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ETHICAL HISTORY: A CONTRADICTION IN TERMS?

ALBERT WINKLER

It is curious that as many historians struggle to make their discipline meaningful to students, these instructors often rob the subject matter of its most fascinating and important aspects. History has long had the reputation of being among the most boring of all courses, and many young people look on their experience with the topic as a bunch of senseless and meaningless facts and dates. Part of this problem stems from the approach historians use, which kills any interest their students might engender in the discipline. Among the biggest failings of the profession is a strong tendency to take humanity out of one of the most humane of all studies. In short, rather than giving students examples of moral accomplishments, history does the exact opposite. In many aspects, the historical profession demonstrates moral bankruptcy by praising killers, by ignoring the peace makers, and by intimidating students rather than inspiring them. Rather than acting as a vehicle for social change and moral action, sometimes history has degenerated to a profession of excuses and cover ups in which anything and everything is justified, forgiven, or praised.¹

In his book *Killing the Spirit*, which is an indictment of higher education in the United States, Page Smith argued that when scholars refuse to use “value judgments”, they present information that has no value.² Smith also referred to questionnaires given to incoming freshmen at prominent American universities, which asked the students what they wanted to receive from their education. Many responded that they wanted the means of understanding humanity and getting information to help them make better decisions. Smith argued that these students were being short-changed by the valueless instruction given to them.

Many historians continually say that history does not teach lessons, clearly ignoring the ethical behavior of literally billions of human beings over several millennia as though their experience taught nothing about

proper conduct.³ Recently, I watched a program on *C-SPAN* in which several prominent historians were sitting in a panel in a bookstore. I don't remember all of their names, but James McPherson, an important Civil War historian, was among them. These esteemed scholars took questions at the end of their presentations and an attendee at the session asked if history teaches lessons. In every case, their responses were negative. One panelist indicated that history might teach lessons, but those lessons are unclear at best. In all fairness to these scholars, they answered the inquiry on a relatively minute level apparently assuming that the question referred to a partisan political interpretation of the past. Nonetheless, I was shocked because I believed very strongly that I could come up with a simple list of lessons almost off the top of my head. This would include much that is manifestly obvious: peace is better than war, democracy is better than tyranny, freedom is better than slavery, toleration is better than bigotry, and life is better than murder. But despite my obviousness, I must freely admit that many historians can counter every supposition I just made. Rather than argue that history does not teach lessons, I assert that history is actually a gigantic morality play in which all kinds of human activities have been demonstrated in numerous cultural contexts. I also assert that the range of human experience has much to teach the modern world, and the importance of such knowledge is of significant value to our students.

In the motion picture *Judgment at Nuremberg*, the screenwriter, Abby Mann, laments through a character's voice about the moral ambivalence of the German people to the Holocaust. The character, Ernst Janning, a convicted criminal possessed of a conscience, shouts in dismay, "What were we? deaf, dumb, blind" to the evil around us?⁴ I sadly admit that many historians are clearly "deaf, dumb, and blind" to evil.

One of the more insightful observers of the Nazi regime was Albert Speer, who served as Hitler's armaments minister and spent twenty years in prison for the crime of using forced labor. Speer was the only defendant at the Nuremberg trials who pled guilty to his crimes. After his release from prison, he wrote three books on his experiences and granted many interviews. In one of these, he continually referred to the lesson of the Nazi regime. Finally, the interviewer asked him what this lesson was. Without hesitation, Speer responded, "You should never suppress public opinion." I have found this observation or value judgment on the past to be a very insightful, and it has stimulated my thinking on many historical topics in a very profound way. It has clearly helped me in understanding other historical issues better. I believe strongly that if Speer said there was nothing to be learned from the Nazi experience, he would have been doing

us all a grave disservice. Albert Speer also gave other reasons for his moral failure as a human being. As a trained architect, he claimed that his education had taught him the esthetics of buildings, but it failed to teach him anything about moral conduct. He clearly indicated that his ability to make immoral decisions was in part fed by an education system that failed to teach him to prize humanity.⁵ In a like manner, I fear that history teaching also robs our students of the ability to feel and to understand the human condition and moral conduct.

