

Research Article

History as an Ethical Craft — A Study of Ethical Reasons in the Explanation of Historical Acts

Sirkka Ahonen¹

1. University of Helsinki, Finland

Ethical reasoning is inherent in human action and therefore essential to the explanation of historical acts. The ethical nature of the acts should not be restricted to *ex post facto* judgment in terms of consequential ethics but studied as the actor's motivation. Motivational ethics serve to make sense of the actor's decision. This article applies systematic textual analysis to expose the ethical reasoning of the authors of elected history textbooks. The ethical meanings are attributed by the authors to historical narratives within the frames of ethically resonating concepts, that is, values and norms. The values and norms are definable as dimensions, like heroism – villainhood, humanity – inhumanity and loyalty – betrayal as examples. Analysis of the textbooks' presentations shows that ethical reasoning is a rational element in historical explanation. Educationally, ethical judgment of historical acts promotes students' ethical consciousness and ability to make intellectually honest distinctions between ethically tenable and untenable human acts.

1. Introduction

The past resonates morally in people's minds. The resonance is particularly strong in social memory and the public culture of history. Recently, in the early 2020s, the movement *Black Lives Matter* vibrated globally in history culture and raised public discussion about the issue "Whose history". Even academic history has made a moral turn. The turn started in the 1960s with the postcolonial quest of giving voice to the previously suppressed peoples. Around 1980, an influx of Holocaust studies, based on the universal remorse of Genocide, sharpened the turn. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought up claims of guilt and victimhood related to the gulag and Holodomor, with historians like Timothy Snyder, Robert Service and Anne Applebaum as moral judges. Historians appealed to the

conscience of the global community by exposing the cruelty of ethnic and political cleansing in different parts of the world. Elazar Barkan surveyed historical injustices universally in *The Guilt of Nations* (2000). History had become an ethical craft. However, the ethical look was predominantly focused on the *post-factum* impact of historical acts. The epistemological question about the compatibility of ethical judgments with the actual valid explanation of historical acts needed scrutiny. In order to answer the question, the role of ethical motives in making sense of historical acts has to be analyzed. Can the ethical motives of the past actors be reconstructed as truthfully as the external cause-effect connections? Are there sustainable epistemological tenets for moral claims of historical right and wrong motives?

In history didactics, the research into the ethics of history is mainly focused on the moral meaning of historical narratives. Jörn Rüsen, the leading author in Central European history didactics, includes a moral element in the concept of historical consciousness, maintaining that the narratives of the past render values for life orientation to both individuals and communities (Rüsen 2004). In Norden, Klas-Göran Karlsson has theorized the idea by the claim that the value-loaded narratives give tentative answers to a variety of ethical questions emanating from the prevailing social and cultural realities (Karlsson, 2014). The Nordic team of Niklas Ammert and colleagues have materialized the view by empirically studying young people's encounters with ethical historical issues (Ammert et al., 2020; see also Edling, 2020).

While Rüsen and the Nordic researchers of history didactics ask how historical issues are judged ethically in hindsight, Peter Seixas in Canada includes ethical judgment to the inquiry of historical acts in making. According to him, the reconstruction of the ethical motives of past actors can and shall be pursued on the side of fact-checking (Seixas, 2017).

Inspired by Seixas, I will argue for the compatibility of ethical reasoning with the explanation of past acts. I focus on the ethical aspect of the reasoning of historical actors when setting about to act.

My research questions are as follows:

- Theoretically, what are the epistemological tenets of ethical reasoning in historical explanation?
- How can the ethical reasons for historical actors' decisions and choices be identified?
- In educational texts, that is, history textbooks, how is a historical actor's ethical reasoning conceptualized?

I will establish the theoretical tenets of ethical judgment in historical explanation using references to historiographical, ethical-philosophical and historical-didactical literature. Thereafter, I will study the ethical reasoning in Finnish history textbooks by means of systematic qualitative text analysis.

2. An Actor's Ethical Reasons in Historical Explanation

I will start by examining the nature of historical explanation, in order to be able to advocate the inclusion of ethical reasoning in the explanation of past acts.

Since the 1980s, an ethical turn in historiography has actualized the epistemological question of whether the use of ethical categories meets the criteria of historical knowledge.

In the positivist historiography, objectivity used to be the key criterion of knowledge. In adherence to the correspondence theory of scientific truth, history was regarded to be constituted by facts that correspond to the evidence verifiable by sources. In the pursuit of objectivity, ethical judgment was regarded as problematic and subsequently avoided. History writing was expected to be an analytical treatise, not an interpretative narration.

