

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

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## Review

**Paper Title:** History as an Ethical Craft: A Study of Ethical Reasons in the Explanation of Historical Acts

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The paper takes up an interesting subject for study and one that perhaps we don't notice enough –the divide between the ethical underpinnings in the judgment of the historian and the ethical determinants of actual historical acts – a really fine line of distinction that the writer of this paper has teased out and presented as a problem worthy of study. In undertaking this examination she has followed three 'sensitive historical narrative topics from global history' through Finnish history textbooks from six decades, using the syllogism as a method made up of 'historical actor's intention, belief and conclusion' to arrive at an evaluation of the ethics underlying the historical actor's action.

She selects three kinds of historical actors – individual actors (Columbus), institutions (that of slave trading) and political leaders (Neville Chamberlain). Also, she refers to the textbooks' use of the value dyads of "heroism-villainhood", "humanity-inhumanity" and "loyalty-betrayal" to "ethically categorize historical acts" and evaluate historical actors' "beliefs and intentions" within these values.

At this point the question that has bothered me through several readings of this paper must be expressed: is it really possible to institute a break here between the historian's value laden language and the historical actor's ethics? to separate into discernible components the historian's narrative account of the acts performed by Columbus et al? The syllogism and the values are frames deployed by the historian – so is it the actors' actual acts that are being evaluated or are we still immersed in the author/historian's interpretative frames and derivations? This is the challenge that the author has set herself and her readers and it is also the point that appears to me to be most problematic.

How is this problem to be articulated? How can one bring in a distinction between the 'ethical judgment' and the 'actual valid explanation of historical acts' – both concerning the historian, but with the first being purely the historian's domain while the second requiring an assessment of the acts of a historical personage in the context in which they were performed, his or her beliefs and intentions formed in that context. Is there really a difference?

In this case is it the ethics of the acts that are at stake or the historian's assessment of the ethical compulsions, or the historians attribution, from her own understanding of ethical issues (the three value-binaries are obviously the historian's

own selection from a possible list of such characteristics), of certain ethical compulsions to the actor.

The author points to a distinction between the continental European tradition where “the moral dimension is a vital element of historical consciousness and history education” and the Anglo American tradition, where “history is approached as an analytical process of establishing facts about the past”. These two historiographic positions – the moral dimension of acts, and the establishment of facts, one inferential and speculative, the other presumably a process of rendering a historical period or institution/ personage etc. tangible – underlie the paper and influence the argument.

With this backdrop the writer assumes that “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”. Was there a choice? Columbus, with the authority of the royal sanction and support behind his journeys, and the Church’s injunctions on good deeds could well have been acting in what he thought was an acceptable, and heroic way and being rewarded by success in the mission. In colonial sites, the role of missionaries as defenders of ‘native’ ‘rights’, often against the colonial power, is well known as is the fact of these being incorporated in to the colonizing project. Here we have the Jesuit support of native rights (deriving from the Church’s support of good deeds) set against the royal support of the colonizing mission apparently presenting Columbus with a choice of heroic or villainous action. But was Columbus really free to act ethically, did he think ethically, did he act knowing that one set of actions was heroic and another villainous? So in the syllogism offered as the route to a conclusive assessment of ethical action, did Columbus accept that his action was ‘vile’? And if *his* ethical motivation is not at issue then what is the unique point of the paper about evaluating ethical compulsions of acts? Isn’t ‘vile’ a term that is now being selected to describe an action in the light of colonial critique, and not in the context in which it was performed? And as I read this paper, it is interested in establishing the ethics of the actor in performing an act.

Similarly with the second and third examples – the third statement in each syllogism, here too ‘inhuman’ action is the historian’s language as is Chamberlain’s ‘betrayal’. I understand that these choices are based on the historical circumstances of these acts but the historian’s evaluation is obviously bound to be couched in the language of the historian’s own time, and draw on ethical understanding of this time (despite the setting of the acts in their context).

The three principles which the writer of this essay proposes to analyze “historical actors’ ethical reasoning as presented in textbooks” already bring distance from the actuality of the act by confining to the “presentation” – so then: How are past actors’ “intentions and beliefs” to be accessed if the reader only has their presentation by the textbook authors/historians to rely on?. What I am trying to get at is perhaps best demonstrated by the first example of her argument that the author offers – the case of Columbus: first, the author extrapolates from the textbook’s language and presentation – as she writes “the value judgment is conveyed . . . by the rhetoric of the text” – but she herself has restated (or should I say replaced) this rhetoric with a set of descriptors of her own. This is part of the analysis but in being so, it actually brings in a doubt about the ethical issue at the heart of the paper – if it is close reading that is intended then the exact words used by the textbook author should be the subject of scrutiny not their extrapolated meaning or content. The examples and selections are of course quite fascinating (and I must say that it is a paper that is productive for thought – as I read I find I am engaging with different parts of it. It is in the mode of reflection initiated by the paper’s argument which means that there is enough in the paper to generate thought).

Towards the end after the author has established her point through the study of the three examples from the textbooks, she makes the following conclusive and summative statements: “The intentions and beliefs of historical actors are interpretable by means of a hermeneutic process where 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” (personally I would have preferred such a statement that is the clearest articulation of what the paper does, to appear in a similar form perhaps, at the beginning). This is quite unambiguous. But it is also precisely this sense of the ethical aspect of the historical accounts, where the historian and historical actor are sought to be understood as performing two different roles – one acting in the context of their time, and the other understanding/narrating/recounting such acts apparently on the basis of the same context as the actor, but additionally determined by the linguistic and value choices of her or his time.

I am happy to have had the opportunity to read this essay as part of this new way of doing peer review. I was able to look up other work by this author and get a sense of how she is thinking in this essay. I read it not so much as a critic as a reader interested in how another writer thinks, what questions exercise her, and how issues and historical episodes familiar to me from another location (colonialism, slavery and modern history are after all the material of my own discipline of literature) appear when presented by a sensitive critical reader from the perspective of a different discipline.