

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

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

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

Aug 9, 2023

Qeios ID: 2YJIHE

Open Access

<https://doi.org/10.32388/2YJIHE>

This article is very good, both because of its clear, substantiated and well organised shape and its messages.

The “pretext” or the objective – the creation of a model of explaining history with ethical judgements based on the reconstruction of actors’ ethical beliefs with the help of their practical ethical reasoning and historical contextualisation, deducing their core values and their clash with alternative ones, existent in the historical intervals – allows a fruitful capitalisation of this model in the evaluation of the present or nearer to us political facts. But we know that nowadays just the ethical evaluation is forbidden / ignored: because it involves to considering the actors’ anticipative thinking – and thus their possible / realizable preventive behaviour – and the consequences of acts beyond the immediate interests of actors; and because it involves the judgements of facts transcending the present statements arising from the power relations, from the domination-submission relations.

The messages are both technical, emitted during the analysis and suggesting further continuation and / or criticism and extra technical observations, noted in a neutral form but even this form pushing to the necessity to evaluate the observed acts.

From the former, I mention here:

(1) the difference made between the continental European manner to view history and the Anglo-American one (3.1). I think that here there are no differences between “continental” and “analytical”, because both discuss evidence, cause and change and both consider the knowledge of history important for the social conscience and that history is an important tool to mould the social conscience. Actually, I think that this aspect of difference is not at all necessary in the article, the simple reference to Seixas is enough.

And (2) the way through which the ethical judgement on actors is shown – the textbooks – is subordinated to the

pragmatic aspect of the article, the history education, but it simply allows to displaying the ethical meanings given by contemporary writers (and actors) to historical (and implicitly present) facts. And these meanings reflect lesser some cognisance shortages than political (ideological, I will explain) biases.

Columbus was more than likely, full of boldness, but this aspect does not exclude his – historically, culturally determined – Eurocentric vision and promotion of colonialism. The significance of a political etc. act has nothing to do with the psychology of the author. And at the same time, the moral choices he makes are depending not necessarily on his knowledge of up-to-date alternative standpoints. During Columbus time, the *dominant* point of view concerning the Indians was not that of Jesuits but that of the crowns of Spain and Portugal; actually, if Columbus could not have another *Weltanschauung*, even though there were Catholic documents rejecting slavery, *present* actors (and writers) have clear alternatives, even though only one is dominant and thus tries to erase the competing conceptions. We can reject slave trade, but not by criticising the slave traders as immoral. No, “the slave traders had” NO “a free choice between humanity and inhumanity”, because they were slave traders, i.e., their existential well-being depended on this trade, irrespective of their eventual enlightened culture and remorse. We – as present theorists – reject slavery, but just in order to strengthen this standpoint we have to transmit the entire ethical argumentation substantiating it; and, at the same time, showing that people cannot have humanistic moral opinions abstractly, and that their social condition, including the powerful influence of the dominant moral, is that which explain first and foremost their moral opinions. We cannot enforce the antislavery opinions of students by criticising the modern Western slave traders, but we can show that our present humanism is worth to be assumed just by presenting it as dialectical: humanism is not a dogmatic splitting of humans in morally good and bad, but a serious theoretical demonstration where moral qualification as evil or good is based on the complex social determinism of social behaviours.

For this reason, the practical syllogism is much more relevant and actually, it is contrary to the step showing the idea that Columbus and slave traders had bad moral values. Yes, from the standpoint of the inward human compassion (Schopenhauer) they “should have refrained” to being conquistadores and slave traders; but this reduction of situations to moral evaluation is counterproductive just for the education of moral sentiments. In practice – and not in debates of mind – the moral sentiments, including the internal moral debates, reflect the social condition of individuals. Just by showing – with the help of practical syllogism – what the practical reasoning of Columbus and slave traders consisted of, we do emphasise and question the concrete aspects, and thus we persuade the moral inferences.

