

History's Moral Turn

George Cotkin

“Morality is a subject that interests us above all others,” wrote David Hume in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1740).¹ While such a concern with morality has long been evident, each generation needs to revisit its presumptions and language about it. Few would, I suspect, doubt that our age is marked by especially deep moral fissures and challenges, especially since earlier presumptions about truth and objectivity have come under sustained and sometimes withering analysis. At present, we seem to be stuck on either/or choices, riveted to a hard wall of morality—hence the vituperative and endless debates on reproductive rights, gay marriage, affirmative action, and capital punishment. In many cases, morality is worn too proudly, as a means of avoiding serious thought. It intrudes everywhere in this manner: from much contested attempts to display the Ten Commandments in courthouses and public spaces to invocations of abstinence for control of sexually transmitted diseases. President George W. Bush has regularly invoked evil as the highest order of moral condemnation against various na-

I wish to thank the following for their comments on drafts and bits and pieces of this essay: Hazel E. Barnes, Casey Blake, Kendra Boileau, Paul S. Boyer, Ray Haberski, Melody Herr, Jim Hoopes, Ralph Leck, Nelson Lichtenstein, Kevin Mattson, Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, Joan Shelley Rubin, Ann Schofield, Martin Woessner, Stephen Tootle, the Readers for and the Editors of the *Journal of History of Ideas*, and to the faculty, Department of History, Cal Poly.

¹ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1740, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), Book Three, 455.

tions and terrorists.² Books spin off the presses suggesting how Jesus would act in certain situations. Yet, serious scholars also examine questions such as how we can live “a moral life amidst uncertainty and danger” and why is it that we act inhumanely.³

Historians can play an important role in deepening and directing this moral turn, in moving us away from simplicity to complexity, from rhetorical heat into cool compassion. Moral philosophers naturally involve themselves in the controversial moral issues of the day, and they increasingly use historical examples to illustrate and support their analyses. Their conceptualizations are often deep, but their historical excavations are commonly shallow. Historians are better able to dig out gems of fact in their glittering nuance. Historians can, and are at present beginning, to benefit from acquaintance with how philosophers employ and problematize various concepts—intentionality, virtue, character, moral luck, action, and Just War. Moral history, as I conceive it, is valuable precisely because it troubles issues. The moral turn is less about imposing our moral and political judgments on historical events and figures. It looks at historical agents and events to warn us that human motivation is complex and confusing, open and constrained. Morality becomes a process of thinking rather than a pre-digested set of answers. In a time when our politicians and students rest too comfortably in certitude, history’s moral turn may help create productive confusion, a willingness to recognize that behind all of our moral choices—not to mention choices made in the past—lurks paradox, tragedy, and irony. Understanding, as Kant once put it, is “burdened by questions.”⁴

² For Bush’s statements on evil, see: <http://irregulartimes.com/evilwar.html>. Also, Richard J. Bernstein, *The Abuse of Evil: the Corruption of Politics and Religion since 9/11* (Malden, Mass.: Polity Press, 2005); Peter Singer, *The President of Good and Evil: The Ethics of George W. Bush* (New York: Dutton, 2004), 209–210. On Ronald Reagan’s use of the term “Evil Empire,” see John Patrick Diggins, *Ronald Reagan: Fate, Freedom, and the Making of History* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2007), 35–37.

³ Amazon.com has a score of books along these lines published in the last few years, dealing not only with what Jesus would do morally, but what he would eat and how he would exercise! Recent works by academics on morality for everyday life are Arthur Kleinman, *What Really Matters: Living a Moral Life Amidst Uncertainty and Danger* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) and Jacob Needleman, *Why Can’t We Be Good?* (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2007).

⁴ Kant, “Preface to the First Edition,” *Critique of Pure Reason* trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1965), 7. The language in this paragraph suggests the worldview of the New York intellectuals. Although concerned with the “moral imagination” and its permutations, they failed to trouble their own assumptions about Cold War liberalism. See Neil Jumonville, *Critical Crossings: New York Intellectuals in Post-war America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

In moving to consider history in explicit dialogue with moral issues and philosophical conceptions, historians should be catholic in their approach. The point of the conversation is to arrange a happy marriage between historical narrative and analysis with philosophical methods and questions. Historians need not draw only from the most obvious philosophical sources—Kantian notions of right (as in a duty or obligation) or utilitarianism's emphasis (as a calculation of claims) on the greatest good. Instead, they should follow those philosophers that purposefully steer away from these well-traveled waterways to open us up to a sea of moral questions—how do we think about issues of justice? What does it mean to be concerned with the dignity of others? What is it that makes a life meaningful? Can virtue condition us to face contingency?

Many in the profession, often with good reasons, react negatively when explicit moralizing, or discussion of moral problems, appears in a historical text. Armed with social scientific objectivity and methods, historians since the late nineteenth-century have generally eschewed the language of morals, and they have presumably avoided imposing explicit moral judgments of right and wrong on dead actors and past events. Morality, too, has been associated with the unsavory connotations of Sunday school didacticism, abstract applications of rules, or fundamentalist preaching. Finally, the danger of imposing moral judgments resounds with the presentist problem of reading our own moral values upon those of an earlier age, thus demeaning the morality of historical figures and suggesting that ours resides in a higher rent district. Historians, by and large, prefer to follow the dictates laid down by Herbert Butterfield, E. H. Carr, and Henry Steele Commager to immunize themselves against morality in the pages of their professional work. It is the height of absurdity and “arrogance,” Commager bellowed, for historians to render moral judgments in their work; when they do, they confuse themselves with God.⁵

⁵ Henry Steele Commager, “Should Historians Sit in Judgment?” in *Search for a Usable Past* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), 316, 317. Also, Commager, *The Nature and Study of History* (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Books, 1965), 61. Herbert Butterfield, “Moral Judgments in History,” in *History and Human Relations* (London: Collins, 1951), 101–30; Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History?* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), 94–112. In the same vein, Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* trans. Peter Putnam (New York: Vintage, 1953), 138–44; David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 78–81. Also, Michael Bentley, “Hebert Butterfield and the Ethics of Historiography,” *History and Theory* 44 (2005): 55–71. For a good overview, see Richard T. Vann, “Historians and Moral Evaluations,” *History and Theory* 43 (2004): 3–30. For a contrary view, see Isaiah Berlin, *Historical Inevitability* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954). On the historian as

