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Research Question: Do our ancestors' mistakes and/or triumphs define who we are today?

The question of whether our ancestors' mistakes or triumphs define who we are today is a profound inquiry into the intricate relationship between history, identity, and human nature. This exploration goes beyond mere chronological events; it delves into the essence of our being, probing how the past weaves its threads into the fabric of our present selves. This topic resonates deeply, stirring personal reflections and shared contemplations alike. Within the details of these complexities, lie the keys to understanding our motivations, aspirations, and shared humanity. In synthesizing the varied perspectives on the impact of ancestral legacies, it becomes apparent that historical determinism, agency and choice, and a constructivist approach offer distinct lenses through which to interpret the dynamics of intergenerational influence.

One perspective that often surfaces in discussions on ancestral influence is historical determinism. This viewpoint suggests that our present circumstances are inexorably tied to the actions and decisions of those who came before us. It posits that the trajectory of our lives is predetermined by the historical forces set in motion by our ancestors. As Saul McLeod, PhD, contends in his article "Freewill Vs Determinism In Psychology," "The determinist approach proposes that all behavior has a cause and is thus predictable. Free will is an illusion, and our behavior is governed by internal or external forces over which we have no control" (McLeod, 2023). Indeed, history is filled with examples where societal structures, economic systems, and

cultural norms inherited from previous generations exert a profound influence on individuals and communities.

One example can be seen in old money, as seen with the Astor family and their influence in NYC through several generations. Another more specific example can be seen in the legacy of Commodore William Bainbridge, who holds a unique place in my family tree as my first cousin, eight times removed. (It goes back 8 generations.) His valorous acts during the War of 1812 resonate deeply within me, exemplifying the historical determinism inherent in shaping my own cultural identity. Bainbridge's triumphs in naval battles not only contributed to the broader narrative of American naval history but also influenced the collective consciousness of subsequent generations, instilling a sense of national pride and identity deeply intertwined with maritime prowess. As I reflect on his achievements, I am reminded of the enduring impact of familial connections and the role they play in shaping our understanding of history and identity.

Contrary to the deterministic view, the lens of agency and choice, or in other terms, free will, reframes the narrative, emphasizing the transformative potential inherent in human autonomy. This perspective contends that while our ancestors' actions may set the stage, it is our own decisions and choices that ultimately shape our identity and trajectory. McLeod further elaborates on this idea in his article "Freewill Vs Determinism In Psychology" by stating, "Free will is the idea that we are able to have some choice in how we act and assumes that we are free to choose our behavior. In other words, we are self-determined."

Consider my own story, wherein the agency and choices I've made contribute to shaping my cultural identity. Growing up amidst diverse cultural influences, I have encountered a myriad of perspectives and traditions. Despite the challenges and uncertainties I faced, I made a

conscious decision to embrace elements of my cultural heritage, drawing strength from my familial roots and community connections.

Much like my 3rd great grandfather, Marriner Wood Merrill, whose pioneering spirit courses through my veins, my journey involves navigating through various hardships and obstacles while remaining steadfast in my commitment to preserving and honoring my cultural identity. From embracing the legacy of a religion that he was a key part of (an apostle in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints,) to wanting to learn his stories to keep his memory alive, each choice I make contributes to the ongoing evolution of my cultural identity, enriching the tapestry of my heritage for future generations. As I walk in the footsteps of my 3x great-grandfather, I am reminded of the resilience and determination that characterize my familial lineage, guiding me in my quest to uphold our shared legacy with pride and reverence.

A third perspective, rooted in the principles of constructivism, explains that our understanding of the past is not a fixed reality but rather a dynamic, socially constructed narrative. In simpler terms, constructivism suggests that our view of history isn't set in stone; instead, it's a changing story shaped by society. In this view, the significance of our ancestors' actions depends on the culture, politics, and ideas of today. As Saul McLeod, PhD, asserts in his article "Constructivism Learning Theory & Philosophy Of Education," "Constructivism is a learning theory that emphasizes the active role of learners in building their own understanding. Rather than passively receiving information, learners reflect on their experiences, create mental representations, and incorporate new knowledge into their schemas" (McLeod, 2024). This notion of active engagement with knowledge resonates deeply with the idea that our interpretation of history is not predetermined but rather a product of our ongoing engagement with it.

Examine the example of my 13th great-grandparents, William and Mary Brewster, whose legacy as Pilgrim settlers offers a lens through which to explore the constructivist nature of cultural identity. The interpretation of the Brewsters' journey and contributions to American colonial history varies depending on the cultural narratives and ideological frameworks within which their story is situated. Their decision to travel to the New World, where they established a community that included indentured servants, raises questions about the complexities of identity formation. While their actions reflect the norms and practices of their time, how do we reconcile this aspect of their history with our contemporary values and understanding of social justice?

In examining the question of whether our ancestors' mistakes or triumphs define who we are today through the lenses of historical determinism, agency and choice, and a constructivist approach, we gain insight into the complex interplay between past legacies and present realities. It's a delicate balance between acknowledging the actions of our ancestors and recognizing their significance in shaping our identities while also critically examining their choices within the context of their time.

Personally, I believe in the importance of embracing our family history and the legacy they left behind, as we are undeniably a part of their narrative. However, it's essential to put their decisions into historical context and not view them in black and white. For instance, while acknowledging the achievements of William and Mary Brewster as Pilgrim settlers, we must also confront the uncomfortable reality of indentured servitude that was prevalent during their era. Similarly, while honoring Marriner Wood Merrill's contributions to Mormon heritage and the settling of Utah as a pioneer, we cannot overlook the complexities of polygamy within his cultural context. As I reflect on my own identity, I grapple with the legacy of my ancestors, acknowledging both their triumphs and their mistakes. By critically examining their actions

within the context of their era and considering how they intersect with my present values and beliefs, I find that I can navigate the intricacies of identity formation and strive to reconcile the complexities of my heritage with my evolving understanding of social justice and equity.

Ultimately, we should strive to embrace the positive aspects of our family history while acknowledging and learning from the mistakes of the past. By doing so, we can navigate the complexities of our heritage with empathy and understanding, fostering reconciliation across generations. It's through this process of reflection, reinterpretation, and redefinition of our collective past that we can pave the way for a more inclusive and equitable future.

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