From the extra technical aspects, recalled only in passing, I mention only

(a) the phrase “historiographical de-ideologization after the Second World War was complemented by constructivist multiperspectivalization”. The author suggests that before, the social analysis of history was imbued with the dominant ideology of the time – capitalistic with extreme right, nationalist and strong leadership elements – and after, the “excessive” parts were removed and their place occupied by multi perspectives (the word “complemented” is here to the purpose); but the suggestion that after the war these multi perspectives were advanced just to avoid the substitution of the former ideology with the “Frankfurt school’s” dominance, is equally pertinent, isn’t it? Because the authors analysed in the article “avoid explicit moralistic expressions. However, implicit moral judgments can be disclosed”. And thus, we can think

to the relationships between ideology and the multi perspectives: and observe that the *ideological criterion / perspective does not exclude many other criteria and aspects*; and that, however, *without the ideological criterion the multi perspectives cannot be understood*, that is they give a relativistic impression of chaotic representation of things.

(b) The other example of rich suggestions made *en passant* is “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”. I have no space to detail the many aspects of this example, but the last phrase does remind us the characterization of Columbus and slave traders, does it?

Anyway, the author’s *finesse* in conducting us – and with a firm hand – on the paths of this complicated topic is noteworthy.

The paper is important because it shows that the metaethical reasoning is not a sophisticated philosophical *passe-temps* but a highly embedded fact in the real choices of values and goals of humans. It is embedded even though people do not act on the basis of metaethical self-questioning and do not know to do this. Indeed, the main metaethical question is just *why* do people choose this or that value, goal, path. Ethics discusses the values and goals, prescribes and describes their consequences still in terms of ethics (good, happiness). Metaethics inquires *why* the values and goals and even *why* does ethics itself prescribe and evaluate the ethical consequences of ethical choices, and in this or that manner. And this *why* entails to entering in *extra* ethical domains.

People are taught to think in a way or another, of course. Their beliefs are induced and shaped not only by imposing them in different manners, but also, and epistemologically, by forging and transmitting the reasons of values and ideas. They learn the reasons of the way – eventually as the best / better than any other reasons and way – but: why are they taught precisely those reasons and no other ones and why do people acquiesce those reasons and way, and no other ones?

The answer for the first aspect concerns the *ideology*, the *class position determinism on ideas about society*. All ideas regarding society are ideology/ideological, and the dominant ideology is the ideology of the dominant class, this in nutshell recall of Marx’s theory seems to be necessary. Ultimately, people transmit their values and ways of thinking about social relations, institutions and values according to their social class position in society, so according to their class interests. (The class interests involve the economic, political, cultural realms). But – and this is the answer to the second aspect – still ultimately, people acquiesce some values and reasons of social order according to the “ratio” between their own concrete social position, condition, experience and, on the other hand, the received ideas and values, the received education. This ratio – as relation and as proportion – explains why do people behave, consciously or not, according to their own class interests, why is there a huge mystification of these class interests, and also why do people exceed their own class interests behaving in an opposed way to these interests (there existing differences between the reasons caused by the class position and reasons constituted only through rational analysis, etc.). Therefore, the more applied answer to the second aspect is the ratio dialectic that entails contradictions. (And as we know, the dominant power

structures tend to control this dialectic by a huge propaganda infesting the entire education).

The understanding of ethical *values* and why do people respect them – or respect some ones of them, while rejecting other – is the core of ethical and metaethical investigation. They are both universal (courage was a main value in ancient times but also now) and particular / historically and socially determined. Is this a coherent explanation? It is if we remember and use Aristotle's *form* and *content* of entities. Boldness to act is the form of courage, but the concrete content of this boldness is obvious. Loyalty as faithfulness and consensus, can we define it, but it's clear that the loyalty of medieval vassals towards their sovereign was different from the loyalty of a bandit towards his band, and different from the loyalty of a citizen towards his state. And conversely, is the betrayal of a vassal, or of a bandit, similar to the decision of a citizen to leave his country, or to criticise the country's government?