A strong animus remains in the profession against moral history. Moral history seems too beholden to claims that are foundational, hence resistant or exempt from historical facts and change. Or it places the historian in a position that s/he should not occupy. Perhaps the fullest statement of this position comes from historian Richard J. Evans. In his writings about the practice of history, and in his book about the work of Holocaust denier David Irving, he has argued that history can be objective. Evans claims that at least some works of history, as in the case of Irving, are unfair to the facts and consistent in manipulation of data. But historians, he suggests, are in a danger zone when they wander from their own academic pastures. Listen to Evans' claim: "Historians are simply not trained to make moral judgments of findings of guilt and innocence; they have no experience in these things."⁶ Yet Evans evaluated carefully the historical claims made by Irving, while appearing in a London court of law, and he pointed out the moral imperative to truth and objectivity in the practice of history.

If, on the one side, you have antagonism from historians against historians engaging in moral activities, then on the other side you have the historians claiming that they always have been, and still are, engaged in moral examination of issues.⁷ Historians certainly confront moral and political questions in their work. Most historians when writing about the past presume that lessons can be garnered for the present. Sometimes they are explicit about this, sometimes not. Indeed, entire fields of inquiry—ranging from African-American to labor to women's history—at least at their onset, carried an implicit moral or political agenda. But such attention is often under-theorized, inexplicit, and anchored in certitude about what was or ought to be. It is designed to resolve problems, to give us answers in concrete. This is useful in many circumstances, but it is not the same as the challenges invoked by the moral turn, which are concerned with evoking complexity and opening up moral issues and concerns.

The second part of this "we have always been doing it" argument is that historians are engaged with morality because it is embedded within

judge, see Bruce Kuklick, "The Mind of the Historian," *History and Theory* 18 (1969), esp. 319–320.

⁶ Richard J. Evans, "History, Memory, and the Law: the Historian as Expert Witness," *History and Theory* 41 (2002): 330. On Evans as, in effect, a witness and judge, see *Lying About Hitler: History, Holocaust, and The David Irving Trial* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

⁷ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 122, 125–28.

the texture of our historical arguments and practices. Historians seek to understand, for example, how slaveholders organized their worldviews or how slaves maintained agency under horrible conditions, or how gender codes have been imposed and transformed. In so doing, their historical work captures how moral values were experienced, molded, and exercised in the past. Historians' work also places upon the past its own presumptions of how things might have been, of what was right and wrong, necessary or situational. Such concerns are, of course, moral.⁸ And they need not run roughshod over objectivity or our striving for impartiality. As historian Thomas L. Haskell tells us, objectivity does not mean neutrality—historians can, and often do, take strong interpretive stances (which are always implicitly tinged with moral assumptions) without compromising their objectivity in research.⁹

Historians encounter the past through language and presumptions. In 1954, Isaiah Berlin claimed that “our historical language—the words and thoughts with which we attempt to reflect about or describe past events and persons “is rife with moral presumptions and judgments, as well it should be.¹⁰ In a sense, Berlin anticipated aspects of postmodern notions of the narrative nature of history. For Hayden White, historians by their emplotment of research materials into a meta-narrative, in effect, construct a moral universe. “Could we ever narrativize without moralizing?” asks White. His conclusion is a clear, no.¹¹ Thus historians write moral tales, albeit more or less consciously. Moreover, in the view of various theorists, the adherence of practicing historians to professional codes of ethics—what belongs and does not belong in a text, the etiquette of citation, professional standards, and much more—constitutes as well a moral stance—one that is

⁸ Thomas L. Haskell, “Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility,” *American Historical Review* 90 (1985), 339–61, 547–65; Karen Halttunen, “Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture,” *American Historical Review* 100 (1995): 303–34.

⁹ Thomas L. Haskell, *Objectivity is Not Neutrality: Explanatory Schemes in History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 145ff. Also, Allan Megill, *Rethinking Objectivity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994).

¹⁰ Berlin, *Historical Inevitability*, 57.

¹¹ Hayden White, “Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” in *The Content of Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 25. Also, White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973). White softens his views in “Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth,” in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution*, ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 37–53.

invariably unexamined, and all the stronger for its existing below the line of conscious vision.¹²

As a narrative enterprise, history engages its readers in a world of moral choice and constraint. Too often this is little recognized or appreciated outside of the field of history itself. Philosopher Richard Rorty and classicist Martha Nussbaum, along with novelist Milan Kundera, celebrate the power of fiction to convey virtues such as empathy, to widen horizons, and to make us more attuned to the complexity of motivation and context.¹³ Rather than employing the language and concerns of analytic philosophy, Nussbaum, for example, brings to the fore questions of classical philosophy—most notably, “what does it mean to live a good life?”—by close readings of literary texts. The value of literature and philosophy in this mode is to open us up to complexity and possibility, rather than to render moral judgments or presume to occupy a place of neutrality. Unfortunately, Nussbaum largely exiles historians from this moral task; she finds them narrowly concerned with description and empiricism. When they work in a moral mode, they simply mimic literature.¹⁴ Historians should demand equal time on the stage of moral narration. After all, historical narratives are concerned with demonstrating how cruelty and evil are produced, disseminated, and experienced. Reading nuanced and engaged accounts of historians about slavery and abolitionism, about war and peace, about shifting boundaries of gender and race, all of this can be, no less than in fiction, a means of conveying moral meaning to students of history. Historians will, of course, make judgments, but the impetus behind moral history should be to trouble issues, to make palatable the pain and necessity of the moral imagination.¹⁵ The hope is that, in the process, historical work widens vision and cultivates virtues. And this is what morality is all about for Rorty, Nussbaum, and others.

A heightened concern about the relationship between history and morality began to emerge with particular fervor in the 1980s and early 1990s,

¹² James Cracraft, “Implicit Morality,” *History and Theory* 43 (2004): 31–42; Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, “Ethics and Method,” *History and Theory* 43 (2004): 61–83.

¹³ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 141f; Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed: An Essay in Nine Parts* trans. Linda Asher (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 215f; Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), xvi–xvii, 53, 96–97.