There have been numerous attempts to understand evil in society, and many theories have been argued. Among them is the idea that child abuse makes people more prone to violence and cruelty. In her book *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child Rearing and the Roots of Violence*, German psychiatrist Alice Miller gave this theory a broad interpretation, including the historical framework. In her attempt to make the Nazi era in Germany more understandable, she took a hard look at what she considered to be the misuse of history. Miller asked, "Would it be desirable to raise our children to be people who could hear about the gassing of a million children without ever giving way to feelings of outrage and pain? Of what use are historians to us if they are able to write books about it in which their only concern is to be historically and objectively accurate? What good is this ability to be coldly objective in the face of horror? Wouldn't our children then be in danger of submitting to every new Fascist regime that came along?"⁶

The term "objective" is often used to define the epitome of historical methodology. Under this premise, if we achieve the ability to look at every human act and condition without bias or emotion, then we have reached the height of our profession and can do truly good work. Will Durant, a prominent historian who has written eleven large, masterful volumes on the human cultural experience, made an interesting observation: "There is nothing in historical writing so irritating as objectivity." Of course, true objectivity does not exist because every scholar unavoidably brings his or her own biases to the subject matter, and the attempt to be objective is simply another case of partiality. I must say I believe strongly in the historical method. All competent historians need to examine the sources as carefully as possible and try to understand history from all different angles. However, I also strongly believe that historians have an obligation to point out the faults and failings of historical characters. This is not to say that all history should be pejorative and presented to justify any and all preconceptions; I am arguing that sometimes it is necessary to take some kind of moral stance to understand better.

One method by which historians dodge any moral responsibility for

examining the human record is to state that we cannot judge the past. They assert that to do so is to place our own values on the activities of others, and this simply distorts a proper view of history. I find this to be very amusing because historians judge the past continuously. After all, that is our job. I was very surprised when I was watching a program on television dealing the bombing of Hiroshima during the 50th anniversary of that event. A prominent military historian from Brigham Young University declared that we should not judge historical actions or the decision to drop the atomic bomb, which killed 50,000 human beings. Clearly, he believed we must not judge the moral activities of anyone in the past.

I recently read in a text book relating to Western Civilization the old idea that we must not judge even the most egregious crimes. The text was referring to a slaughter of people and the enslavement of societies. I find this to be very curious. The text spent much space judging many civilizations' art, literature, architecture, philosophy, political ideologies, and technical advances just to name a few. But we must never judge their conduct! We need not place our values on another society to criticize what their citizens did, and we can clearly use the criteria of the civilizations themselves. We need only to take the perspective of the victim to criticize. No one has ever been able to answer the question of why the injured party is irrelevant in a crime. In fact, this is absurd. After all, virtually every legal system in the world and every concept of justice demands that we examine crimes from the standpoint of those hurt by them. We can well imagine what the victims of murder were thinking when they were killed, and I seriously doubt any of them were using historical perspective to say that their deaths were justified or that their suffering did not matter. The Renaissance scholar Garrett Mattingly once argued that the primary function of all history is to do justice no matter how belatedly. He clearly stated that justice should always matter, but many scholars flee from that very concept by trying to excuse everything.

In their quest to understand, to be objective, and to forgive anything and everything, historical determinists believe that what happened in the past was destined to be and no other alternative was possible. According to this theory, people of the past had no choice but do what they did because of historical forces far beyond their control. This is ridiculous. I am completely convinced that I have choices. For example, when I leave my house, our neighbor's cat often comes to me and meows clearly asking for a hand out of cat food. Every day, I have the choice among other things to kick the cat or give it something to eat. No social, religious, or historical trends take away my ability to choose my conduct and make me give food to that cat, and I believe historical characters had choices as well. We

often forget that no historical character ever lived in the past or the future for that matter; every person lived in their present. Every moment of their lives they faced decisions and many alternate choices, just as I did when I give the cat some food. Sometimes historical characters chose to act in a responsible and humane manner, but unfortunately they also chose to act in a brutal and harsh manner. But they always had a choice.

As a point of reference, let us briefly reexamine the issue of the Holocaust, and refer once again to the example as expressed by Alice Miller. In this case, I freely admit that I am being facetious, but I do so to show the absurdity of historical determinists. As is well documented, the Nazis murdered about one million babies and small children. Many of these unfortunate victims were burned alive, and we know that these unfortunate and innocent children cried and writhed in their mortal agony as they died. If we take the perspective that historians must not judge, then the distress of the babies makes no sense. The little ones just failed to understand the proper historical perspective in their cries of anguish. After all, murdering babies is just what the Nazis did. We should not judge those mass murderers, and we should never put our values on them. If you think this is absurd please note how many times such actions have been justified by historians. When Hitler ordered prisoners of war to be murdered that is considered to be a crime, but when Napoleon did the same thing it is considered to be glorious. I sadly fear that the Nazis will eventually be excused much as Napoleon and many mass murders of the past. It is only a matter of time before the Holocaust will be understood as a historical event that we should never condemn but only seek to justify.

