in the narratives



### ***The causal explanation***

As can be observed in table 4, only 15% of the narratives introduced some element of causal explanation, with the lower levels of use being clearly predominant. The most common profile was the presentation of a single cause with a clearly simplistic model. In order to explain the Christian expansion over Muslim territory or the arrival of the Muslims, the concepts of union/hegemony are used in comparison to dispersion/weakness. Hegemony, which is based on the territorial advance of Christians or Muslims, is linked to union and a strong central power. On the other hand, the weakness of both sides is associated with dispersion, the decentralisation of the territory and the loss of a strong central control. This explanatory model must be linked to the continuation of a traditional interpretation of the history of Spain inherited from the 19<sup>th</sup> century (López Facal and Sáiz, 2016), a national narrative in which traditional historiography associated the idea of strength with territorial union and a centralising authority with sweeping powers. On the other hand, this type of historiography links periods of political, social and economic decadence to the division and disintegration of the territory (the Taifa Kingdoms against the Christian advance or the division of the Visigoth Kingdom against the Muslim invasion). This aspect can be appreciated in some of the narratives:

First of all, mention must be made of the decadence of the Visigoth Kingdoms which occupied the Peninsula. This favoured the progressive invasion of the Muslims which culminated in the Caliphate of Al-Andalus...Secondly...a second phase must be highlighted, which can be referred to as the 'Reconquista', in which the Muslim caliphates were weakened by internal struggles. This was taken advantage of by the Christians in order to reconquer the occupied territories (Ref. 42 UV).

The disputes between the different caliphs led to the Muslim Kingdoms gradually losing power as many of these kingdoms were divided into smaller ones (taifas) and, therefore, they became less powerful, both in economic and in military terms. This was taken advantage of by the different Christian Kingdoms, which, on many occasions, joined forces and began to reconquer the territory (Ref. 43 UV).

The Muslims invaded the Iberian Peninsula in 711. The speed with which they conquered the territory was due to the fragmentation of the territory of the Peninsula at the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> century (Ref. 45 UM).

It is also necessary to highlight the fact that the models of causal explanation presented in these narratives show a view of the historical processes which is related to Todorov's (2003) proposal. There are four ideal types for the analysis of narratives in the model proposed by Todorov: the benefactor (in which the narrator presents him/herself or his/her social group as the one who acts correctly); the evildoer (in which the one who does wrong is represented); the beneficiary (who is the receiver of the good action from a passive perspective; and the victim (who receives the evil from the others). There are two positive elements in these types: the hero (the one who does good) and the victim (who has a moral complaint). The other two types have a negative character (Chapman, 2016). In the narratives analysed, we can observe a sense of identification with a specific group (the Christian Kingdoms as opposed to the Muslims). Furthermore, when moral arguments are used in providing causal explanations, the Christians regularly appear as victims of the Muslims in the justification of the "reconquest" of lost territory. On the other hand, when mentioning the causes which explain the Muslim advance, mention is only made of the disintegration and lack of union of the Visigoth kingdoms. It is also significant to point out that, in many of the narratives, the Catholic Monarchs are considered as "heroes", to whom a fundamental role in the process of territorial conquest is attributed. This leading role is justified, in several of the narratives, by the atrocities and immoral actions carried out by the Muslims towards the Christians. These narrative views of history show the strong influence of

moral preconceptions and prejudices regarding “us” and “them” which are in agreement with Rösen's (2015) approach to narrative analysis:

The Christians rebelled because the Muslims wanted to impose their religion, their culture and their customs. The Catholic Monarchs completed the reconquest in Granada (Ref. 52 UM).

The Catholic Monarchs conquered the territory for the Christians because the Muslims forced the Christians to convert. If not, they were killed, without consideration for whether they were adults or children (Ref. 117, UM).

## **Conclusions**

The results indicate that the trainee teachers who participated in our research have not received an adequate level of education in terms of history as far as both substantive contents and historical thinking skills (causal explanation among them) are concerned. Therefore, they can hardly be considered to be in a suitable state to teach history with the minimum level of disciplinary and educational sufficiency, at least according to the standards currently accepted by researchers in the field of social science and history teaching (Wineburg, 2001; Barton and Levstik, 2004; VanSledright, 2014). This problem is derived both from the design of the curriculum of Primary Education degrees in Spain and from the irregular and insufficient level of history teaching received at school. In both primary and secondary education, a model of history teaching prevails which is derived from the memorisation of factual and conceptual contents. This model is explicitly reflected in one of the narratives we analysed:

The Muslims who had settled in the Peninsula years before were invaded by James I and his troops. I don't remember anything else because I was taught to learn by heart and I had to throw it up onto an exam paper at the time. At least I suppose that is what happened because I really don't remember having studied this (ref. 130 UV).

In this text, the memorisation of contents as the basis of prior history education is explicitly recognised; contents which simply cannot be recalled are not known and, therefore, cannot be easily explained in terms of their cause. The learning of history at school is derived from a model of learning by heart for an exam, which either consists of short questions or of remembering academic texts, which are normally determined by the activities and the contents of the school textbook. This situation allows us to understand perfectly the limited control of causal explanation demonstrated in the narratives of these future primary education teachers. In order to pass their history exams, they have not been required to make arguments or to construct narratives resorting to causal explanation. They have not learned these skills and, therefore, have not shown them in their texts, nor will they be able to teach them. A change to a curriculum based on basic educational skills would hardly have modified this model of learning history, which has become a routine belonging to the disciplinary code of history as a subject, its validity in textbooks (Gómez, 2014; Gómez, Rodríguez and Miralles, 2015; Sáiz, 2013 and 2015) and the practices of teaching such as exams (Fuster, 2016; Gómez and Miralles, 2015; Sáiz and Fuster, 2014).

Many studies have shown the educational potential of teaching skills relating to strategic contents and historical thinking in primary education. The studies of Cooper (2013), Levstik and Barton (2008) and VanSledright (2002) point the way towards making use of sources, research methods, reflection and historical reasoning based on causal explanation. However, the epistemological idea of history as closed knowledge is deeply rooted in countries such as Spain, where the teaching of this subject is based on a linear narrative of past facts which have been previously selected by the official curriculum, the textbook, the teaching programme of the school and, finally, by the teacher. Faced with this situation, it is necessary to intervene transversally in order to increase the presence of history education (in terms of substantive contents and historical skills, which are both intimately related) in the early stages of education

(primary and secondary), a factor which must be complemented by training future teachers in these matters.

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## Endnotes

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