

Should we judge those from the past by the standards of today? How will historians in the future judge us?

Chateaubriand, writing in the aftermath of the July Revolution, claimed that judging history “impartially” can only be achieved from “posterity”.¹ 1830s France was a place of great turbulence and upheaval, and thus it is easy to appreciate why Chateaubriand wished to escape the present.

Nonetheless, jettisoning all values and standards of a particular time or milieu, however desirable it may be to Rankean empiricism, is impossible. For us, in a similarly uncertain present, how we view the past has become central in contemporary political discourse and has led to a debates about the (re)assessment of historical figures.

The first question makes assumptions which require elaboration. Firstly, it makes the fair assumption that historians judge the past. As Berlin notes, besides “very clear” judgments (such as moral judgments), to value something as “important” equally qualifies as judgment.² Even Butterfield, who goes to great lengths to depict the historian’s “art...[as] descriptive”,³ concedes the role of “interpretation” (which entails judgment) in the historian’s toolkit.⁴ Judgment is inherent to the historian’s language; one would be hard pressed to find a work covering the Holocaust that would not describe the events as atrocities. Furthermore, as Moro-Abadia notes, since the historian writes for a contemporary audience, their language and arguments will have to be present-centred.⁵ Ultimately,

¹ Chateaubriand, François René. “The Memoirs Of François René Vicomte De Chateaubriand, Sometime Ambassador To England.” Translated by Alexander Teixeira, vol.5, Project Gutenberg, 2017, pp. 176, www.gutenberg.org/files/55070/55070-h/55070-h.htm. Accessed 25 Jun. 2021.

² Berlin, Isaiah. “Historical Inevitability.” *Liberty*, Edited by Henry Hardy, Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 37, Oxford Scholarship Online, oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/019924989X.001.0001/acprof-9780199249893-chapter-3. Accessed 25 Jun. 2021

³ Butterfield, Herbert. *The Whig Interpretation of History*. 1931, pp. 65, www.semanticscholar.org/paper/The-Whig-interpretation-of-history-Butterfield/bd1f6956d18953146b43394b0611341b66fbcc99?sort=relevance. Accessed 25 Jun.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 67.

⁵ Moro-Abadía, Oscar. “Thinking about ‘Presentism’ from a Historian’s Perspective: Herbert Butterfield and Hélène Metzger.” *History of Science*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2009, pp. 65, journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/007327530904700104.

everything the historian does – from selecting to interpreting sources – necessarily involves judgments rooted in the present. This is why Carr’s aphorism that historical understanding is only attained “through the eyes of the present” still rings true.⁶ Therefore, the fundamental issue at stake is the nature of the framework within which these judgments are made.

The question postulates the existence of “standards of today”, which poses problems. One must question whether there are universal modern standards, and this essay judges that standards are defined as much by geography and culture than by chronology. Nevertheless, in a chronological framework, the supposition of modern standards can be a useful model relative to “those from the past”. As standards evolve, one should consider when modern standards move from the present to the past and, by extension, from the recent to remote past. Even when one’s scope is limited to a society in a chronologically restricted period, standards will not be universal and will likely vary across class, gender, race etc. This can be seen with slavery within the British Empire; although slavery was condoned by the majority in Britain, abolitionism did exist, meaning that to simply portray the period as absolutely accepting slavery is over-simplifying.

Nonetheless, despite the question’s complications, the historiographical problem of how historians approach the past persists. The propriety of judging the past by today’s standards remains disputed, and such a presentist outlook is often derided in historical scholarship.⁷

This essay considers that not only are judgments on the past inevitably shaped by the present, but that judging the past through the lens of the present is not necessarily harmful, assuming the historian approaches the past with due respect and nuance and does not blindly impose present norms on epochs that can appear somewhat foreign to the modern eye. As judgments are necessary for the historian, then, by extension, historians in the future will judge us; however, how they will see us is difficult to predict.

The inherent problem with a presentist perspective is the danger of it preventing the historian from fully contextualising and comprehending how and why those of the past acted. For example, from a modern egalitarian view, the treatment of women in the Napoleonic Code can reasonably be seen as sexist (wives were seen as effective property of their husbands).⁸ However, to call the author(s) sexist would be problematic for it presupposes that the same egalitarian values upon which such a judgment is based were equally dominant in their period. Consequently, this judgment is anachronistic for it imposes modern standards on those whose mores were different, meaning that the concept of

⁶ Carr, E.H. *What is History?*, Penguin Books, 2018, pp. 21.

⁷ Presentism as a concept is notoriously slippery to pin down. David Armitage recognizes five distinct definitions: teleological, idealist, analytical, perspectival and omnipresent (9). The underlying idea however is neatly captured by the Oxford English Dictionary, which defines presentism as “a bias towards the present or present-day attitudes, esp. in the interpretation of history.”