I think we could also ask a similar question of ourselves. If I were the whipped slave or the victim of prejudice and pain, I must wonder if I would look at my persecutors and believe that they just did what they had to and my agony does not matter. We must never forget that all humans in all ages have much in common. Just as is the case with all people, if you cut me, I bleed. If you hurt me, I cry.

Hitler is a case study in evil, but we often overlook some of the means by which he justified himself. In many respects, he used the historical record or the common interpretation of the historical record to justify himself.⁷ As a young, impoverished man on the streets of Vienna, he often borrowed books from libraries at a nominal fee, and he often read about the significant figures of history. No doubt, he was aware of the "greats" of history such as Peter the Great, Frederick the Great, Catherine the Great, and Napoleon. One of the many features all of these persons had in common was the huge suffering and great loss of life caused by their policies, practices, and wars. But all this is forgotten in history's mad rush to praise

killers and denigrate peace makers. In the same generation of most of these so-called greats, Joseph II ruled in Austria. He gave his people religious toleration, and he lowered the huge tax burden on the poor. He also freed the serfs, discontinued censorship, built hospitals, expanded education, and even allowed poor peasants to enter public parks. His policies were among the most enlightened and progressive of his age, but Joseph II is often forgotten not only because of the fact he conquered no one in war, but also because he simply failed to kill enough people and spread sufficient misery.

Hitler actually used the historical perspective, and how it is often interpreted, when ordering his men to be brutal in the attack on Poland in 1939. He even referred to Genghis Kahn, one of the most brutal men ever, by saying that his slaughters were forgotten, and he was only remembered as a founder of a state. In his own admonition to his troops, Hitler also referred to the Armenian Genocide, which was the butchery of one million Christians in Turkey in 1915, stating clearly that this brutal event is simply forgotten.⁸ Napoleon is another case in point. He took power illegally in a military coup, made up millions of votes to support his actions, destroyed freedom of expression in the theater and the press, tortured those who disagreed with him, enslaved peoples, subverted religion, denigrated women, murdered millions of men in insane and senseless wars, and destroyed hundreds of towns and thousands of villages while ravaging Europe from Lisbon to Moscow. His real legacy is rape, plunder, and ravages and spreading his brand of military dictatorship everywhere he went.⁹ And still he remains one of the most praised and popular characters in all history. Roughly 100,000 books have been written about him almost all of which find many reasons to praise him. I fully expect that those who applaud such mass murders are secretly in love with power and want to have lived such a life of dominance and butchery. In these cases, I believe that the weak want to forgive the strong in order to emulate them at least in their own minds.

There is an old saying that "to understand all is to forgive all." I wonder if we should, therefore, understand Ted Bundy, Klaus Barbie, or Joseph Mengele and forgive them. I would look at this statement and change it to something like "to understand all is to forgive nothing." Or "to understand all is to condemn more completely." Maybe we would actually be wise to shock and offend our students a bit more often to get the point across that many incorrect and immoral decisions have been made and have severe consequences.

The historical figures that have garnished the most attention tend to be power brokers. Truly admirable characters such as Black Kettle, a

Cheyenne chief who worked tirelessly for peace until he was murdered by George Armstrong Custer's men, are simply forgotten.¹⁰ Needless to say that George Armstrong Custer is known to almost every American, and his most famous legacy is murder. Henry Bergh, who worked tirelessly to end child abuse in America, is passed over without mention. Such characters are just thrown on the dung-heap of history to be ignored and forgotten. I recently asked a class of more than thirty students, mostly history majors, if they knew about Belgian relief during World War I and how Herbert Hoover and others saved the lives of millions of innocent people during and after the war. Even though this was one of the most admirable American accomplishments, the students met me with blank stares and frank admissions that they had never heard of it.

Many have argued that slavery is not a moral evil and that it had many positive features. Some have added that mass murder is excusable even when the cause is not admirable. I once had a conversation with a historian of the American West who argued that the theft of Indian lands, the degradation of Native Americans, the incarceration of many nations of peoples on hell-holes we call reservations, and the premature death of thousands of people were simply unavoidable, and he asked what else could have been done. My response was, "How long of a list do you want?"

In the historian's moral ambivalence, many of them have the attitude that what they say or write does not matter. I take the complete opposite approach. What we say matters a great deal. I am often reminded of Voltaire who took on every brutal cause in Europe for decades. In more than 100 cases, he fought any injustice and the use of torture. His pen was so powerful that torture was soon made illegal in many countries, and the judiciary systems of Europe began to be less brutal and more honest. In a like manner, what we say can truly make a difference. I often urge my history students, who will soon have the opportunity to speak and write on numerous historical issues, to attack immoral people and brutal actions with their words.