¹⁴ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 5.

¹⁵ On these issues, see Thomas L. Haskell, “The Curious Persistence of Rights Talk in the ‘Age of Interpretation,’” *Journal of American History* 74 (1987): 984–1012.

as academe was caught up in the culture wars and the challenge of post-modern thought.¹⁶ Scholars and political figures debated the nature and possibility of truth, morality, and cultural purity. Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre offered the “disquieting confession” that Western culture had lost its “capacity to use moral language.” He lamented that we exist in a fallen state of moral decay and confusion.¹⁷ Conservatives complained about the leftist leanings of the liberal arts and about the perceived danger of moral relativism, in academe and American culture. Allan Bloom’s best-selling *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) cried out that Americans were morally adrift. “[T]he state of our souls” was in danger of sinking, according to Bloom, because of postmodernism, rock and roll, cultural relativism, and other icebergs in the cold waters of popular culture.¹⁸ One-time Secretary of Education, William Bennett followed hard upon Bloom’s heels with practical advice about how to resurrect proper moral training and values. In *The Book of Virtues* (1993), Bennett offered parents a collection of texts—almost all drawn from the Western intellectual tradition—that would arm young people with proper values: courage, perseverance, faith, loyalty, and honesty, among others.¹⁹ These virtues, he felt, were foundational, able to withstand the siren song of relativism. Of course, Bloom and Bennett often preached to the converted, to those who were convinced that cultural relativism really did exist and that it could only sap the moral lifeblood of America.

Liberals fought back. Historian Lawrence O. Levine’s *The Opening of the American Mind* (1996) challenged Bloom’s indictment, finding that pluralism, attention to race, ethnicity, and gender had had a salutary effect on the practice and sweep of history.²⁰ Rather than bemoaning the loss of an artificial unity, others celebrated the new subjects and perspectives. Literary scholar Gerald Graff found that students flourished in classes when

¹⁶ David Harlan, “Intellectual History and the Return of Literature,” and the response by David A. Hollinger, “The Return of the Prodigal: The Persistence of Historical Knowledge,” along with Harlan’s reply, in *American Historical Review* 94 (1989): 581–626.

¹⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (sec. ed., Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 2, 5.

¹⁸ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 19.

¹⁹ William Bennett, ed., *The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993). Also, Bennett, ed., *The Moral Compass: Stories for a Life’s Journey* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995).

²⁰ Lawrence O. Levine, *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture, and History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

teachers challenged them to confront conflicting moral and cultural values.²¹ Richard Rorty, borrowing from traditions of American pragmatism, philosophical skepticism, and postmodernism, argued that moral values are particular to cultures, without any firm foundations other than historical contingency. Hence, Nietzsche was right: according to Rorty, morals (and truth) are nothing more than cultural constructions. In arguments concerning deeply-held values, there are no knock-out punches to be landed: only contending views of the world to be accepted or rejected. Although Rorty made clear that values, even without foundations, were invaluable and worthy, critics on the right became increasingly alarmed by what they viewed as a widespread relativism in America.²²

Ironically, pluralism, relativism and the critique of historical and scientific objectivity, helped jar open doors for historians with strong religious convictions.²³ A resurgence of American religious history occurred, a turn that enthused even the most secular of historians. In addition, evangelical historians began to practice “believing criticism,” not just of the Scriptures but of history in general.²⁴ Why, some asked, was it acceptable for historians to bring to historical studies Freudian and Marxian perspectives, with their own metaphysics of necessity, rather than religious views? Increasingly, historians no longer hid their religious convictions, and they explicitly suggested that such convictions could comfortably coexist with their historical research.²⁵ A leading American historian and practicing Mormon, Richard Bushman rejected the view that religious thinkers were more united than secular scholars in their perspectives. He concluded, in the essay “Believing History,” that “enlargement of moral insight, spiritual commitment, and critical intelligence are all bound together.”²⁶

Secular-minded historians in the 1990s also began to address moral

²¹ Gerald Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992).

²² Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979). Also, Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The ‘Objectivity Question’ and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

²³ George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 429–32.

²⁴ Mark A. Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

²⁵ But they have not, as Bruce Kuklick argues, been rigorous in their method of examining religious belief and its empirical claims. Nor is it clear that arguing for postmodernism as opening up the gates to religion is a useful stance. See Kuklick, “Evasive Maneuvers,” *Books and Culture* 10 (2004): 21.

²⁶ Richard Bushman, *Believing History: Latter-Day Saint Essays*, eds. Reid L. Neilsen and Jed Woodworth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 17–18.

challenges in an explicit fashion. In 1998 appeared two collections of essays, *In the Face of the Facts: Moral Inquiry in American Scholarship*, edited by Richard Wightman Fox and Robert B. Westbrook and *Moral Problems in American Life*, edited by Karen Halttunen and Lewis Perry.²⁷ These volumes were linked to the cultural wars that had been raging. Fox and Westbrook rejected any hint of “moralism” in their call for “moral inquiry.” They rejected moralism because it sought to recruit historical facts, at the cost of their complexity, for narrow agendas of political correctness.²⁸ Their volume was predicated upon the pragmatic principle that values and inquiry cannot be separated, that all scholarship is committed. In a gloss on Dewey, they announced that “inquiry is a morally laden set of practices.”²⁹ For Halttunen and Perry, acknowledging the advice and practice of David Brion Davis, history was moral examination, attuned to “moral ironies,” steeped in complexity and ambiguity.³⁰ Halttunen and Perry found that historians could help moral understanding by trying to figure out how historical agents had constructed, and been influenced, by moral worldviews and practices.

Both volumes sported excellent introductions by well-known historians about the value of moral inquiry in historical study. However, the essays in *Moral Problems in American Life*, all written by historians, avoided conversation with the discipline of philosophy. Indeed, the names of key moral philosophers such as Kant, Hume, and Rawls, are absent from the volume. Of ten essays in *In the Face of the Facts*, only one was by an historian. By and large, the contributions promoted a pragmatic openness to the varieties, importance, and situated nature of moral perspectives. Historians were steering toward a moral turn, but they had yet to arrive at it.

