

# To Professor \_\_\_\_\_: An Essay Regarding My Thesis, of Which You Did Not Approve

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You know the one; the thesis of the paper I spent the past eight weeks writing (not including library time and online groping for thematic inspiration after learning the assigned topic.). The same eight weeks, you recall, that you changed the format and requirements of said paper no less than four times. Yes, *that* thesis. As you'll remember, you drew a red circle around the second half of my introductory paragraph, connected to a line with a little arrow on the end which pointed to the word "No." The "No" just sort of hung there, without even the elaboration of punctuation. To be fair, you did underline it heavily not just once but three times, and even tore the paper just a tiny bit at the end of one pen stroke. I suppose this might be interpreted as vehemence. And, there was some explanation at the end of the paper. I believe you expressed your "disappointment" in my paper, and said that, given my "intellectual capacities," you'd expected better. Unless I am completely misreading the situation, I must reluctantly conclude that you disagree violently with the entire premise of my paper.

In the spirit of academic challenge (which I'm certain you respect, as it is the steel which sharpens the blade of intellect . . . ), I would like to say, Sir, respectfully and with the fullest readiness for further discussion, that I disagree with *you*. I suppose I could reply in kind and simply mail you a 46-point font "Yes." However, I believe the topic one worth discussing, which is why I wrote a twelve-page paper on it.

The basic idea that I advanced in my paper was that the topic we were assigned (a World-Shaping Event in History) was meaningless. That is, unless confined by mutually agreed-upon boundary conditions, which you declined to discuss. If we are talking about the "world" of human beings—living, marrying, fighting, and dying, in an endless fractal pattern of emergence and decay—then it boils down to this: *everything* we do changes the world. We can only meaningfully discuss degree, and then only when our subjective assessment coincides as to what we consider important. To illustrate: is it not likely that you and I would define as "world-shaping" the voyage of Lewis and Clark? Yet, it is very unlikely

that a schoolgirl from Argentina, or a Kalahari tribesman, would ever learn of it, or consider it remotely important if they did. Further, were this insurmountable issue of perspective somehow overcome by our personal mutual agreement, can we disregard the mundane? Is not the mundane equally “world-shaping,” (reducing us again to the necessity of endless definitions around the edges of “important”)? Our actions are endless ripples in an ocean. These reinforce and cancel one another constantly in an infinite, and at any given moment, unique pattern. More, the course of any one ripple becomes impossible to trace after only a few interactions. Maybe you’ll never know, for instance, that the guy you cut off in traffic this morning—just lost his job, buried his dog, and divorced wife—and your inconsequential action sent him off of a bridge by midday. And the fallout of that act spreads, and the next, and the next . . .

Onto more traditionally “discussable” World-Shaping Events in History: if I say that the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima changed the world, is that really an event standing alone in a vacuum? Don’t we have to move further back the causal chain to the bomb’s invention? The Manhattan Project? Einstein’s remarkable letter to President Roosevelt? How about Marie Curie and her interesting observation that an unnamed element seemed to be giving off particles, for which she coined the novel word “radioactive”? And what of the smaller events that comprise the chain between each of these events? These are only threads, noticeable for one reason or another, in the fabric of history. Chance meetings, conversations, stray thoughts, odd coincidences, are the fabric itself, the solidity that comprises all that vast, uncharted space between the thin fibers we subjectively choose to name “History” and deem our search complete.

No, the mundane, by overwhelming preponderance, *must* describe the lion’s share of history. Einstein rides in an elevator, first invented by god-knows-who, and conceives of the relative nature of acceleration. Sylvia Plath goes, by chance, to a party and meets Ted Hughes, the catalyst for her “Ariel” poems. Hitler can sell neither paintings, nor books, and goes into politics instead. It is the philosophical equivalent of chaos theory. So we condense, and call it “history.” It is the inscrutable, the random nature of history which I took up as my thesis. And I further posited, that the human experience, what we call history when we re-tell it, is also inherently random. I believe this randomness to cause an intellectual knee-jerk reaction, much like gun recoil, such as when a person like you reads a student’s topic sentence pointing this pesky chaos out. It is the Intelligentsia’s equivalent of

warding off demons with fire, this magical control-through-analysis, as though reciting “Facts” makes them “Truths.” We coin phrases to encapsulate the incomprehensible (“collective behavior?”) like latter day alchemist’s intent, not on gold, but the absolute. The other word for absolute knowledge, by the by, is omniscience. God-like knowledge is quite the goal; no wonder the recoil. Such a discussion seems logical to me, not least because it reconciles all of the best descriptions of the universe, with which I am familiar.

The altering-in-interpretation is history’s counterpart to Schrödinger’s cat; we cannot ever say what actually happened, not simply because of limitations on our knowledge, because events do not possess inherent “measurability.” If you disagree, consider what answers people from different places would give when asked about Christopher Columbus’ contribution to history. Perhaps Boston, a Native American reservation, Santo Domingo, or Budapest, for example . . . History is liable to labeling and value comparisons only in the limited sense of one’s relative frame of reference (not to belabor the physics analogies). Consensus is not elusive; it is contrary to the nature of history itself.

That was my thesis. Of course, for practicality, I realize the necessity of picking and choosing which things we deem “Historical and Important.” And please don’t misinterpret it as relativism; obviously some “Events” command our attention more than others. I just don’t think we should ignore the Emperor’s paradigmatic nudity either.

Perhaps you’ve some ideas for me?