My first interest in the past was in the realm of military history. Later, when I was attending college during the Vietnam War, my professors challenged my interest in the topic by accusing me of being in favor of war. I argued the exact opposite by stating that I studied war for the same reasons medical doctors study disease, to understand it in order to prevent it or even offer some cures. In like manner, I think that historical areas should be examined to learn something of value from them, and to urge everyone to make better decisions.

When I published my first academic article many years ago, I ad-

dressed a massacre of about twenty Indians in Circleville, Utah.¹¹ I did my level best to understand the event from the standpoint of all involved, but my conclusion was that these unfortunate victims were simply murdered. I believe that this conclusion was substantiated by the evidence, and I did not back off from this moral judgment. My most recent articles have dealt with the destruction of Jews in Germany at the approach of the Black Death in the Middle Ages.¹² The scenes were horrible. On the basis of prejudice, improper court proceedings, and groundless rumor thousands of innocent people were burned alive. Once again, I have done my best to understand what happened and why, and I am as convinced as I can possibly be that the mass murder of Jews at that time was completely unjustified. In my opinion, to say anything else, such as we should not judge or these events did not matter, would be intellectually dishonest, historically inaccurate, and morally indefensible.

When I have told my students that I still feel sorry for my friends who suffered and died in Vietnam while fighting a brutal, senseless, and immoral war, I have been criticized for doing so. One student suggested that my fallen friends would not want me to feel so sorry for so long. No doubt he thought there is no reason why I should bring up something so disturbing. Clearly, I have no idea what these dead men could possibly think of me now, but nothing excuses me from trying to look at their experiences and learning something from them. Also, I cannot image these men wanting me to forget them or disregard what happened to them. I firmly believe that my attempts to understand the events and crimes of the past have given me a broader perspective, and the effort has helped me greatly in my attempts to become a better human being. I am loath to admit what kind of bigot I was as a young man and how I used to denigrate minorities and think war was a grand adventure even as my friends were killed in Vietnam. But my reading of history books on the struggle of humanity and my attempts to understand war led me to reexamine my values, and I found them terribly misguided. I sincerely believe that the values I have learned from my study of history have made me a better human being, and I also strongly believe that the examination of human conduct from an ethical perspective may help our students as well.

One of the great burdens of history is the fact that nothing can change the past. This means that any injustice or needless suffering that has ever occurred cannot be altered, but I hope I will mourn for these errors for my entire life. I believe strongly that we ignore the human experience at grave peril to ourselves. It is my opinion that we can make progress in preventing the problems of the past by examining them carefully and condemning what needs to be condemned. But we must also praise that

which is admirable. Rather than being value neutral, the past can enlighten us and give us examples of proper and improper behavior that can guide us to make better decisions. We should make it clear that improper or immoral decisions can lead to grave consequences. Only by this means can we historians hope to prepare any future generation with what they need to know to make human existence more tolerant and compassionate.

Notes

1. I presented a shorter version of this paper to the ethics symposium at UVSC in January, 2007.
2. Page Smith, *Killing the Spirit: Higher Education in America* (New York: Viking, 1990), 5.
3. For example, E. H. Carr, maintains historians should never "denounce" such persons as Hitler, Stalin, and Napoleon. Edward Hallett Carr, *What is History?* (New York: Knopf, 1964), 100-1. See also Mark M. Krug, "The Proper Study of World History," in *New Perspectives in World History* (Washington, DC: National Council for Social Studies, 1964), 545-6.
4. *Judgment at Nuremberg*, produced by Stanley Kramer, written by Abby Mann. 186 min., MGM, 1961, Videocassette.
5. Albert Speer, BBC interview broadcast on PBS. See Gitta Sereny, *Albert Speer: His Battle with the Truth*. New York: Knopf, 1995.
6. Alice Miller, *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-rearing and the Roots of Violence* (New York: Farrar), p. 139.
7. John Toland, *Adolf Hitler* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1977), 57-69.
8. Heath W. Lowry, "The U.S. Congress and Adolf Hitler on the Armenians," *Political Communication and Persuasion* vol. 3 no. 2 (1985) and Kevork B. Bardakjian Hitler and the Armenian Genocide (np: Zoryan Institute, 1985).
9. Alan Schom, *Napoleon Bonaparte* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 780-94.
10. See Albert Winkler, *Washita-Massaker* (Wyk auf Foehr, Germany: Verlag für Amerikanistik, 1999).
11. Albert Winkler, "The Circleville Massacre: A Brutal Incident in Utah's Black Hawk War," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 55 (Winter 1987): 4-21.
12. Albert Winkler, "The Medieval Holocaust: The Approach of the Plague and the De-