⁸ “Code Civil Des Français: Édition Originale Et Seule Officielle. A Paris, De L’Imprimerie De La République, An XII 1804.” Assemblée Nationale - Bicentenaire Du Code Civil, 2004, Article 213, www.assemblee-nationale.fr/evenements/code-civil-1804-1.asp. Accessed 26 Jun. 2021.

“sexism” has little value when applied here. Therefore, it can be argued that condemning those in the past on the basis of values and a moral code foreign to them is an “injustice”.⁹

How then are we to judge those in the past? Judging historical figures by their own standards is not particularly revealing, as what was considered moral may no longer be, limiting the judgment’s value. Fricker attempts to bypass this with an alternative framework for judgment – whether the person “should have known better”.¹⁰ Unger has applied this criterion to Washington’s and Jefferson’s ownership of slaves, concluding that the “Virginian social pressure made it psychologically” difficult for these two men not to hold slaves.¹¹ Although intriguing, this method is too ill-defined to be streamlined into mainstream historical scholarship. The fundamental difficulty is ascertaining when one could have “known better”; for example, when did Virginia cease being a pro-slavery milieu that psychologically promoted slavery and when did abolitionism displace slavery as the dominant political belief? Moreover, this ambiguity concerns an explicit historical phenomenon (owning slaves). It is unclear how we are to approach less tangible institutions (e.g. political ideology), where it would be harder to measure whether one could have “known better”. Nevertheless, this approach remains illuminating as it conveys the complexity of judging people in the past, for, continuing with this example, one had to be exceptional to avoid involvement in slavery.

This explains Carr’s adoption of Weber’s sociological view that the “historian should pass judgment on the institution”, but not on the individuals themselves.¹² This raises an interesting point. Rather than simply judging people, would it not be more fruitful to investigate how institutions (e.g. racism) arose and became commonplace in a society? Despite its appeal, in reality, implementing this is more problematic. Although Carr believes the historian can condemn “a slave-owning society” without judging the “individual slave-owner”,¹³ this distinction is not clear. One must consider that a society is the aggregate of a group of people, and that if a slave-owning society reflects a group of slave-owners, then to condemn the society is to condemn this group indirectly, and by extension the slave-owners

⁹ Vann, Richard T. “Historians and Moral Evaluations.” *History and Theory*, vol. 43, no. 4, 2004, pp. 8, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3590633. Accessed 27 Jun. 2021.

¹⁰ Fricker, Miranda. “I—The Relativism of Blame and Williams’s Relativism of Distance.” *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, 2010, pp. 166, onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-8349.2010.00190.x. Accessed 27 Jun.

¹¹ Unger, Peter. “Illusions of Innocence: An Introduction.” *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence*, Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 16, Oxford Scholarship Online, oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/0195108590.001.0001/acprof-9780195108590-chapter-1. Accessed 27

¹² Carr, *ibid*, p.73

¹³ *ibid*

themselves.¹⁴ This approach also introduces the notion of agency in history and, specifically, the extent to which one is responsible for their own actions. If we are merely products of our own particular social milieu, then to pass judgment on the individual is unfair as it assumes independent action. This determinist view is unconvincing. A more plausible interpretation would be that although we are greatly influenced by our environment, we are still culpable (or praiseworthy) for our actions,¹⁵ meaning that judging one's actions is not an inherent injustice.

Some historians who are not philosophically opposed to judgments on individuals still maintain that judging those of the past is erroneous. Particularly notable is Croce, who declares that those in history cannot be judged since they "belong to the peace of the past".¹⁶ If we adopted Croce's theory on an ideological basis, then one could never highlight injustices and brutalities (for they necessarily include judgment) in history. Thus, the Holocaust could never be judged as an atrocity or even as immoral. A world in which historical figures are automatically exonerated to preserve illusions of the past's impenetrability and the historian's objectivity is a frightening prospect. Therefore, one can appreciate Schama's frustration when he considers Caron's apathy to the suffering of the French Revolution the "scholarly normalization of evil."¹⁷ An illusory "peace of the past" implies an ethical relativism that is more dangerous than judging the past.

This "peace" also raises questions about the nature of the past not adequately addressed by historians who oppose a presentist outlook. If the past is defined as that which precedes the present, then the world a minute, a month, a millennium ago are all in the past. Therefore, technically everything we judge is situated in the past at the immediate moment of judgment. However, claiming that the world a century ago compared to a minute ago is equally as foreign (as Croce implies) simply because they both belong to the past is patently untrue. Williams addresses this by introducing what he calls the "relativism of distance",¹⁸ prioritising temporal over geographical or cultural differences as the foundation for ethical relativism. However, the idea of temporal differences only being significant is unconvincing (there are contemporary societies that resemble more societies of the past than of the

¹⁴ This line of reasoning mirrors the argument of Adrian Oldfield, who contends that if the "historian asserts that slavery is wrong, and then describes an individual as a slave-owner, he is by that description condemning an individual" (266-7).

