Should We Judge Those from the Past by the Standards of Today?

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Abstract : *This paper discusses whether we should judge behaviors of the past using the moral standards of today. It details the social movements and the re-examination that has taken place of America's historical "heroes." Ultimately, this paper argues that judging those from the past utilizing the standards of today goes against existing theories of knowledge development, as well as philosophical theories; it is recommended that history be approached with more of a qualified form of moral relativism.*

Keywords: *history, judgment, morality, blame, responsibility*

I.   INTRODUCTION

In 2020, with the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement and other social movements, America experienced a mass re-examination of its "heroes" in history – and its effects rippled across the world. As protests against racism and other "-isms" have renewed attention on the legacies of system injustices, many statues have been toppled; last year, in England, a 17th-century slave trader was dumped into Bristol Harbor. In the U.S., more than a dozen statues have been removed, including Confederate war figures (The New York Times, 2020). Many other countries have followed suit, scheduling certain statues to be torn down. All of this recent upheaval puts focus on what role history plays in our society, and how much of it that we want to and should own up to. How much of our ancestors' sins are we responsible for, as current citizens of said nations? Do these monuments deserve to stay as part of a legacy as reminders of some past, or does it make sense for them to disappear out into the far reaches of our collective consciousness? Furthermore, beyond the removal of controversial statues, an underlying question remains – should we judge behaviors of the past utilizing the moral standards of today? In this essay, I pose that we should not use the common moral standards of the modern day as a benchmark by which to judge those from the past. First, I will argue how judging those from the past using the standards of today goes against the theory of moral relativism and other existing theories of knowledge development. Then, I will champion that if we *were* to judge in some cases, we should approach history with a more qualified form of moral relativism – to ultimately create more help than harm.

II.   JUDGMENT BY DEFINITION

The capacity to form judgments is generally defined as "the basic power that people need, in order to orient themselves in the world" (Düring & Düwell, 2015). Judgment allows us to understand and position ourselves in relation to our environment and those around us. In the capacity of judging, the irreducible nature of the "where" and "when" is relevant. In Immanuel Kant's theories of judgment, he states that the ability to make judgments is dependent on "the necessary and non-empirical forms of empirical intuition" as well as "our representations of space and time" (Hanna, 2017). Thus, there is a danger in placing judgments on past representations of space and time through the lens of "presentism" – defined by Oxford as the "uncritical adherence to present-day attitudes, especially the tendency to interpret past events in terms of modern values and concepts" (Ratner, 2020). Since those people reacted to situations around them within the boundaries and representations of society eminent in their day, we should judge them using those same boundaries and representations.

III.   JUDGMENT ON THE BASIS OF MORALITY

When it comes to judgment on the basis of morality specifically, a Kantian approach suggests that all people, conceived of as autonomous rational agents, have intrinsic moral worth (Bellevue College). In Kant's view, the fundamental moral principle surrounding judgment-making is the Categorical Imperative – a command that tells you how you should act, and by nature, he states that people "act only on that maxim that you can consistently will to be a universal law" (Bellevue College). Furthermore, the theory of moral relativism caveats this notion, stating that "moral judgments are true or false only relative to some particular standpoint" – that is, for a certain culture or during a historical period (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy). Similar to Kant's view of morality, the view of moral relativism does not specify one standpoint that is unique, privileged or more noble over all others. More extremely, it denies that there are universal moral values shared by every society – insisting that we should "refrain from passing moral judgments on beliefs and practices characteristic of other cultures other than our own" (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy). From the perspectives of Kant and moral relativists, our moral values today could not be compared with the values from another time period; as the people of the past only acted according to what they believed was right for them.

IV.   JUDGMENT AND A PSYCHOLOGY-BASED APPROACH

Additionally, we can take a more psychology-based approach to understanding – judging people of the past with the standards of today fundamentally goes against certain theories of learning and knowledge. There is empirical data that suggests our present time tends to be viewed as the greatest and most advanced society in humankind, both socially and intellectually (Ratner, 2020). This present time is constantly evolving, and in one year or one decade from now, we will have adopted the mindset that we are better then, than we are now. This is due to our aggregate accumulation of knowledge, as our present collective intelligence comes from the wisdom that has been gathered by generations before us. Over time, it makes sense that our standards of morality and judgment are informed by greater examination and experience. This concept of the evolution of knowledge has been studied by Almy and Genishi, as they conclude that "each succeeding generation uses the basic concepts of the preceding generations, combining and altering them so new concepts emerge" (Almy & Genishi, 1979). Furthermore, Swiss psychologist Piaget, through his theory of cognitive development, believed that our present knowledge has also evolved over time – with basic concepts like mathematics and science to have been constructed over generations (Bovet, 1976). With the rise of trends like electric vehicles and veganism, in another few decades or so, I postulate that humans and historians alike could view themselves as being more knowledgeable than people in today's Western world who still drill for oil and practice widespread commercial farming. Thus, it is unfair to say that an individual living 100 years ago should have been equipped with the knowledge shared by most people in our current time.

V.   MORAL RELATIVISM AND BLAME VS. RESPONSIBILITY

It is also important to note that I am not saying that no judgment on past human behavior can be passed at all. Taking into account all of the theories above, I propose that in the cases of judgment, we should approach history with a more qualified form of moral relativism – analogous to the beliefs of modern philosopher Miranda Fricker. Fricker states that "the proper standards by which to judge people are the best standards that were available to them at the time" (BBC, 2013). In other words, the test for one's blameworthiness is not whether he was right or wrong in a moral sense, but if he could have known any difference given the context and respective time period. As we pass judgment, an attitude of blame "presupposes that the person was in a position to have done better" (BBC, 2013). When an agent's moral shortcomings are a matter of their past living condition, according to the qualified theory of moral relativism, judgments of blame in the modern day are thereby out of order.

Another distinction that is important to make is the difference between blame and responsibility – these concepts are relevant for when we reflect upon our past and make amends for historic moral mistakes. In the 20th century, British philosopher Bernard Williams coined the term "moral luck," which attempts to distinguish between blame and responsibility. Moral luck can occur when an agent is "correctly treated as an object of moral judgment despite the fact that a significant aspect of what she is assessed for depends on factors beyond her control" (Nelkin, 2019). For instance, if a child were to run in front of a bus and be struck dead, is the bus driver to blame for the accident? One could say that he is not. And yet, this driver now takes on a set of moral responsibilities that someone who was not driving the vehicle, equally as blameless, would not. The moral differentiator was that it was him behind the wheel. Similarly, discussions have arisen over whether the modern-day U.S. and U.K. should take responsibility for historical slavery, through essays like "The Case for

Reparations" by Ta-Nehisi Coates arguing for the reparations (Coates, 2021). These are examples where arguably, current people might be blameless, yet still responsible.

VI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I argue that it is unjust to judge a person from a different era for lacking the moral foresight to act according to the standards of the modern day. However, referring back to the case of statues being torn down, that is also no excuse to celebrate and commemorate attitudes that oppose what we as humans largely believe in now. Still, by focusing too much on the assessment of right from wrong, we oftentimes may overlook the "why" factor in history – how morals came to be, as well as the "what next" factor – how to take responsibility for historic moral mistakes as needed. Therefore I champion that history should be presented in as unbiased a fashion as possible, to pave the way for true holistic understanding and to prevent unfortunate history from repeating itself.

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