

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

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Ahonen's article presents an intriguing alternative way of analyzing historical figures and their actions, which can be useful to history didactics. She suggests a method of studying the ethical reasons of historical actor's course of action, as a way to explain historical acts. This is because ethical motivations can explain why actors chose to act the way that they did, which in turn can explain historical events and developments, Ahonen suggests. The present article, however, does not primarily analyze the ethical motivations of historical actors directly, but how authors of school textbooks in history have reasoned about the ethical motivations of historical actors like Christopher Columbus, British slave traders, and Neville Chamberlain in 1938.

Although the present article presents an interesting perspective on historical research and history didactics, I have some comments, questions and suggestions for improvement.

In the introduction, Ahonen writes that historians like Snyder, Service and Applebaum have written works in which they morally judge past historical actions and actors. Thus, Ahonen suggests, history has become an ethical craft. However, she does not elaborate on what "craft" means in this instance. What does it mean that history has become an ethical craft, apart from the fact that historians pass moral judgements on the past? In her presentations of the mentioned works, it does not seem to me that the historians can be said to develop and analyze ethical systems or imperatives. Historians use their (probably more or less articulated) predefined moral values to judge past actors, in Ahonens examples. Historical examples do not seem to be used as basis for ethical discussions. Thus, the use of the word craft appears somewhat unclear to me, as "craft" does not only imply learning and acquiring knowledge to reproduce products, but to produce oneself, to further the craft. Is that what Snyder, Applebaum and Service do?

Further in the introduction, Ahonen asks: "Can the ethical motives of the past actors be reconstructed as truthfully as the external cause-effect connections?" I cannot see that this question is the one being answered in the analysis, where Ahonen unveils the ethical reasonings of the authors of textbooks. Why is this question included in the text? As Ahonen presents her research questions later in the text, it seems that this question is not one of them. In my opinion, the inclusion of the question serves to confuse the reader and makes the text less clear. A similar issue relates to the sentence at the end of the introduction, where Ahonen writes: "I focus on the ethical aspect of the reasoning of historical actors when setting about to act." Again, what is actually done in the article is an analysis of the interpretation made by authors of textbooks, not of the actual historical actions. It is crucial for the clarity of the article that this distinction is made clear throughout the article, to ensure coherence between the purpose statement and the actual research made.

Ahonen reviews how the discipline of history has moved from a positivist historiography to opening up for narrative presentations of past events, with explanations of events referencing “past actors’ reasoned intentions”. The review is written in a precise language and references relevant theorists. However, when writing history as a narrative, the historian must constantly reflect on what she does (as of course is the case in more positivistic historical research as well), i.e. that she makes certain choices in writing her historical narrative: which actors become important, and which are put in the background? Which actions or events are interpreted as causes and effects, as changing the course of history or as inconsequential? Who becomes heroes and villains, and which judgements and evaluations by the historians make these distinctions? Overall, I would like to see more self-reflection by Ahonen as a historian, and her critical reflections about the material and methods she uses. Critical self-awareness and reflection about one’s historical situatedness and about the limitations of one’s own evaluations and perspectives is important in ensuring the validity of historical research.

This comment is also relevant to Ahonen’s presentation and use of hermeneutic theory: she writes that in the hermeneutic process, “the minds of a historian and a past actor meet”. Here I would interject that the historian can never claim to fully understand a past actor (or any other actor, for that matter). We must acknowledge the limits of our understanding and possibilities of knowing. No matter how much historical knowledge we have, we cannot see the inside of someone’s mind. There will always be a distance between the interpreter and what is interpreted, and the interpretation will always be made on the background of the horizon of interpretation of the situated interpreter. I would suggest that Ahonen reflects on the limitations of interpretation, as the acknowledgement of these limitations will strengthen the validity of the research.

When reading the article, I became interested in knowing more about the material used. Ahonen has surveyed an “elected set of Finnish history textbooks from six decades”. However, I would suggest presenting which age group the books are intended for, and consistency in presenting the title and year of publication for the elected books. I will also suggest including more quotes from the material, as unquoted material make up important foundations for Ahonen’s analysis and claims about the textbooks, like in the following statement: “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.” However, this is not reflected in the quote from the textbook, but in a paraphrased summary by Ahonen. As a reader, I would like to be able to read the quotes for myself. More presentations of quotes from the material would also strengthen the research’s validity.

Before my concluding remarks, I want to present some minor comments and questions:

- In part 3.1. Ahonen writes about the “rhetorical resonance of the text”. What is meant by rhetorical resonance?
- The syllogism about slave trade does not appear quite logically consistent: the middle statement of the syllogism does not include a statement about what action the slave traders deemed necessary to boost trans-Atlantic business, only a statement about their judgement of slaves as commodities.
- In the conclusion, Ahonen writes that four examples were analysed, when three is the correct number.

In conclusion, I believe this article can be strengthened on the following points:

1. A clearer, more thorough critical reflection on the historiographic practices of constructing narratives and making ethical judgements of past actors and actions. How do the choices and interpretations we as historians make, affect how we construct historical knowledge? Related to this is a reflection of the historian's situatedness and her horizon of interpretation. Which values do we attribute to historical actors, and how do we judge them? What determines how we judge historical actors? The values Ahonen presents can be interpreted as universal values, but they should also be historically contextualized. Ahonen does point out that historical contextualization is important for our understanding of historical actors' motivations, but a philosophical-historical metaperspective on contextualization could strengthen the research.
2. There should be a clearer description and execution of the purpose of the article. What is the primary object of analysis – the motivations of the historical actors, or the textbooks' interpretation of their actions and the narratives constructed and ethical judgements made by the textbooks' authors?
3. A critical discussion of ethically judging the actions and interpreted motivations of past actors. When we analyse the actions of Columbus, slave traders and Chamberlain within a dichotomy of one value and its negation, do we not risk reducing these persons to one-dimensional representatives of one characteristic/value? And in judging their actions based on our knowledge today, which they did not possess (which in this case perhaps chiefly applies to Chamberlain), are we not judging their actions on the wrong grounds? Again, Ahonen does argue that contextualization is crucial for understanding past actors, but I will repeat that the type of ethical analysis of past actors must be accompanied by a critical reflection of what we today are doing when judging past actors, and what the limitations on our knowledge are, i.e. what our situatedness allows us to see and not see.

Ahonen ends the article with the important statement that “[a]n 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”. I agree with this statement, and I believe that the didactical potential in Ahonens analysis is great. Ethically discussing the actions of historical persons give students the opportunity to analyse and criticize the actors, but also the textbooks that pass moral judgement, and to reflect on whether they agree with the textbook authors or not. There is potential for practising critical and ethical thinking by trying to ethically explain historical actions.