The moral turn accelerated after the genocidal bloodletting in Bosnia and Rwanda, and especially in the aftermath of 9/11. On all sides of the political divide, questions of value, concerns about the power of belief, and many other issues entered into the American conscience. Of course, similar concerns had sprouted, for instance, during the war in Vietnam, as histori-

²⁷ Richard Wightman Fox and Robert B. Westbrook, eds., *In the Face of the Facts: Moral Inquiry in American Scholarship* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Cambridge University Press, 1998). Karen Halttunen and Lewis Perry, eds., *Moral Problems in American Life: New Perspectives on Cultural History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998) was, in essence, a *Festschrift* for David Brion Davis, the esteemed and morally engaged historian of slavery and abolitionism.

²⁸ Fox and Westbrook, eds., *In the Face of the Facts*, 1.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁰ Halttunen and Perry, eds., *Moral Problems in American Life*, 10.

ans and others questioned American foreign policy and reframed the history of American imperialism. But the scope and depth of moral concerns increased by the 1990s. In literary studies, the cultural turn was a given, even if there was little consensus as to how to proceed. An ethics of reading designed to get at the plurality of experience and to comprehend difference became a moral imperative.³¹ Philosophers responded to an epistemological crisis, deep-seated skepticism, and the inhumanity that refused to exit the world by using their parsing skills to interrogate events past and future, and to make judgments on moral issues.

In this vein, moral philosophers Jonathan Glover and A. C. Grayling examined Allied bombing during the Second World War—area, incendiary, and atomic—to determine whether it was morally justified. Grayling, as well as Glover, presented himself as prosecutor and defender, judge and jury.³² Grayling begins with a history of Allied bombing of Germany, both from the perspective of the bombers and the bombed. He offers separate chapters entitled, “The Case Against Bombing” and “The Defense of Area Bombing.” He then dons a judge’s robes to decide: the bombing of Hamburg—as well as Dresden, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki by implication—“was an immoral act.” It was “*unnecessary and disproportionate*” to its goals, in part, because other means of securing surrender (or changing the means of surrender) were at hand. Some historians, too, have suggested judgments along the same lines, by arguing that other options existed, or that the atomic bombing was necessitated less by military considerations than by diplomatic ones. But few have been as willing as Grayling to describe in such an explicit manner that Allied bombing in Germany and Japan was a “moral atrocity” and to suggest that Allied airmen involved in bombing runs are stained with moral guilt for participating in these actions.³³

We obviously need to be wary here. Historical judgments, especially

³¹ Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *Shadows of Ethics: Criticism and the Just Society* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); *The Turn to Ethics*, eds., Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (New York: Routledge, 2000), *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory*, eds. Jane Adamson, Richard Freadman, and David Parker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

³² Contra Glover, see Allan Magill, “Two Para-Historical Approaches to Atrocity,” *History and Theory* 41 (2002): 104–23.

³³ A. C. Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities: The History and Moral Legacy of the WW II Bombing of Civilians in Germany and Japan* (New York: Walker & Co., 2006), 277, 279; Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 84. On the historiography of the bombing, see J. Samuel Walker, “Recent Literature on Truman’s Atomic Bomb Decision: A Search for a Middle Ground,” *Diplomatic History* 29 (2005): 311–34.

rule-based ones, such as the Just War strictures employed by Grayling, can be deceptively easy to apply.³⁴ They give relatively firm rules without a sufficient sense of tragic moral decisions having sometimes to be rendered. Moral problems are important because they challenge us to walk down, as philosopher Thomas Nagel puts it, a “moral blind alley” between absolutist moral imperatives (in a Kantian sense) and utilitarian calculations of what needs to be done. The value of historical analysis, joined to philosophical considerations, is that it highlights the complexity of moral choices, without necessarily diminishing responsibility.³⁵

Philosophers agree, in large part, with Grayling’s condemnation of Allied bombing, although often in a more nuanced manner. Employing a blend of historical examples and philosophical analysis, political theorist Michael Walzer uses Just War theory—with its emphasis on avoiding civilian casualties by intent, and by practice. But he is willing to trouble the issue of Allied bombing in Europe. He refrains from condemning British area bombing of German civilian centers prior to the end of 1941. In this period, Great Britain was isolated, without resources to engage Germany fully in a major land war. In this time of “supreme emergency,” and by dint of Britain being just in its war aims, Prime Minister Winston Churchill was justified in sanctioning bombing attacks that would kill many German non-combatants. But necessity at this particular historical moment, Walzer warns us, does not mean that other moral values—the imperative not to attack non-combatants—are rejected. They are “overridden,” preferably with a deep sense of tragedy. Or, as philosopher Ruth Barcan Marcus notes, there are situations where agents must choose “among irreconcilable alternatives, within the agent’s range of options.” A case of “dirty hands” or “damned if you, damned if you don’t.” Yet Walzer, along with other moral philosophers, contends that later bombing of civilian centers in Germany and Japan, or the use of the atomic bomb(s), was unjustified, and hence, morally wrong.³⁶

³⁴ G. E. M. Anscombe, “Mr. Truman’s Degree,” (1957) in Anscombe, *Ethics Religion and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), 3: 64–65.

³⁵ Nagel, “War and Massacre,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972): 123–44. In this same vein, see Susan Wolf’s argument that moral philosophy “should not serve as a comprehensive guide to conduct.” Wolf, “Moral Saints,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 79 (1982): 434.