As a counterargument to epistemological positivism, the phenomenological view of the inseparability of mind and action prevailed among historians. In this view, thought and action are mutually correlated aspects of human agency. Human thought is immanent in acts and renders them meaning and reasonability. (Habermas 1990.) Reasonability binds individual acts into sensible accounts, that is, narratives.

In post-positivist historiography, narrative has become rehabilitated as a legitimate form of historical presentation. (White 1987; Rorty, 1991; Rüsen, 2004a.) The narrative form is structurally based on human agency. Narratives are characterized by moral emplotments, and the plots are founded on actors' intentions. Causal explanation of events and phenomena is substituted by references to past actors' reasoned intentions. As intentions are internal motives instead of observable external factors, the question of their reliable reconstruction prevails. The historian R. G. Collingwood in the 1940s suggested "re-enactment" as the method of acquiring knowledge (Collingwood, 1949). An intention can be re-acted by a historian by means of empathic imagination, which is enabled by the historian's familiarity with the historical context of the respective past act. In difference, the philosopher Georg Henrik von Wright in his book "Explanation and Understanding" (1971) regards intentions as results of rational logical inference. He refers to the Aristotelian concept of practical reasoning, 'pragmatic

sylllogism', as the way of explaining human and social action. In the explanation of a human act, the actor's intention and the connected belief are acknowledged. The intention and the belief make the premises, on which the conclusive act takes place. The reasoning towards the explanation of a n act X in terms of practical syllogism proceeds as follows:

A wants to act out p

A believes that in order to act out p, he must do X.

Therefore A does X.

(von Wright, 1971)

An actor's belief is most often of an ethical nature, wherefore her or his action can be studied with a moral gaze.

In hermeneutic interpretation, a historian conducts a dialogue between her or his own beliefs and those of the past actor, which helps the historian interpret the actor's beliefs. As a historical actor's ethical beliefs stem from her or his cultural background and social position, the hermeneutic inquiry needs to be supported by historical contextualization (Megill, 2004; Novick, 1988; Danto, 2004.)

Philosophers disagree about the trustworthiness of hermeneutically re-enacted ethical beliefs. The adherers of epistemological realism, among them the Finnish philosopher Ilkka Niiniluoto, differentiate between factual propositions and value statements, the former being verifiable in terms of the correspondence theory while the latter is relative and only truthlike. (Niiniluoto, 2020; cf. Rorty, 1990).

According to Frank Ankersmit, historical interpretations and explanations are rather tentative proposals than unambiguous propositions. Some value proposals are more trustworthy than others. Ankersmit writes: "Historical writing is the experimental garden where we may try out different political and moral values" (Ankersmit, 2004).

In contrast to Ankersmit, Jörn Rüsen defends the hermeneutics of historical interpretation as a trustworthy way of acquiring knowledge of the past. Rüsen holds the past reality as the ultimate reference point of history. He disapproves of self-referential history, where authors refer to each other's interpretations instead of references to the past reality. Not unlike Ankersmit, Rüsen regards the 'objectivity' of history based on intersubjective validity. When two value systems, that of the judged and that of the judging historian hermeneutically merge, ethical interpretation of past action

will be both just to the past and relevant to the present. Hermeneutical intersubjectivity enables ethical judgments of the past. (Rüsen, 2004.)

Despite the epistemological disagreements between relativists and realists, ethical reasoning is in the post-positivist historiography generally accepted as a legitimate element in the narratives of the past (see e.g. Kalela 2012.)

3. Judgment of the Ethical Reasoning of Historical Actors

Ethical thinking means basically making choices between 'good' and 'evil', 'right' and 'wrong', 'duty' and 'denial of duty'. The question of what is ethically good has given rise to different ethical schools of thinking, the main ones being classical fundamentalists, utilitarians and contractarians. Ethical fundamentalists refer to Immanuel Kant's fundamental categories of 'good', 'right' and 'duty' and insist on their universality in human mental constitution, where 'internal good' is rendered imperative by human rationality. (Moore, 1922; Surgeon, 2002.) Utilitarians are more relativistic about what is 'good', and regard human acts as good if they pursue "the greatest good of the greatest number" (see e. g. Scheffer, 1988). Even further relativistically, contractarians regard ethical preferences as results of social negotiations and contracts. (Rawls, 1971.)