The eventual good intentions of people – substantiated by “rational logical inference” – may be real. But as the rational logical inference is a *form* framing a content that is contextual – and thus the logical inference is not neutral – so the content deploying in it is ideological, the good or bad intentions are ideological, and thus the assumption of values reflects the concrete historical and social conditions framing the values. (The above phrase about the form and content of the rational logical inference is easy to be understood if we take into account von Wright's formula quoted by the article: “A wants to act out p / a. s. o.”. But why does A want p? The premise is the clue, the rest flows simply. Logic, as ethics, has an extra domain determinism, manifested in the contents deployed in the form).

It is always necessary to understand the ethical reasons of actors, because this helps us to understand why do we have a different ethical judgement than them: and thus, which reasons were better, why and which are the theoretical solutions. The ethical reasons of actors involve concrete values and concrete experience: to have values implies to have ethical thinking – since, as Aristotle has noted, this is habitual at humans – but people start always from their concrete, received and lived, experience.

All their beliefs concerning society are *ethical*, but also *ideological*. And thus, the kernel of ethical beliefs concerns justice, is the *sense of justice*. Once more we see that this sense has different contents according to the above-mentioned ratio. But is this supposing that the moral value of justice is all the more relative? Its application is “hypothetical” (Kant) / historically and socially determined, but its structural criterion giving its stretching is the result of the tension between restrictive and selfish scopes and those tending toward universality. All cultural biases of ethical ideas have an ideological aspect, and this manifests through the above tension. Thus, this – but any – criterion does not mean and does not imply an abstract, absolute reference, but a specified one. So, why were some ones convinced that slavery is good – therefore, to justify it – is ultimately part of the core of both the ethical thinking of humans and the metaethical one. But without taking into account the *extra ethical ideological dimension* it's difficult to explain the justification occurred during the mental processing of received ideas and independent conclusions after the personal experience of actors; as well as it's difficult to explain our metaethical images about the formation of ethical thinking.

Why would slavery be rather evil than good? Why not to consider that racism would have a natural grounding and thus its inherent results – yes, till the “final solution” – would be “normal”? How do we know that the intuitions that they are evil are verisimilar? These negative forms of metaethical questions drive attention on the *ideological* specific of ideas like racism and slavery: and that this ideological specific of ideas intermediates between /links the received ideas and the experience confronted by people, i.e., by different class situations and class positions manifested in economy, politic, culture.

Obviously, these class situations and positions do not influence directly the ethical thinking of people but indirectly, through the medium of different ideological ideas clashing in the mind. They involve an important – and initial – emotional aspect, but epistemologically, ultimately these emotions are based on a deep, though confused, level of reasoning: of questions, reasons and justifications. To reduce the ethical reasons to emotions or to received ideas is not enough. Just the ideological origin of ethical thinking leads to contradictory ethical standpoints regarding the same concept (Bazac, 2021). Accordingly, the questioning of ethical reasons in decisions is not speculative at all; on the contrary, without it, thus without the determinism of ethical thinking we cannot understand its lasting contradictions and apparently inefficient solutions.

The ethical judgements of contemporary authors on past historical facts and phenomena are inherent, inevitable. Their validity as explanation of these historical facts and phenomena involves, obviously, their consonance with the sound deconstruction of facts and phenomena – i.e., the demonstration through the analysis of causes, effects, actions (strategy, means) – but first the epistemological requirement to openly declare the values assumed by the authors (and thus, *why*). Only by meeting this requirement both the historical conditioning of past values of past actors and the legitimacy of the contemporary ethical judgements do appear. These judgements have a clear explanative force but not alone: they also need to be explained, and added to economic, political, social, cultural analysis. Simpler, only “value-loaded narratives” are an explanation through ethical concepts, and this is not enough.

But does this explanation have value, is it worth to be made? It is, and the article raises this problem and attests the affirmative answer.