³⁶ Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (2nd. ed., New York: Basic Books, 1977), 246–47. Also invaluable are the writings of James Turner Johnson, *Just War and the Restraint of War: A Moral and Historical Inquiry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981). On dirty hands, see Ruth Barcan Marcus, “Moral Dilemmas and Consistency,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 77 (1980): 127. Also, Bernard Williams, “Politics and Moral Character,” in Stuart Hampshire, ed., *Public*

Historians have joined philosophers in taking this moral turn. Harry S. Stout applies Just War theory to the Civil War and its military campaigns. Stout demonstrates how a “moral slide” occurs—incremental minor actions lead to a hardening and rationalization of worse atrocities—so that good intentions birth evil actions.³⁷ In contrast, although eschewing explicit moralizing in his book on Union actions in the Civil War, Mark Grimsley shows how the moral baggage carried by Union soldiers in the Civil War both sanctioned and, more than Stout allows, diminished acts of immorality on the part of Northern soldiers.³⁸

Michael Bess, in a wide-ranging analysis, examines the “moral dimensions of World War II.” He concludes, among other things, that the origins of the war in the Pacific were complex, that racism did undermine moral sanctions in the Pacific theater (on both sides), and that while the decision to drop the atomic bomb was “unequivocally bestial, unconscionable, barbaric,” it did shorten the war and saved lives—both American and Japanese.³⁹ Thus an immoral act in terms of Just War theory can, according to a utilitarian moral calculus, be juggled to be seen as “profoundly ambiguous,” and sadly reasonable.⁴⁰ The title of Bess’s work, *Choices Under Fire*, is revealing. It suggests that in war conditions, individuals retain choice in their actions. While Bess recognizes, as do all historians, that choices are often constrained by circumstances, individuals still make decisions, opt for certain courses of action. And, with this imperative for choosing, comes responsibility. In turn, if agents can choose from a variety of possibilities, then they are also liable for judgment by historians.

The difficulty of arguing against the covering cloak of determinism has long perplexed philosophers and humanists. An exasperated William James once exclaimed that even if he could not prove free will, “my first act of

and Private Morality (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 52–74. Rawls, “Fifty Years after Hiroshima,” (1995) in *Collected Papers* ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 565–72. For a contrary interpretation, see Charles Landesman, “Rawls on Hiroshima: An Inquiry into the Morality of the Use of Atomic Weapons in August, 1945,” *The Philosophic Forum* 34 (2003): 21–38, and Douglas Lackey, “Why Hiroshima Was Immoral: A Response to Landesman,” *The Philosophical Forum* 34 (2003): 39–42.

³⁷ Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War* (New York: Viking, 2006).

³⁸ Mark Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War: Union Military Policy toward Southern Civilians, 1861–1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 2, 162, 185.

³⁹ Bess, *Choices Under Fire: Moral Dimensions of World War II* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 249.

⁴⁰ Bess, *Choices Under Fire*, 246–51.

free will shall be to believe in free will.”⁴¹ Over the years, the sway of Marxian and Freudian concepts, followed by the early work of Michel Foucault and post-structuralist theory, further threatened to undermine agency and to sharpen tensions in the concept. Agency was determined by the necessity of historical development, the demands of the unconscious, or the linguistic structures of the dominant discourse.⁴²

Such debates about free will are the stock in trade of philosophers and neuroscientists. But scholars in all disciplines grapple with them. There is never any consensus about the drag between free will and agency, but we would do well to stop thinking about it in either/or terms. As anthropologist Michael Jackson sums up the divide, from his Sartrean phenomenological perspective: we are born into structures of power and culture that constrain us. But, at the same time, we retain a degree of agency that may assimilate or change those structures to varying degrees.⁴³

Debates about conduct and agency are at the center of moral philosophy, especially in discussions of virtue ethics. Historians would do well to pay attention to them. Virtue ethics recognizes how the individual is shaped by rigorous training, by parents or schooling. According to Aristotle, “Moral goodness . . . [is] the result of habit,” the exercise of virtue. We become virtuous by acting virtuously.⁴⁴ This emergent self is marked by a cultivation of virtues, not unlike those enumerated in William Bennett’s popular volume—patience, charity, courage, to name a few. Training or disposition determines the identity of the individual. But does possession of a cultivated moral character undermine the exercise of free will when that individual is confronted with choices and demanding situations?⁴⁵

Some individuals helped Jews during the Holocaust, in contrast to the vast majority of those who remained bystanders or became implicated in the process of destruction. There is debate about whether or not rescuers share many traits—religious sentiments, friendships with individual Jews, a

⁴¹ Quoted in Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1935), 1: 323. Also, George Cotkin, *William James, Public Philosopher* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 61–64. James’s view is in keeping with many aspects of existentialism, see, Cotkin, *Existential America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

⁴² On the postmodern philosophers, see Allan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

⁴³ Jackson, *Minima Ethnographica: Intersubjectivity and the Anthropological Project* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 8ff.

⁴⁴ Aristotle, *The Nichmachean Ethics* trans. J. A. K. Thomson (London: Penguin Books, 1985), 91.

⁴⁵ Joel T. Kupperman, *Character* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

particular understanding of humanity. Most importantly, it appears, rescuers—at least in later interviews—claim that they acted without thinking much about what they were doing. Given their own sense of self and their identification with the suffering of others, they simply had to help. They were, in effect, acting without choice; they could not imagine not helping, even at the cost of harm to themselves or their families. This is the upshot of Philip Hallie's well-known depiction of how villagers, from the town of Le Chambon, acting under the spiritual guidance of Pastor Andre Pascal Trocme, willingly shielded Jews. There is a sense that their actions, however dangerous, were determined by their spiritual and historical situations. If such was the case, then did they act in full consciousness of choices, or simply act in accordance with who they were or had become?⁴⁶

Of course, moral philosophers and psychologists—no less than historians—like to muddy the waters on issues such as choice and free will. Rather than seeing rescuers as hard-wired to help, some suggest that they were conditioned to lend a helping hand, initially, in some minor manner (albeit one fraught with dangers).⁴⁷ Thus a rescuer might find him or herself offering a night's shelter to a Jew in hiding, a situation that helped the individuals to bond and that soon stretched out into a longer-term commitment. Or initial activities in the Resistance, on a relatively low level of danger, might lead to fuller engagement and greater dangers. Here choices are made, but only to a degree. A moral ladder, in contrast to a moral slide, suggests that initial small steps of goodness begin to add up, conditioning the individual to new ways of acting in the world.⁴⁸

The self-fashioning of character is appealing, and we see it especially in historical biography. It is also upheld by William Bennett and others for its moral valence, promoting the idea that the individual can, through conscious decision, forge a new character, have it set in stone, and then confront the world in a consistent and virtuous manner. Hence, in part, the fascination with Abraham Lincoln. Biographers of Lincoln marvel at how

⁴⁶ Philip Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed: The Story of the Village of Le Chambon and How Goodness Happened There* (1979; New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1994); Kristen Renwick Monroe, "Morality and a Sense of Self: The Importance of Identity and Categorization for Moral Action," *American Journal of Political Science* 45 (2001): 491–507.