In the judgment of human action, 'good' appears as values. Historical actors make their ethical choices in the frames of values. Values endow rationality with ethical thinking. Actors make choices within moral dimensions reaching from a value to its negation. The crucial role of values justifies the view of history as an ethical craft. (e. g. Colby & Kohlberg 1987: 1–60.)

In my elected textbook examples, the values 'heroism', 'humanity' and 'loyalty' are used to ethically categorize historical acts. The authors judge historical actors' beliefs and intentions within the value dimensions.

In order to be historically truth-like, the attribution of 'loyalty' or 'betrayal' to a past action needs to be made on the basis of historical evidence and with regard to the cultural context of the actor. An actor's historical context will enable a trustworthy disclosure of his beliefs by a narrator. Without contextualization, a historian will not be fair in his judgment of the past people.

In the following, I will analyze ethical judgments by history textbook authors in their explanation of historical acts.

3.1. Analysis of Textbook Presentations of the Ethical Reasons for Past Acts

History is a broad domain in the life of a community, comprising academic history, culture of history and social memory. History education is conducted at the crossroads of the three domains, having reference points in all of them. History education is a spin-off of academic history and at the same time a public service. The parameters of knowledge in textbook writing are sought from the theories of both history and education.

In the continental European tradition, influenced by the Frankfurt school of philosophy, history is regarded not just as a scholarly craft but a meaningful part of the life-world of individuals and communities. Universally human historical consciousness implies historical identity and transgenerational responsibility. According to Jörn Rüsen, one of the leading European theoreticians of history education, the moral dimension is a vital element of historical consciousness and history education (Rüsen, 2004; Kölbl & Konrad, 2015). In difference, in the Anglo-American tradition history is approached as an analytical process of establishing facts about the past (Wineburg, 1991; Lee and Ashby, 2000).

Anglo-American history educators have a set of formal concepts to guide the acquisition of knowledge in history. Basically, evidence, cause and change constitute historical cognition (Shemilt, 1983; Lee & Ashby, 2000). Canadian Peter Seixas has added 'ethical judgment' as one of the key formative concepts. According to him, knowing an actor's intentions and beliefs enables a student to judge a historical actor's ethical reasoning. (Seixas & Morton, 2012: 168–202; Gibson, 2014.) Within the limits of the temporal and cultural position, the actor had a choice of values that make her or him morally judgeable by posterity. His ethical agency is judgeable in terms of values. (MacIntyre, 1988)

In the following, I will analyze examples of the ethical explanation of past acts in textbooks. My examples refer to the dimensional values 'heroism' – 'villainhood', 'humanity' – 'inhumanity' and 'loyalty' – 'betrayal'.

When analyzing historical actors' ethical reasoning as presented in textbooks I apply the following principles:

- I will regard the past actors' intentions and beliefs as explanatory for historical action.
- As the frames of ethical analysis of the historical actors' intentions and beliefs, I will use the dimensional values 'heroism' *versus* 'villainhood', 'humanity' *versus* 'inhumanity' and 'loyalty' *versus* 'betrayal'.

- I will consider the validity of the textbook-conveyed ethical judgements on the basis of their logical structure as practical reasoning, according to which the actors' intentions and beliefs were premises that conclusively lead to an ethically reasoned action.

My choice of textbook material is eclectic. I surveyed an elected set of Finnish history textbooks from six decades, during which historiographical de-ideologization after the Second World War was complemented by constructivist multiperspectivalization (Renvall 1945; Ahonen 2017). Authors customarily pursue an objectivistic factual style and avoid explicit moralistic expressions. However, implicit moral judgments can be disclosed in their argumentation.

For my text analysis, I selected three sensitive historical narrative topics from global history. I will conduct a systematic deconstruction of the respective textbook narratives, firstly, by identifying the rhetorically protruding value in a narrative. In the following step, I will ask whether the textbook author provides the historical context to support her or his judgment. Next, I will break the narrative into a practical syllogism constituted by the historical actor's intention, belief, and conclusive action, in order to prove that the ethical content of the narrative is grounded on rational reasoning rather than affective reaction. I will conclude the analysis by stating the textbook's judgment of the actor's value standpoint.

