

## **Episode 8. Absorbing a distorted view of history without noticing it.**

Welcome to philosophy for the real world. I'm Professor Thomas White.

This is going to be a different sort of episode from the ones I've done so far. It's "practical" in the sense that it focuses on an ordinary object you may see in the real world every day. In fact, it's something so ordinary you may not even notice it. But I want you to think about whether this *ordinary something*—in this case, a sign telling you you've entered a particular town or city—is encouraging you to have a distorted sense of history.

### History versus propaganda

One of the complaints by Native Americans and other indigenous peoples is that when the European historians wrote about their famous Age of Discovery, the accounts were closer to propaganda than history.

Ideally, we'd like to think that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we've moved past that. But have we? Do we still do things that don't simply ignore the fact that Native Americans lived in North America before the Europeans, but almost suggest they weren't here at all?

Consider the following.

I live in Massachusetts. At the border of each municipality is a white sign with large black print. It says “ENTERING whatever town it is”; it gives the date the town was incorporated; and it displays the Massachusetts state seal.

I recently moved to Plymouth. So our sign says, “ENTERING PLYMOUTH,” Incorporated 1620,” and displays the state seal. (For now, I’ll skip over the controversy over the fact that the seal shows a Native American beneath a colonial arm holding a sword.) The signs are so common, we barely notice them—which is the problem.

Let’s start with the sign for Eastham, a town on Cape Cod. The sign says that Eastham was incorporated in 1651. Strictly speaking, the sign is accurate. The town was “incorporated” by the European settlers in 1651. To some, this might suggest that colonists founded the community on largely virgin, uninhabited land. That’s not true, and it certainly isn’t the whole story.

There is an interesting map made by the French explorer Samuel de Champlain *in 1605* of the native Wampanoag community in what is now called Nauset Inlet, part of modern-day Eastham.

This community was just one small part of the seventeenth-century Wampanoag nation which consisted of 67 villages with a population of up to 40,000

people. These villages stretched from an area south of Boston, included all of Cape Cod, and reached to southeast Rhode Island. The region was inhabited for about *15,000 years*.

Now it is true that English colonists in New England did sometimes settle in villages that the Wampanoag had abandoned. However, the settlements were empty because up to 90% of their population was wiped out by what is called “the great dying of 1616-1619.” This was a series of epidemics of diseases brought by the Europeans, which the Native Americans had no natural immunity against.

To add insult to injury, the Europeans considered the epidemics to be God’s handiwork. As King James I of England put it, “Within these late years, there hath, by God’s visitation, reigned a wonderful plague, the utter destruction, devastation, and depopulation of that whole territory, so as there is not left any that do claim or challenge any kind of interest therein. We, in our judgment, are persuaded and satisfied that the appointed time has come in which Almighty God, in his great goodness and bounty towards us, and our people, hath thought fit and determined, that those large and goodly territories, deserted as it were by their natural inhabitants, should be possessed and enjoyed by such of our subjects.”

And lest you think that the spread of European diseases was done entirely by chance or in ignorance, consider the following suggestions by Lord Jeffrey Amherst

to a British colonel in response to attacks by Native Americans against colonists:

“Could it not be contrived to send the Small Pox among those disaffected tribes of Indians?” and “You will do well to try to inoculate the Indians by means of blankets, as well as to try every other method that can serve to extirpate this execrable race.”

It’s hard to read this as anything other than a call for deliberate, racist, biological warfare. The Europeans , then, took over the Native Americans’ territory by a combination of immigration, expanding settlements, and aggression. And that’s not even talking about the attempt to wipe out indigenous cultures by means of the infamous “Indian Schools,” which weren’t ended until the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Now let’s go back to Plymouth—which likes to call itself “America’s Home Town”—and consider this. Whether through famous paintings you’ve seen or stories you’ve probably repeatedly heard about the so-called “First Thanksgiving,” you may believe what we can politely call the “idealized” version of the event—a friendly harvest celebration marking friendship and cooperation between the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag. I’m not going to tick off the details, but a better description is “European propaganda.” Similarly, if you visit Plymouth, you’ll see “Plymouth Rock” (there’s a story about that too), the Mayflower Two, and what used to be called the “Plimouth Plantation” (fortunately renamed the Plimouth Patuxet Museum in 2020). If you wander around town, you’ll run into a number of different

statues and monuments. However, all but one celebrate the Pilgrims. The sole exception is a statue of Massasoit—a Native American leader who brokered a peace treaty with the Pilgrims.

I assume you see the pattern. To the casual observer, the Eastham and Plymouth town signs gloss over a multitude of sins. From my perspective, it could be argued that something as mundane as these street signs contributes to a collective acceptance of a false picture of history among the current residents of these communities and anyone driving through the area.

### Why this matters.

Why does this issue matter in the real world?

Here's an important quotation from the ancient Chinese philosopher Lao-Tsu, the author of the Tao Te Ching.

"Watch your thoughts; they become words.

Watch your words; they become actions.

Watch your actions; they become habits.

Watch your habits; they become character.

Watch your character; it becomes your destiny."

What Lao-Tsu saying is that what we *think* or *believe* affects not just what we *do*—but *who we become*.

Remember that a major goal of these podcasts is to help you make decisions that are truly your own—not the result of someone trying to get you to think or do something you wouldn't if you knew all the facts. For me, this issue is all about truth and free choice.

So, ask yourself this. Before you listened to this podcast, did you know that indigenous peoples had thriving communities in North America for 15,000 years? Did you know that the conventional story of the First Thanksgiving is largely propaganda? Does knowing that affect how you think about anything? Perhaps more importantly, if you did not know any of this, can you think of any beliefs you held or actions you took that were mainly the result of not knowing *the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth*?

One final question. *If* in addition to the information I mentioned that's already on every Massachusetts town or city sign, there was also a line that said, "Inhabited by indigenous peoples for 15,000 years." Do you think that would help people have a more accurate view of history? Would anything positive or negative come from that?

Thanks for listening. I'm Professor Thomas White. This has been philosophy for the real world.

## SOURCES

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