¹⁵ Although Carr presents him as otherwise, upon closer reading, Weber more closely aligns with this conclusion rather than Carr's. Although Weber does indeed see the "individual as...[the] actor of social roles", his concept of "charisma" acknowledges that some can "transcend the routines of everyday institutions" (73).

¹⁶ Croce, Benedetto. *History as the Story of Liberty*. Translated by Sylvia Sprigge, George Allen & Unwin, 1949, pp. 47.

¹⁷ Schama, Simon. *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution*. Penguin Books, 2004, pp. 533.

¹⁸ Williams, Bernard. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. With a commentary by A.W. Moore, Routledge, 2006, pp. 162.

present). Additionally this “distance line” (as Fricker expresses it)¹⁹ that Williams draws between the recent (which we can judge) and remote past is a subjective chronological yardstick and thus very open to interpretation. Consequently, it would be better to conceptualize chronological remoteness as a “distance continuum”,²⁰ rather than a line, which implies degrees of remoteness instead of an arbitrary cut-off point.

Consequently, the historian will approach different periods with varying levels of familiarity, but must be aware that their judgments (although influenced by present standards) should respect the intricacies of the past. Richard J. Evans, having admitted the inevitability of judgment in history, advises the historian to avoid “explicit moral judgments on the past”.²¹ Rather than “explicit”, “simplistic” would be more suitable as judgments are inevitable (even down to the historian’s language), meaning surely it would be preferable to have explicit judgments instead of implicit ones hidden under a pretence of “objectivity” that may distort what the unwary reader takes away.

Judgments using present-day standards are not wrong in themselves. However, oversimplification is misleading. An example is a recent article in a leading British newspaper asking whether Napoleon was a “Cruel despot or wise reformer?”²² This is but one case of a simplistic judgment (here a false dichotomy)²³ that encourages limited examination of the past. Ultimately, the historian must enter into another worldview and perspective without moralizing or complacency. Thus, what Hume calls “sympathy” (and Carr “imaginative understanding”)^{24,25} – best expressed today as “empathy” – is essential for the historian.

In conclusion, it is not a question of whether we should judge those from the past by the standards of today, but rather how should we judge the past by these standards. Judging historical figures within a framework influenced by the present day is not an offence, however, it may become harmful when it prevents us from fully contextualising and comprehending how and why those of the past acted. To combat this potentiality historians must proceed not only with the knowledge that the morals and mores of the past will inevitably differ from the present but also with an empathic appreciation of different epochs

¹⁹ Fricker, Miranda. “I—The Relativism of Blame and Williams's Relativism of Distance.” *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, 2010, pp. 152, onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-8349.2010.00190.x. Accessed 29 Jun.

²⁰ Crowder, George. “Value Pluralism vs. Relativism in Bernard Williams's ‘Relativism of Distance.’” *The Pluralist*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2017, pp. 114–138, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/pluralist.12.3.0114. Accessed 29 Jun. 2021.

²¹ Evans, Richard J. In *Defence of History*. Granta, 2018, pp. 51.

²² Willsher, Kim. “Cruel Despot or Wise Reformer? Napoleon's Two Faces Go on View.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 2017, www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/03/napoleon-exhibition-museum-france-modern-civilisation. Accessed 29 Jun. 2021.

²³ David Hackett helpfully provides a helpful list of recent publications whose titles involve false dichotomous questions (10-11).

²⁴ Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature: A Critical Edition*. Edited by David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton, Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 206.

²⁵ Carr, *ibid*, p.20

and cultures. This necessity may well justify Lowenthal's remark that the "antidote to presentist misjudgment is historical understanding."²⁶ If we judge the past by our standards, then subsequently, historians of the future will judge us by theirs. Historians' judgments are neither binding nor final, and they belong to an ongoing process of interpreting the past – a dynamic dialogue between past and present. However, the answer to how future historians will judge us remains elusive. One could reasonably offer possibilities – perhaps our treatment of the environment or animals (e.g. in factory farming) – but if enough people are certain about these then they are unlikely to be such prominent problems. Nonetheless, the fact remains that it is a foolhardy endeavour to predict what is unpredictable. Those living through the early stages of the French Revolution would have been unlikely to foresee the conservatism following the Thermidorian Reaction and the eventual Napoleonic dictatorship. For us, living in the aftermath of the equally momentous events of 1989, rather than witnessing a universalization of Western liberal democracy asserted by Fukuyama,²⁷ we are faced with a similarly unpredictable future. What remains certain is that future historians will judge us by their own standards. Let us hope that they approach us with sufficient empathy.

²⁶ Lowenthal, David. *The Past Is a Foreign Country – Revisited*. Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 601.

²⁷ Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*. Free Press, 1992.