My analysis of the respective textbook author's historical ethical judgment in the elected narrative proceeds along the following operations:

- Identification of the value of framing the narrative on the basis of the rhetorical resonance of the text;
- a look at the historical contextualization of the moral statements in the textbook narrative;
- deconstruction of the narrative in regard to its relevance to the identified value dimension by breaking the elected chapter into the historical actor's intentions and beliefs as premises towards a practical conclusion;
- disclosure of the textbook's conclusion about the actor's ethical reasoning in regard to the value-dimension.

I will deal with three kinds of historical actors: individual actors, institutions and political leaders, that is, Columbus, slave traders and the British premier Neville Chamberlain.

Analysis 1. Columbus's encounter with native Americans: 'heroism' or 'villainhood'

- The value-dimension in the narrative of Columbus

Historiographically, Columbus used to be presented as an example of resilience and courage. In contrast, in post-colonial historiography, he appears as a representative of ruthless colonialism. In 1992, under the auspices of the quincentenary of Columbus's landing in America, a worldwide debate on the nature of the act was conducted. Some historians interpreted the 15th-century global explorations as the results of a crusader spirit that was rampant in 15th-century Spain, where *reconquista* of the country from muslim rule was ongoing and justified a harsh treatment of infidels (Edwards, 1992). On the other hand, post-colonially tuned historians wrote of Columbus's act either as the opening of the global economy or, critically, as a disastrous encounter of two cultures (Zinn, 1980; Teivainen and Pakkasvirta, 1991; Henriksson, 2021).

The textbook *Horisontti* (1998) combines the classical adventurer-narrative with a post-colonial critique, thus including the value-issue in the narrative of Columbus's encounter with the Caribbean islanders. The textbook author traces Columbus's reasons for subjugating the islanders, exposing the ethical elements in the reasoning:

Long weeks aboard were tenuous and hazardous. Shortage of food and drinking water caused anxiety. – – – [When landing] Columbus stepped ashore, knelt down and christened the island as San Salvador and declared it a Spanish possession. A wooden cross was mounted on the shore. – – – To the disappointment to the Spanish, the inhabitants of San Salvador appeared to be poor. After all, the purpose of the journey was to gather treasures for the Spanish royal court. – – – [After founding another colony] Columbus loaded his ship with treasures and curiosities. He took also a few Indians as a boot on board and returned to the royal court of Barcelona as a revered celebrity, while [in the colony] the angry Indians killed all Spaniards who had settled in the colony. [– – –] The encounter had far-reaching consequences. European states would compete about the ownership and command of the oceans, overseas territories and trade. To Americas, the new era meant ruthless conquerors, alien inhabitants and life under the harsh rule of the white man. (Kauniskangas et al., 1998, 211–212.)

The ethical element of the narrative is constituted by the value-dimension 'heroism' versus 'villainhood'. The value judgment is preliminarily conveyed to the researcher by the rhetoric of the text. The rationality of the judgement will be proved next by a logical analysis.

- Value-relevant statements in the textbook narrative

The deconstruction of the passage discloses the following moral statements toward an overall moral judgment:

- Columbus was resilient as a seafarer;
- he devoted his endeavor to God;
- he was economically acquisitive;
- he pillaged local native communities;
- he forcibly deported natives to Spain;
- the natives killed Spanish colonizers in cold blood;
- he was revered by the Spanish court

The above statements in the textbook narrative indicate both heroism ('resilience', 'victimhood of the natives' rage') and villainhood 'acquisitive', 'pillaged', 'forced'). The prominent ethical issue in the narrative is constituted by the violence of Columbus's encounter with the natives.

Columbus's cruel acts need to be made sense of by the beliefs behind them, which requires the contextualization of the statements.

- Historical contextualization of the value-relevant statements in the narrative

To analyze whether the textbook's ethical judgment of Columbus's reasoning and action is valid historical knowledge, the morally relevant statements have to be contextualized. 'Devotion to God', 'acquisitiveness', 'forced deportation' and 'victimhood' have to be looked at in the mirror of the 15th-century culture.

In its previous chapters, the textbook refers to the strong role of religion and Church in the medieval life. The church taught that God would reward and punish people on the basis of their deeds, wherefore Columbus could rightly believe that the ordeal at sea was a God-ordained test and the successful landing on San Salvador a God-given reward for heroism. However, the Church also preached humanity and mercy towards the natives. Jesuits publicly defended the rights of Indians against the Spaniards. Thus, Columbus had a choice, which makes his action ethically judgeable. When the textbook's author implicitly refers to human rights, he is not guilty of anachronistically projecting 20th-century standards to the past but is objective in his judgement.