⁴⁷ An increasingly influential movement in moral theory situates moral actions within the context of evolutionary development. James Q. Wilson, *The Moral Sense* (New York: The Free Press, 1993); Marc D. Hauser, *Moral Minds: How Nature Designed Our Sense of Right and Wrong* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006).

⁴⁸ On the complexities of character and decision making, see John M. Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

this country boy managed to educate himself, to develop a deep sense of moral sympathy and a tragic sensibility. The choices that Lincoln made and the virtues that he cultivated, in the words of one biographer, became his sense of honor, “that would make all the difference” in his presidency.⁴⁹ These virtues, it is further argued, helped him to lead during the Civil War, by holding the Northern coalition together and by promoting a peace without undue acrimony.

Rather than character being destiny, perhaps it is but a house of cards ready to topple under the slightest breeze of circumstance. The relation between character and contingency, as some philosophers note, is perilous. Martha Nussbaum speaks of the “fragility of goodness,” stressing how the Greek fascination with tragedy captures this power to undo virtue.⁵⁰ Cognitive psychologists’ work—some of it quite familiar to historians—casts doubts about the power of character and identity to uphold virtue. The famous Stanley Milgram and Philip Zimbardo experiments indicate how easily subjects jettison moral virtues of empathy and gentleness. The Milgram experiment was simple, although later many variants of it were tried. In essence, a person designated as a tester was to ask a subject, who was strapped into what appeared to be an electric chair, a series of questions. When the subject failed to answer correctly, the tester was to administer an electric shock. In over 60% of the cases, the tester was willing to deliver dangerously high voltages of electricity to a person perceived to be screaming in pain. Some continued to administer shocks after the subject had fallen silent or was thought to have dropped dead. This willingness to go along with the imperatives of the experiment and to follow the commands of the scientific authority figure highlighted how readily people from all walks of life obey authority. One might protest that such experiments demonstrate that character triumphs here as well, given that obedience to constituted authority, may be viewed as a virtue. However, many other

⁴⁹ Douglas L. Wilson, *Honor's Voice: The Transformation of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 323. Also, William Lee Miller, *Lincoln's Virtues: An Ethical Biography* (New York: Knopf, 2002).

⁵⁰ Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). On the Greeks as free and responsible moral agents, see Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). For the ability of character and morality to survive the worst conditions, see Tzvetan Todorov, *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps* trans. Arthur Denner and Abigail Pollak (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1996); Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976). Also, Gaddis, *Landscape of History*, 116–21.

experiments, in other situations, indicate that under the pressure of situations, most individuals will act in a way that is discordant with what they normally recognize as established virtues. In the Zimbardo prison experiments, normal university students were given roles to play—prison guards and prisoners. In short order, the prison guards were administering punishment and acting cruelly and the prisoners were suffering real pain. The experiment had to be terminated early for fear of irreparable mental and physical harm being inflicted.⁵¹ If in these controlled experiments individuals were so quick to shed their moral clothing, then how can historians lament, or wonder at, the readiness of agents in high tension situations, such as war, to act in a horrible manner?

Historians and philosophers have important roles to play in examining the interaction between character and circumstance. Philosophers offer historians many critical concepts for examining morality, as well as fine distinctions on the relations between intent and action. But philosophers are often weak as historians, simply plugging historical events into their theories for illustrative purposes. Indeed, one sometimes senses that philosophers might be more comfortable following the method of John Rawls, who sought to arrive at moral truths by stripping all identifying characteristics from his subjects. By imposing a “veil of ignorance” concerning wealth, race, gender, class, Rawls hoped that he would illustrate an “original position,” untainted by history and context in order to argue for “justice as fairness.”⁵²

Historians, in contrast to Rawls’ studied ahistoricism and acontextualism, immerse themselves in the contingent and essential matters of history. They refuse to succumb to what Schopenhauer once referred to as “the stilted maxims” of moral systems that refuse to “see life as it really is with all its turmoil.”⁵³ Historical analysis, description, and interpretation help us to understand why individuals act and how conscious they are in their choices. In one of the more compelling examples of this type of history with great moral implications, Christopher Browning studied the men of

⁵¹ Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (1974; New York: Harper Perennial, 2004); Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (New York: Random House, 2007). For a historian’s positive take on Milgram’s concept, see Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998), 171–76.

⁵² John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), 17 passim.

⁵³ Quoted in Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 250.

German Police Battalion 101 during the Second World War. These men, mostly from the Hamburg area, were emotionally unhardened by fierce combat, and there is little indication that they were Nazi ideologues, imbued with rabid anti-Semitism. When told by Major Wilhelm Trapp that they could opt out of killing at close range thousands of Jewish men, women, and children, only a small percentage of the troops chose to do so. The remaining soldiers did their duty and executed Jews—despite what had to be the horror of killing innocents in a manner that sent blood, bone, and brains flying everywhere. Browning concludes that whatever virtues and character these men possessed was trumped by their allegiance to their comrades and by peer pressure.⁵⁴

The same moral problem concerning character and circumstance—and many others—confronts historians studying the My Lai massacre of March, 1968. After disembarking from helicopters, and without encountering any enemy fire, American soldiers swept through a Vietnamese village populated by mostly women, children, and the elderly. Over a three hour period, 400 people or more were slaughtered, and many women were raped. Some individuals were brought to ditches and then shot at close range, apparently under the orders of Lieutenant William F. Calley. He, in turn, maintained that he had been ordered by Captain Ernest Medina the night before to kill everything in sight, a chore made easier by his stated conviction that all Vietnamese were the enemy, or might someday grow up to be the enemy.⁵⁵ The question “How could this happen?” forces the historian to address issues about how one constructs a narrative and makes or avoids moral decisions in analysis.

Novelist and Vietnam veteran Tim O’Brien has written about what these young soldiers packed with them—letters from home, a family Bible, rations, good luck charms, and character.⁵⁶ At My Lai, one of the men was the son of a minister, but he participated in the slaughter. By any account, the men involved in the My Lai outrage, like those in the Police Battalion, were conventionally moral; in normal circumstances they would not have

⁵⁴ Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 160, passim. On “eliminationist anti-Semitism” to propel and maintain orgies of killing, see Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996). It should be said that Goldhagen does act as judge and jury for moral judgments. The style of his work, including graphic depictions of the slaughter of Jews, bequeaths an added moral power to his work.

