

## The Moral Basis of Historiography (1997)

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**Abstract:** For historians of psychology it is important to recognize that any intelligible historical account must necessarily be made from a position within history. Thus there can be no historical account without a particular perspective or point of view from which aspects of historical reality are seen or not seen, emphasized or played down, accepted or rejected. The pretence of being able to step outside history and describe it as it were from nowhere puts the historian in a godlike position and represents a major obstacle to good scholarship. One can land in this position if one fails to distinguish between morally tinged historical biases and emotional commitments, and also if one does not recognize the constitutive role of interpretation in historical accounts.

Last fall's special issue of this Bulletin was devoted to the topic of *Convergence Across History, Theory and Philosophy*. I would like to pick up one thread of that discussion by addressing a question on which there appears to be some confusion, namely, the role of moral judgements in historiography.

As one might expect, this question has long been a matter of concern to professional historians and they have produced an extensive literature on it. Historians of psychology can no more afford to ignore this literature than physiological psychologists can afford to ignore relevant physiological literature. In a contribution that takes issue with views he attributes to Adrian Brock and myself Chris Green (1996) quite appropriately draws support for his position from the writings of historians, Butterfield and Carr in particular. That seems to me to be a step along the right road. Let us see where a few more steps along that road will take us.

I'll begin with Carr, whose views on the role of moral judgements are very explicit. Taking his cue from Max Weber, he writes: "The historian does not sit in judgement on an individual oriental despot. But he is not required to remain indifferent and impartial between, say, oriental despotism and the institutions of Periclean Athens. He will not pass judgement on the individual slave-owner. But this does not prevent him from condemning slave-owning society. Historical facts, as we saw, presuppose some measure of interpretation; and historical interpretations always involve moral judgements - or, if you prefer a more neutral sounding term, value judgements." (Carr, 1964, p.79). Clear enough, one would think.

It is not *moral judgement* that Carr objects to as a historian but what he calls "*emotional and unhistorical reaction*" (ibid. p.98). For him, as for many of us, the two are not at all the same thing. Even on the level of everyday understanding one can surely recognize that moral judgements need not be accompanied by emotional reactions and that emotional reactions need not involve moral judgements. So I think we have to be clear about whether we are talking about the role of moral judgements in historical studies or the role of emotional reactions. Our concern should focus on the former, not the latter. The merits of judgements do not depend, directly or inversely, on the degree of emotion invested in them.

There are two postures which commonly lead to a blurring of the distinction between moral judgement and emotional response. The first is the posture of the rhetorician who equates the *other's* judgements with emotional reactions, but typically not his own. Though this is an old trick, it is surprising how well it still works. The second, much more interesting, posture is that of the *emotivist* philosopher for whom all value judgements are nothing but emotional expressions. This is not the place for a discussion of such a philosophy - anyone wishing to pursue the topic might want to look at Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1984) - but it is clear that from a perspective of philosophical emotivism there would be a necessary equation of moral judgement and emotional reaction.

Carr was obviously not an emotivist and neither am I. In fact, I believe that the adoption of such a perspective would prevent us from pursuing the question of the moral basis of historiography in any useful direction. The role of emotion in the moral choices of particular *individuals* may be an interesting *psychological* topic, but it only becomes relevant to the principles of historiography if one takes some rather dubious philosophy on board.

The case of the historian Herbert Butterfield illustrates a different, though related, problem. Everyone is familiar with his 1931 critique of "whiggish history" that provided the context for his strictures on moral judgements by the historian. We can surely agree that these strictures still have some point. Indeed, some of us have explicitly criticized the older whiggish history of psychology on similar grounds. But Butterfield's days as an authority on the role of the historian are long past. More recent discussions of that topic by historians have drawn attention to the inadequacies of the position he represented. These discussions are, I think, quite instructive in terms of our own concerns.

To illustrate: After criticizing the whig historians' bad habit of allowing value judgements to colour their history Butterfield (1957) proceeded to write a history of science that struck a later generation of science historians as distinctly whiggish in character (Hall, 1983). This happened in spite of the fact that he sought to avoid mixing history and value judgements in the infamous Whig manner. How was that possible? The answer probably lies in a rather naive conception of historical method which was not uncommon among British historians of his generation. Briefly, that conception was based on a division between collecting historical facts and reading the significance of those facts (Wilson & Ashplant, 1988). The former activity was basic and essentially unproblematical, the latter was constituted by acts of inductive generalization from the collected facts. Such an understanding of what he was doing as a historian effectively shielded Butterfield from recognizing the effect of his own moral commitments on his work. He saw himself as one whose business was with facts, not with values. When he encountered values that were not his own he could easily separate them from what he regarded as facts, but his own values remained embedded in the process of favouring one set of facts over another and in everything that he took for granted when generalizing from these facts. The point is that historical accounts do not emerge inductively out of fact collection; they depend, as Carr and many others have emphasized, on interpretive frameworks that embody value judgements and moral commitments.