- Columbus's ethical reasoning and position as a historical actor on the dimension 'heroism' – 'villainhood' as argued by the textbook

To reconstruct the reasoned ethical judgment of Columbus's action, the narrative needs to be deconstructed into a practical syllogism. Supported by the historical contextualization, the textbook offers the following syllogism toward a conclusive ethical judgment of Columbus's act:

In the context of the early modern European state and economy, Columbus *intended* to extract riches from Indian communities.

Columbus *believed* that the subjugation and the dispossession of the natives were necessary to materialize the intention.

Therefore, Columbus undertook the vile *action* to subjugate and dispossess the natives.

The conclusion of the villainhood of Columbus, made on the premises of the acquisitiveness of his intention and his belief in violence, grounds the textbook narrative's ethical denunciation of his endeavor.

Analysis 2. Slave Traders: 'humanity' – 'inhumanity'

- The value-dimension in the narrative of slave traders

European entrepreneurs who shipped masses of African slaves to the Americas in terms of an efficient commercial system, the Atlantic Triangle, were mainly British. Africans were sold to British sugar, tobacco and cotton farmers in the New World. The cotton was traded back to Europe to British manufacturers, who paid the African chiefs for the human merchandise.

In historiography, lately the auspices of the movement Black Lives Matter, the economic profitability of the slave trade to the investors of British industrialization has been acknowledged. British slave traders worked as a lobby to vehemently defend the case of the slave business as a source of national prosperity. (Taylor, 2020) My textbook example is factual and brief about the ordeal of the captured African victims:

In the 1440s slaves started to be imported from Africa. For many African kings, slaves as merchandise were as profitable as gold and silver. When smallpox in the early 1500s killed a big part of the population of the Caribbean islands, African slaves were in demand and became imported in masses to the sugar plantations of Haiti, Cuba and

American continent. Between 1550 – 1850 altogether 9,5 million Africans were shipped to the west. (Markkola et al., 2003, 164)

The textbook account of the slave trade provides a variety of plain facts but also clues to question the slave traders' ethics within the value dimension of 'humanity' *versus* 'inhumanity'.

- Value relevant statements in the textbook narrative

The textbook narrative includes the following ethically relevant elements:

- African chiefs were acquisitive and treated people as commodities;
- masses of human beings were captured and sold by the chiefs as commodities to slave merchants;
- traded Africans were enslaved to benefit the American plantation economy;

The key ethical issue in the narrative is constituted by the slave traders' business approach, where the maximization of profit overruled the consideration of human costs.

- Historical contextualization of the morally relevant statements in the narrative

The quoted textbook offers in connected chapters ample arguments for a pragmatic understanding of the slave trade by means of historical contextualization. As Islam allowed the chiefs to buy, sell and enslave unfaithful fellow Africans, the chiefs, tempted by economic profit, traded even the members of their own tribes. Human trafficking was bolstered by the British quest for fiscal and material resources needed for industrialisation.

However, the textbook also presents the idea of universal human rights raised by the 18th-century Enlightenment movement, implying disapproval of the slave trade, resulting in the ban on the slave trade in Britain in 1807. The slave traders had a free choice between humanity and inhumanity.

- The textbook's argumentation on the slave traders' ethical reasoning on the value-dimension 'humanity' – 'inhumanity'

As a practical syllogism, the textbook's ethical judgement of the slave trade as a historical action proceeds as follows:

Slave traders *intended* to boost the trans-Atlantic business.

They *believed* that slaves were a commodity without a right to human inviolability.

They set up the inhuman *action* of the Atlantic slave trade.

The conclusion of the inhumanity of the slave trade, made on the premises of the actors' acquisitive intention and their belief in the inferior human standard of the Africans, renders the textbook narrative ethically meaningful. In the historical context of the 18th century, slave traders' inhuman practices were, according to the textbook, deliberately reasoned.