⁵⁵ On the massacre, see Michael R. Belknap, *The Vietnam War on Trial: The My Lai Massacre and the Court-Martial of Lieutenant Calley* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002).

⁵⁶ Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 1–26.

committed any sort of atrocity. How then to approach this issue? Some argue that these men experienced a moral slide. They had become hardened by the war (the loss of comrades, frustrated by the seeming invisibility of the enemy) and sanctioned by the willingness of their officers to violate the rules of warfare by torturing prisoners and acting with disdain towards Vietnamese civilians. Certainly, few would doubt that these explanations bring us closer to an understanding of why these young men jettisoned their moral virtues and engaged in a killing and raping spree.⁵⁷

Other ways of framing the issue exist. Consider philosopher Thomas Nagel's concept of "moral luck," which contends that it is difficult at best to imagine what one would do in unfamiliar and harsh circumstances. It is all-too-easy for us to announce that we would not act as those men did at My Lai, or that we would have rescued Jews, if in the situation of a German or Polish citizen. Is it possible that doing the right thing is sometimes actually divorced from intention? Consider Nagel's well-known illustration of the contingent nature of morality and the problem of intent. Two individuals both drive trucks, and both of them know that they should have their brakes checked. But the brakes seem to be working well enough, and the drivers have been quite busy of late, so they have neglected to take their trucks in for inspection. Both of these drivers travel down the same street, according to the speed limit, on the same night, five minutes apart. The first driver reaches his destination without incident. Five minutes later, a child moves suddenly to cross the street, and the second driver, because of his faulty, unchecked brakes, is unable to stop and kills the child. He is convicted of manslaughter. However, given moral luck, in what sense can we confidently presume that he is guiltier in terms of intention than the first driver?⁵⁸ Concludes Nagel, "The things we are called upon to do, the moral tests we face, are importantly determined by factors beyond our control."⁵⁹ Given the circumstances of My Lai, might moral luck come into play? And to what end?

Perhaps we enter dangerous territory when we try to explain and assess responsibility for the intentions and actions of the soldiers in My Lai on that eventful and tragic morning. Does the process of explanation tend to make the inexplicable seem reasonable? And, if so, does it diminish ac-

⁵⁷ Glover, "The Case of My Lai," in *Humanity*, 58–63.

⁵⁸ Thomas Nagel, "Moral Luck," in *Mortal Problems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 24–38. Also, Claudia Card, *The Unnatural Lottery: Character and Moral Luck* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).

⁵⁹ Nagel, "Moral Luck," 33.

countability? This is, quite naturally, a hot-wire issue in trying to explain evil, such as that of Adolf Hitler or the dimensions of what individuals did during the Holocaust or Cambodian genocide. Historians must try to explain, for without such explanation we are be doomed to repeat the crimes of the past. Yet we must also beware that explanation can be a way of deflecting individual responsibility, of losing either contingency or character in the welter of explanation.

Given the moral texture of narration, to what degree does the focus of explanation of Charlie Company's actions at My Lai direct our attention away from the suffering of the civilians; does it increase our empathy for the murderers? Do they become faceless and voiceless, mere effects of the actions of the soldiers? Do we misplace moral responsibility by focusing on the grunts on the ground and fail to bring into the picture the moral crimes of those in positions of power, those who devised the policies of search and destroy, of body counts, and of free-fire zones? And why, given moral luck, are these soldiers held more accountable for their crimes than a pilot dropping napalm in a civilian-populated area, or an artillery officer directing projectiles into a village where Vietcong may be residing alongside civilians?⁶⁰

The verdict on character formation, intention, contingency, and judgment, then, remains mixed. While character and virtue are useful concepts for analyzing historical agents and their degrees of free will, these very concepts can undermine the thinking process, making agents act in a consistent but relatively unthinking manner. It tends to make us unaware of the role that moral luck plays in actions, and it can further place too heavy a burden on the shoulders of an individual, such as Lieutenant William Calley, who was thrust into a situation. At the same time, moral luck can tend to diminish the responsibility that Calley must bear—we are, after all, responsible for what we do, unless compromised by insanity, at least in a legal sense. We praise certain virtues in due course, but we also need to recognize that virtues can be content-less.

The soldiers of Battalion 101 or the southern slaveholders may exhibit many virtues—loyalty to the group, courage to endure difficult acts—but these virtues are linked to specific situations. We should not presume, even when character is formed, that it is resistant to pressures, as cognitive psychological experiments uphold. Thus, again, philosopher Thomas Nagel's

⁶⁰ A particularly powerful view of the responsibility of higher ups in the moral horrors of the war is in Kendrick Oliver, *The My Lai Massacre in American History and Memory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 147ff.

category of “moral luck” comes into play by diminishing the certitude of judgments that what happened in Vietnam could not have happened to the chronicler of the event, had he or she been in the same situation. Yet, taking another moral stance, Tim O’Brien has no hesitancy in condemning the actions of the My Lai soldiers as immoral and unnecessary. O’Brien becomes a powerful voice of moral judgment. Many soldiers, he argues, were in situations similar to Charlie Company’s during the war; they carried with them the same fraught baggage. Yet they did not kill and rape like Calley’s men. O’Brien sums up, “It was murder. There was no punishment. Something ought to be done about it.”⁶¹ Should historians demur from this view?

Historians are presently treading upon a landscape full of moral topics. By stressing how historical memory is constructed and contested, about how facts are fitted into the garments of memory, historians engage moral questions. As David Blight puts it in his book on memory of the Civil War, “Americans made choices to remember and forget their Civil War.”⁶² Memory, then, is more than a simple recounting of what happened; it is part and parcel of national myths, which are moral structures of great importance, with the potential to heal and fester wounds, to develop an ethic of caring or dismissal, and to assess or defer blame. German historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch’s brilliant study of how nations construct memory after defeat in war is essentially a moral tale of redemption, but at a price—the refashioning of historical truth.⁶³ Israeli philosopher Avishai Margalit shows how memory is, in essence, an ethical enterprise, since it can be a form of “moral witness.” In doing their work at interpreting the past, historians and philosophers are part of this moral witnessing process.⁶⁴ The analysis of memory, as practiced by historians, is moral in the sense that historians are, in effect, burdened with a responsibility towards the dead. Historians seek to bring the dead to life as historical figures. Thus, one analyst has gone so far as to suggest something like a Bill of Rights for the Dead!⁶⁵

The question of empathy is another example of historical work cur-

⁶¹ O’Brien, “Roundtable Discussion,” in *Facing My Lai: Moving Beyond the Massacre* ed. David L. Anderson (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1998), 187.