Needless to say, Butterfield was only a prominent, but hardly a unique, victim of what one might call "the Butterfield effect". Appeals to an interrelated set of polarities - fact vs. value, scholarship vs. propaganda, dispassionate judgement vs. emotion, distance vs. commitment, etc., have a long

history in the annals of rhetoric. I have no doubt that there were times when such appeals played a role that most of us would applaud. But that should not prevent us from entertaining doubts about the grounds on which such appeals were based.

All such appeals rely on a radical asymmetry between a point of view that is epistemically privileged and another that is not. The privileged viewpoint is one that rises above all social interests, local prejudices, individual weaknesses, and partial perspectives; it is a godlike viewpoint. On the other side there is the all too human viewpoint which remains trapped in grubby local entanglements. There have been historians whose claims implied a godlike perspective on their subject matter. Peter Novick's (1988) magisterial account of debates on "the objectivity question" among American historians provides an overview of such claims on this side of the Atlantic.

But these days there is a lot of scepticism about the notion that there is one true story to be told about the past. Such a story could only be told by those without their own place in history, those who could see it all without being anywhere, in other words, by gods. That has not stopped humans from pretending to godlike knowledge by employing what Donna Haraway (1991) very appropriately calls "god tricks". Human knowledge, however, is always *situated* knowledge, that is, knowledge obtained from a particular position and hence partial. And, in the recent words of Harvard historian Mario Biagioli (1996, p.193), "being partial is no sin". We cannot avoid being partial, we can only avoid owning up to it.

How does this affect the notion of "scholarship"? Do standards of good scholarship go out of the window when "partiality", in Biagioli's sense, is admitted? Quite the opposite, I think. As long as no-one has found a way of eliminating interpretation, eliminating a situated point of view, from the practice of historiography the first, essential, requirement of good scholarship is surely the recognition of the location from which it is practiced. The greatest obstacles to good scholarship are to be found in the "god tricks" that serve to hide and obscure the necessary partiality of historical accounts. Being unaware of one's biases is no guarantee of good scholarship. Conversely, there is no inherent opposition between scholarship and commitment. Both self-deception and enthusiasm can cloud historical judgement.

Beyond certain elementary norms, like accuracy of citation and attribution, consultation of primary sources, attention to the relevant literature, and so on, it may well be difficult to achieve agreement on what constitutes "good scholarship" in this area. But one does not have to search very far for examples that illustrate how, even on this elementary level, the pretence of moral neutrality offers no protection at all against the infringement of scholarly norms.

In parenthesis, it is worth noting that the exclusion of "god tricks" excludes relativism, for the judgement that one situated knowledge is as good (or bad) as any other could only be made from a position that has no partiality itself, that is, no situation. We might also note that the exclusion of god tricks does not exclude the possibility of all privileged knowledge but only that based on the pretensions of the supposedly unsituated subject. It is quite possible that certain situations sensitize one to aspects of reality that remain invisible or blurred when regarded from other points of view.

Applying these general considerations to the historiography of psychology, it is clear that the issues we have to be concerned about are issues that arise out of its situatedness. There are quite a few

such issues. For example, we have to be concerned with a set of problems that arise out of our situation in a present time that is different from the time we are studying. So we have to give thought to what is possible and desirable in bridging this gap. Then there are the problems that arise out of the existence of different social locations from which one could regard the history of psychology. This was the kind of problem I addressed in my article on whether the history of psychology had a future (Danziger, 1994). I suggested we look at the implications and consequences of situating the historiography of psychology in different locations with respect to the discipline and with respect to various human groups. Depending on where we situate ourselves, different aspects of our subject matter will come into focus, different priorities will operate, and different contours will emerge.

I hope it will be clear that when I speak of location here it is to social, and not theoretical, situatedness that I refer. Pursuing the historical study of psychology in order to gain support for a specific theoretical position within the discipline is of course likely to result in a form of Whig history and is not to be encouraged. But this should not be confused with the problem of social location and its attendant moral perspective that the historian of psychology shares with all historians. From *this* problem there is no escape, not by resorting to god tricks, and certainly not by resolving to be a good historian on weekdays and a good citizen on Sundays. We have a choice, yes, but it is a choice among different moral locations, not a choice between making judgements from somewhere and making them from nowhere.

#### NOTE

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