Analysis 3. Chamberlain in Munich 1938: 'loyalty' – 'betrayal'

- The value-dimension in the textbook narrative of Munich 1938

In the inter-European Munich conference in 1938, the British premier Neville Chamberlain endorsed Hitler's invasion of Sudetenland, the German-speaking part of Czechoslovakia, by refusing a joint Western intervention to stop Hitler. In the aftermath, 'Munich' became a politically useful analogy for later political leaders to justify a dubious military invasion. Referring to the shame caused by the appeasement of a dictator, the later British leaders Anthony Eden in the Suez crisis in 1952 and Tony Blair in 2003 in the wake of the Iraq war told their electorate: "We do not want another Munich". In hindsight, the judgment by neither of them was ethically sustainable. In historiography, the Munich appeasement became an ethical lesson to politicians. (see e. g. Humphreys, 2013.) Latest, the historian-journalist Timothy Garton Ash used the Munich analogy in the context of the Ukrainian war, appealing to the Western remorse of Munich (Ash, 2023). Only rarely have historians defended appeasement as a pragmatically feasible political choice (; (Fest, 1973, 832–3; Johnson, 1980, 354, 452–7; Honderich, 2005).

The elected textbook presents the Munich episode briefly but still as a moral issue;

[After the Anschluss of Austria] [Hitler's] attention was pointed at the mountainous and German-speaking Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia, which had been annexed to Czechoslovakia [in the international Paris peace conference in 1919, with the guarantees of the Czechoslovakian borders by Britain and France. To settle the issue of Sudetenland, Hitler organized in Munich a conference that was attended by Britain, France and Italy. Hitler wanted a review of the Paris peace settlement concerning Sudetenland. The [positive] decision was reached, and, as its persuader, the British premier returned to London claiming that peace had been secured: "Peace for our time." This happened in September 1938. (Markkola, 2003, 347)".

The ethical element, resonating from the above text extract, is constituted by the value-issue of international 'loyalty' versus 'betrayal'.

- Value-relevant statements in the textbook narrative

The deconstruction of the textbook narrative discloses the following ethically relevant statements:

- Hitler expanded Germany at the cost of the independence of small states;
- he defied international decisions and commitments;
- Chamberlain urged the Western leaders to ignore the agreed collective security and betray the small states;
- Chamberlain unduly posed as the champion of peace.

The statements indicate both Chamberlain's defiance of international political settlements and the security of small states. The statements of his international disloyalty overrule an alternative interpretation of him as a peace-maker.

- Historical contextualization of the value-relevant statements in the narrative

Historical contextualization of Chamberlain's choice of action in Munich is duly provided by the related textbook chapters. According to them, European powers had committed themselves to the charter of the League of Nations, according to which aggression against another state was ruled out. Hitler's regional acquisitions are presented as an expansionist scheme of subordinating Middle Europe to Germany. The appeasement policy by Chamberlain is not defended; the Western leaders, including Chamberlain, appear in the narrative simply as disloyal members of the European community and a threat to international order. The book straightforwardly indicates that Chamberlain's betrayal in Munich led to the Second World War.

- Chamberlain's ethical reasoning and position as a historical actor on the dimension 'loyalty' – 'betrayal' as argued by the textbook

The textbook's historical contextualization of Munich supports the above extract's critique of Chamberlain's defiance of collective security. In terms of a practical syllogism, the textbook's reasoning proceeds as follows:

Chamberlain *intended* to avoid an imminent war between the West and the Third Reich.

He *believed* in realpolitik and rejected the collective security pursued by the League of Nations.

Therefore, Chamberlain undertook the *action* to appease Hitler and betrayed the international commitment to the security of small states.

The textbook's conclusion of ethically discrediting Chamberlain's reasoning is made on the premises of Chamberlain's rejection of the collectively agreed peace settlement and his belief in cynical realpolitik. On the value-dimension loyalty – betrayal Chamberlain's action is judged by the textbook as a betrayal.

#

The above analyses of three textbook narratives show that ethical judgment is immanent in their explanation of past acts. Independently of whether a historical actor is an individual person or a collective holder of political power, her or his intentions and beliefs are exposable to a reader and underpin the narrative's ethical content.

4. Educational Remarks about the Recognition of Ethical Reasoning by Historical Actors

In the wake of the 21st century, new autocrats have appeared on the global political landscape, and with them, grand national narratives have returned to popular history. Grand narratives defy the dialogical and multiperspectival nature of historical knowledge.

In pre-positivistic historiography, ethical discourse is used to enrich history, while in positivistic historiography, scholarly historians refrained from moralism, and even the authors of history textbooks avoided explicit attention to the ethical reasoning of historical actors. In the post-positivistic history, moral ethos has returned to history. Heroes and villains mushroom in history's culture, and scholars judge historical actors in ethical terms. In my analysis, I attempted to prove that the ethical reasoning of past actors is accountable as rational choices.

