

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

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I am not an expert in history or the teaching of history, but I found this article extremely interesting. That means I don't have much to say about how to improve it, but I'll mention a few ideas below.

This isn't so much a suggestion as a question: the second research question—"How can the ethical reasons for historical actors' decisions and choices be identified?"—seems slightly odd to me. Why not just ask what their reasons were, and then evaluate these ethically? In fact, I think this is what the paper goes on to do. So maybe the word 'ethical' could be deleted from this question.

On p. 3 the paper says that "An actor's belief is most often of an ethical nature,..." Could this point be clarified or expanded on? It may well be true, but it doesn't sound *obviously* true. Is there some evidence that could be provided to support the claim? Or is the word 'belief' being used here in a way that makes this claim almost true by definition?

I might consider changing some of the terminology used in part 3 of the paper. If "classical fundamentalists" are Kantians then I think it would be more standard to call them deontologists rather than fundamentalists. And since utilitarians identify the good with happiness, I wouldn't call them relativistic (even though people have different ideas about what happiness is). If you talk about consequentialists instead then the label ('relativistic') might fit better, since consequentialists identify the good with various things.

In the same section, might the sentence "Values endow rationality with ethical thinking" be better as "Ethical thinking endows rationality with values"?

And still on this section, 'heroism' and 'loyalty' (I'm not sure about 'humanity') strike me as being examples of what Bernard Williams called 'thick concepts.' Would this be a useful concept to introduce here? Or would it just be a distraction from the main point of the paper?

In 3.1 the Anglo-American tradition in history is described as being concerned with establishing facts in an analytical way, in contrast with the continental European tradition, which sees history as having an important moral dimension. This may well be true, but I wonder if it is changing. How history is taught in Florida has been much in the news recently because of (allegedly) controversial interpretations of slavery and Columbus, for instance. I suspect history in other states in the US is often taught with some sort of moral or political bias too, or with the aim of encouraging certain kinds of views. And I would not be surprised if the teaching of history in the UK were going in a similar direction. (This is not to say that in the

US or the UK history is being taught as the paper recommends. At least, the people who oppose the recent changes in Florida claim that what is to be taught there is not judging the ethical reasoning of historical actors but obscuring the truth and whitewashing past injustices. A lot of the debate about this has focused on how students feel when they study history (e.g., will white students feel guilty if slavery is presented as evil?), which is not the subject of this paper at all, as I understand it.)

Near the bottom of p. 7 the paper says that, "When the textbook's author implicitly refers to human rights, he is not guilty of anachronistically projecting 20<sup>th</sup>-century standards to the past but is objective in his judgement." I agree with this, but don't expect that everyone else will. Could more be said to persuade these others that this is true?

On p. 11, and really in the paper as a whole, there seems to be the implication that ethics comes into actions through the reasons that motivate them. I agree that reasons, intentions, and beliefs are all very important. But couldn't there be ethical content in a historical narrative without any reference to these things? For instance, if genocide or slavery occurred, then do we need to know much, or anything, about the motivation of those responsible to make an ethical judgment? If I am right about this then I don't think it undermines what the paper is arguing. But it could be a supplementary point worth mentioning.

A very minor point: on p. 12 the paper refers to four examples of historical acts discussed in the paper. In fact there are only three discussed in the paper. (Unless I have missed something!)

With regard to the very last sentence of the paper, I would say that not only does acknowledging an ethical aspect to making sense of the past not mean anachronistic moralism, it actually seems almost inevitable. The paper itself shows that attempts to stick to the facts still reveal morally significant motives for action. And discouraging moral judgement of practices such as slavery is itself morally debatable rather than simply scientific or objective.