The humans have a moral side and they always had moral sentiments. As it was explained long ago, the principle of reciprocity (the being in front of mine is human; he is human, too) describes the *form* of the moral side. From this standpoint, Columbus etc. could well feel the Indians’ and slaves’ appurtenance to the human species. Their eventual good intentions – substantiated by “rational logical inference” – might have been real. But there is what is formulated as *cognitive dissonance*. The power of dominant ethical ideas was so huge that the deep moral feeling of reciprocity was erased, and people felt/feel comfortable just by assuming the dominant ethical ideas. The historical actors choose their decisions in the frame of ethical values, of course, but of the ideological ones, also: thus, of their real or assumed extra ethical interests.

However, Columbus was only a sailor, depending on those who hired him. These “employers” as well as the slave traders had the power, but could they oppose to the vital (economic, political, psychological) interests driving them? The

difference between those who have and those who have no economic, political and cultural power is a very important *extra ethical criterion* – this is why we have examples of opposition by representatives of the powerful or only better-off strata – and suggests what it should have done in order to surpass the mono-directional determinism of ideology, but in order to explain and evaluate the moral thinking the still *extra ethical criterion* of difference between past and present is paramount. Because it is about the determinism of objective conditions over the ideas of people.

During the time of Columbus or slave traders the constraint of capitalist mode of enriching – even though with non-capitalist means as slavery – was and proved to be superior to the feudal one; and obviously, no one could think to the damages produced to nature and nor to the human demography and creativity. But in present the waste and destruction of nature and human civilization produced by capitalism is huger than the development it brings about.

On the one hand, the ethical values of present can have a greater independence towards the extra ethical domain (we can be more idealistic), and at the same time their extra ethical – but not speculative – determinism can be demonstrated. Accordingly, it's the present theorists those who must and can counterpose their up-to-date ethical demonstration to the ethical worldview of past – and present – actors. The answer to the question *why* “some values are more trustworthy than others” is given by the present ethical and metaethical demonstration.

On the other hand, in present the objective conditions of alternative, and ethically humanistic, mode of wellbeing and balance in nature exist. The present decision-makers are no in the situation of Columbus and slave traders: they are guilty, that is they *can*, and must, *be judged from an ethical standpoint*. The extra ethical domain of power relations explains the state of cognitive dissonance of the many, why they do not assume the rationally demonstrated values; and just this extra ethical domain explains why the decision-makers can be judged from an ethical standpoint.

Not the ethical labelling of Columbus or slave traders contributes to the students' development of moral sentiment and capacity of discernment between good and evil values – on the contrary, by this labelling, they feel that something is opposed to this labelling – but our present demonstration of what humanism does mean today.

The ethical reasoning cannot be explained only in circular ethical determinism (ethical reasons, ethical emotions) but *ultimately* (let's extrapolate Gödel's theory of incompleteness) by extra ethical determinism. That does never flow unidirectionally, of course. And thus, the ethical choices are not “instead of technical results of external causes”. History is made by humans, with ethical choices. But they are not neutral but both principles and context dependent.

Therefore, the ethical explanation is very important, but without writing out the metaethical question it is rather superficial. The description of behaviours from an ethical standpoint but without their ethical and extra ethical reasons is absurd. Kant showed that a moral behaviour must respect only the ethical principle of duty – and its categorical imperative – and not extra ethical interests to be rewarded (even ethically). Thus, the Kantian explanation remained in the ethical domain, but through the distillation of ethical reasons until their peak and essence, the categorical imperative – that is a form, so undeserving any criticism –, it suggested to go forward to the understanding of extra ethical reasons. (Just the categorical imperative shows that – as Kant explained first – there are no exceptions to ethical principles, and thus the “extraordinary”

ethical situations require a broader explanation than deviation from ethical principles caused by ethical evaluation of consequences).

Once more, this very good article is very important: just because it is so challenging. And I thank for the opportunity to reading it.

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Sorry for quoting me: Ana Bazac, "The Problem of the Coexistence of the Concept of Human Nature and Racism", *Dialogue & Universalism*, 1/2021, pp. 139-156.