In my scrutiny of history textbooks, I applied practical inference as a feasible mode of historical explanation. To make a practical inference, intentions and beliefs constitute the premises on which the conclusion about the ethicality of a historical act can be drawn.

The intentions and beliefs of historical actors are interpretable by means of a hermeneutic process, where the minds of a historian and a past actor meet. The encounter is dialogical. The historian uses her or his acquaintance of the historical context of the act to understand the motives of the actor.

The reconstruction of the ethical reasoning of a past actor requires the identification of the value at stake in a narrative. For the purposes of the ethical judgment of the narratives, a researcher starts by recognizing the values attributed by the narrator to the respective act. In my elected narratives I recognized the values 'heroism' *versus* 'villainhood', 'humanity' *versus* 'inhumanity' and 'loyalty' *versus* 'betrayal' to follow up the ethical reasoning of the past actors as presented by narrators, that is, textbook authors. '

Only in the oldest of the post-World-War-II textbooks studied by me, the language of the narratives was explicitly moral, while more recent books more subtly frame their narratives with values. The ethical dimension of historical explanation is customarily inbuilt into the emplotment of the narratives and the profiles of the actors, as the narrators need values to build the plots and the profiles.

To illustrate the ethical categorization by the textbook authors in the quest of attributing moral meaning to past acts and developments, I elected four examples of individual and collective historical acts. By means of pragmatic syllogisms, I analyzed the ethical reasonings in them. I disclosed the textbook authors' judgment of the historical actors' reasoning by means of figuring out the premises and conclusions of the value-relevant acts, as presented by the textbook author.

For a reader of a textbook, an acquaintance with a historical actor's ethical reasoning allows a practice of her or his ability to distinguish between values and their negations. The fundamental imperatives of 'good' and 'right', may be assumed to be endowed by human constitution, but the ability to distinguish between values like 'heroism' and 'villainhood' results from education. History is an intriguing arena of an exercise in ethics. Actor-based intentional explanation of history supports the student's personal consciousness of an individual's responsibility for the past. History will appear to her or him as ethical choices instead of technical results of external causes. Ethical reasoning, as a cognitive process, makes history into an ethical craft.

An ethical aspect in making sense of the past does not mean anachronistic moralism in regard to past actors but a diachronic dialogue on the ethics of human action.

References

- Ahonen, S. (2012). *Coming to Terms with a Dark Past. How Post-conflict Societies Deal with History*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang.
- Ahonen, S. (2017). *Suomalaisuuden monet myytit. Kansallinen katse historian kirjoissa* [The many myths of Finnishness. The national gaze in history books]. Helsinki: Gaudeamus.
- Ammert, N., Sharp, H., Löfström, J., & Edling, S. (2020). Identifying aspects of temporal orientation in students' moral reflection. *History Education Research Journal*, 17(2), 132–150.
- Ankersmit, F. R. (2004). In Praise of Subjectivity. In D. Carr, T. R. Flynn & R. A. Makkreel (Eds.), *The Ethics of History*. Evanston, IL: North Western University Press.
- Barkan, E. (2000). *The Guilt of Nations. Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Colby, A., & Kohlberg, L. (1987). *The Measurement of Moral Judgment. Volume I, Theoretical foundations and Research validation*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Danto, A. C. (2004). Prudence, History, Time and Truth. In D. Carr, T. R. Flynn & R. A. Makkreel (Eds.), *The Ethics of History*. Evanston, IL: North Western University Press.
- Edling, S. (2020). Why is ethics important in history education? A dialogue between the various ways of understanding the relationship between ethics and historical consciousness. *Ethics and Education*, 15(3), 336–354.
- Edwards, J. (1992). A Conquistador Society. The Spain Columbus Left. *History Today*, 42(5).
- Evans, R. J. (2001). *In Defence of History*. London: Granta Books.
- Fest, J. C. (1973). *Hitler – Eine Biographie* [Hitler – A Biography]. Darmstadt: Propuyläer Verlag.
- Gerner, K. (2011). The Holocaust and Memory Culture: the Case of Sweden. In H. Bjerg, C. Lenz, & E. Thorstensen (Eds.), *Historicizing the Uses of the Past. Scandinavian Perspectives on History Culture, Historical Consciousness and Didactics of History Related to World War II*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag.
- Gibson, L. S. (2014). *Understanding Ethical Judgments in Secondary School History*. Dissertation. University of Alberta.
- Habermas, J. (1990). Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification. In J. Habermas (Ed.), *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Henriksson, M. (2021). *Tähtilipun maa: Yhdysvaltain alueen historia* [Land of the starry flag: The history of the U.S. territory]. Helsinki: Tammi.
- Hoderich, T. (2005). *On political Means and Social Ends*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