⁶² David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 2.

⁶³ Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery*, trans. Jefferson Chase (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001).

⁶⁴ Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 147.

⁶⁵ Antoon De Baets, “A Declaration of the Responsibilities of Present Generations Toward Past Generations,” *History and Theory* 43 (2004): 130–64.

rently under way that partakes of a moral turn. Empathy is certainly a moral virtue. Historians have linked the development of empathy, beginning in the eighteenth-century, with the rise of humanitarian sentiments and opposition to slavery. As historian Lynn Hunt argues, this movement towards empathy was, in part, a function of the development of the epistolary novel, with its ability to communicate the feelings of others. With the privatization of the body, she further contends, respect for other bodies increased, which further fed into developing sentiments about human rights as something universal.⁶⁶ The question of the relation between empathy and human rights, especially in the last half century, needs more analysis from historians. Is it possible, as Susan Sontag and others have argued that empathy is deadened when too many images of human suffering crowd our consciousness? If so, is empathy threatened with emptiness or in danger of becoming archaic?

Other questions surround empathy. Has empathy, at least in the last two centuries, sometimes merged into a mania for experience? Do such expressions of empathy, when taken to extremes, tend to colonize the individual with whom one identifies?⁶⁷ Here I think of Norman Mailer's well-known essay, "The White Negro" (1956) as empathy gone wild. Does the same complaint apply to John Howard Griffin's sincere transformation—as recounted in his famous book, *Black Like Me*—into a "Negro" in order to experience "directly" their plight in the Jim Crow south?⁶⁸

The emerging field of human rights history further testifies to the willingness of historians to engage moral issues and movements. How have human rights been constructed? How are they limited by the politics of interventionism? Are universals such as human rights capable of accounting for the diversity of cultural practices in the world? How can we compare and define the genocidal impulses of recent times?⁶⁹ These are some of the questions historians of human rights currently address.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2007), 35–69.

⁶⁷ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977) and, in contrast, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 104ff.

⁶⁸ On Mailer's "White Negro," see Cotkin, *Existential America*, 192–98. The original essay is reprinted in Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959), 337–58.

⁶⁹ Especially useful is Eric D. Weitz, *A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

⁷⁰ For an excellent overview, see Kenneth M. Cmiel, "Review Essay: The Recent History of Human Rights," *American Historical Review* 109 (2004): 117–35; "The Emergence

Finally, and perhaps most controversially, historians are beginning to meet the challenge of evil.⁷¹ How and why might certain acts and institutions be properly characterized as evil? Does a concept of evil help or hinder understanding? Are some events, such as the Holocaust, best left uncharacterized in terms of evil, lest the designation diminish the cruelty and suffering associated with other horrific events?⁷² Is evil, by definition, something that is ineffable, inexplicable, and hence outside the realm of history?⁷³ Can historians add to the work of Hannah Arendt, with her conceptualizations of evil as “radical” and/or “banal”?⁷⁴

Historians can, and should, address moral issues in an explicit manner. When they choose to pass judgments, they may do so with a sense of limitation and humility. As historian Robert Darnton has remarked, historians can know, “but imperfectly, through documents darkly, with help from hubris, by playing God.”⁷⁵ Since we, in effect, play God in our interpretations, in the subjects we choose, and in the way we frame our narratives, the moral turn makes explicit, and more complex, what has too often been implicit, written under the table.

Historians engaging with the moral turn will benefit from their pluck-

of Human Rights Politics in the United States,” *Journal of American History* 86 (1999): 1231–50. On links between human rights and the ideals of the New Deal, see Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005). Also, Samantha Power, “*A Problem from Hell*”: *American and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

⁷¹ Andrew Delbanco, *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost The Sense of Evil* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995); Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002). On the subject of evil, see Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Mephistopheles: The Devil in the Modern World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986); *The Prince of Darkness: Radical Evil and the Power of Good in History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

⁷² On this challenge, see Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 14–38.

⁷³ On the challenge of evil, see Adi Ophir, *The Order of Evils: Toward an Ontology of Morals*, trans. Rela Mazali and Havi Carel (New York: Zone Books, 2005); John Kekes, *Facing Evil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) and *The Roots of Evil* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

⁷⁴ The best account of Arendt and radical evil, is Richard J. Bernstein, “Evil, Thinking, and Judging,” in *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), 154–78; “Did Hannah Arendt Change Her Mind?: From Radical Evil to the Banality of Evil,” in *Hannah Arendt: Twenty Years Later*, eds. Larry May and Jerome Kohn (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1996), 127–46; “Arendt: Radical Evil and the Banality of Evil,” in Bernstein, *Radical Evil*, 205–24. On Arendt and her concepts of evil, see George Cotkin, “Illuminating Evil: Hannah Arendt and Moral History,” *Modern Intellectual History* 4 (2007): 463–90. The literature on Arendt is vast, see Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Why Arendt Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

⁷⁵ Robert Darnton, “How Historians Play God,” *Raritan* 22 (2002): 19.

ing the best fruits that philosophers cultivate. In so doing, historical narratives can highlight the nuances of intention, the perplexity of choices, the ubiquity of contingencies, and the complications of character. Some might charge that these moves will unduly blur the moral vision of our students and the public. The charge is well taken, in some respects. But in a time when moral vision is too often presumed to be 20/20, it may be a worthwhile corrective. “All historic virtues and achievements,” theologian Reinhold Niebuhr reminds us, “are more ambiguous and fragmentary, than we are inclined to believe.”⁷⁶

California Polytechnic State University.

⁷⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr, “New Foreword” (1959) to *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1960), ix.