- Humphries, B. (2013). *The Battle Backwards: A comparative study of the battle of Kosovo and the Munich agreement (1938) as political myths*. Department of Political and Economic studies, University of Helsinki.
- Iggers, G. (1997). *Historiography in the Twentieth Century. From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press.
- Johnson, P. (1983). *Modern Times. A history of the world from the 1920s to 1980s*. London: George Weidenfield & Nicolson Limited.
- Kalela, J. (2012). *Making History*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Karlsson, K. G. (2000). Varför sekelskiftets förintelseintresse? Levande historia som statsorganiserat historiedidaktiskt projekt i Sverige [Why the turn of the century's Holocaust interest? Living history as a state-organized history didactic project in Sweden]. In S. Ahonen et al. (Eds.), *Historiedidaktik i Norden 7. Bruk och misbruk av historien, Nordisk konferance om historiedidaktik, Trondheim 1999* [History Didactics in the North 7. Use and misuse of history, Nordic conference on history didactics, Trondheim 1999]. Trondheim: Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet.
- Kauniskangas, K., Lappalainen, O., & Tiainen, S. (1998). *Horisontti. Historia kivikaudesta 1800-luvulle* [Horizon. History from the stone age to the 19th century]. Helsinki: Otava.
- Kölbl, A., & Konrad, L. (2015). Historical consciousness in Germany: Concepts, implementation, assessment. In K. Ercikan & P. Seixas (Eds.), *New directions in assessing historical thinking*. New York: Routledge.
- Lee, P., & Ashby, R. (2000). Progression in historical understanding among students ages 7-14. In P. N. Stearns, P. Seixas & S. Wineburg (Eds.), *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*. New York: New York University Press.
- LeGoff, J. (1992). *History and Memory*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- MacIntyre, A. (1988). *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Makkreel, R. A. (2004). An Ethical Hermeneutics of History. In D. Carr, T. R. Flynn & R. A. Makkreel (Eds.), *The Ethics of History*. Evanston, IL: North Western University Press.
- Markkola, P., Mustakallio, K., Oikarinen, J., Oikarinen, S., & Salminen, T. (2003). *Eepos, maailmanhistorian käsikirja* [Eepos, the handbook of world history]. Helsinki: WSOY.
- Moore, R. G. (1922). *Principia Ethica*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Novick, P. (1988). *The Noble Dream: The “objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nozick, R. (1968). *Anarchy, State and Utopia*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Rorty, R. (1990). *Objectivity Relativism, and Truth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rorty, R. (1991). Postmodern Bourgeois Liberalism. In *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, vol. 1 of *Philosophical Papers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rawls, J. (1971). *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Rüsen, J. (2004). Responsibility and Irresponsibility in Historical Studies: A Critical Consideration of the Ethical Dimension in the Historians Work. In D. Carr, T. R. Flynn & R. A. Makkreel (Eds.), *The Ethics of History*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 195–213.
- Scheffer, S. (1988). *Consequentialism and its Critics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Seixas, P. (2017). A Model of Historical Thinking. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 49(6), 593–605.
- Shemilt, D. (1983). The Devil’s Locomotive. *Philosophy of History Teaching. History and Theory*, Beiheft 22, 1–18.
- Surgeon, N. (2002). Ethical intuitionism and ethical naturalism. In P. Stratton (Ed.), *Ethical Intuitionism and Ethical Naturalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Taylor, M. (2020). *The Interest. How the British Establishment Resisted the Abolishment of Slavery*. London: The Bodley Head.
- Teivainen, T. & Pakkasvirta, J. (1991). *Kenen Amerikka?* [Whose America?]. Helsinki: WSOY.
- Uleman, J. (2010). *An Introduction to Kant’s Moral Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zinn, H. (1980). *A People’s History of the United States*. New York: Harper & Row.
- White, H. (1987). *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- von Wright, G. H. (1963). *The Varieties of Goodness*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- von Wright, G. H. (1971). *Explanation and Understanding*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- The textbook extracts were translated by Sirkka Ahonen.

Declarations

Funding: No specific funding was received for this work.

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.