The Place of Moral Judgments in the Interpretation of History

By Stuart Babbage

MANDELL CREIGHTON, in the preface to the fourth volume of *A History of the Papacy*, tells us that he scrupulously avoided making moral judgments about the conduct of the chief actors in the story:

> The epoch traversed in these volumes is one of the most ignoble, if not the most disastrous, in the history not only of the Papacy, but of Europe. It is scarcely fair to isolate the Popes from their surroundings and hold them up to exceptional ignominy; yet it is impossible to forget their high office and their lofty claims. I have tried to deal fairly with the moral delinquencies of the Popes, without, I trust, running the risk of lowering the standard of moral judgment. But it seems to me neither necessary to moralize at every turn in historical writing, nor becoming to adopt an attitude of lofty superiority over any one who ever played a prominent part in European affairs, nor charitable to lavish indiscriminating censure on any man. All I can claim is that I have not allowed my judgment to be warped by a desire to be picturesque or telling.[1]

Acton,[2] of whom it was alleged that he knew everyone worth knowing and had read everything worth reading, was moved to indignant protest. He accused Creighton of adopting an attitude of moral irresponsibility. He had condoned and extenuated what indeed he ought to have castigated and condemned.

By a strange irony it was at Creighton's own request that Acton had first undertaken the task of reviewing the first two volumes of Creighton's history. On the occasion of the publication of the first volume, Creighton suggested to the Editor of the *Academy* that Acton be invited to review them. "I wanted to be told my shortcomings," he confessed, "by the one Englishman whom I considered capable of doing so." Acton was ready to oblige. In the course of his review he complained of the author's moral leniency. Creighton, who admired Acton's probity and earnestness, thanked him for the candour of his review.

Five years later, Creighton, who was then Editor of the newly founded *English Historical Review*, invited Acton to review the next two volumes. Acton forwarded to Creighton for publication a diatribe of passionate denunciation. It seemed to Creighton "ill-natured, passionate and almost incoherent". Writing to an Oxford friend, R. L. Poole, who was Sub-Editor of the *Review*, Creighton confessed:

> I asked Lord Acton to review my Popes, and he graciously consented. Now he sends me a review which reads to me like the utterances of a man who is in a furious passion. . . . He hints and sneers and divagates in a way which seems to me ill-natured. Now the absurdity rather lies in the choice of the *Historical Review* as a vehicle for making an onslaught on its editor. It seems to me so funny that I shall be sorely tempted to add a note to the

review, ' The Editor is not responsible for the opinions expressed in the above article '.[3]

Creighton did not honestly think it was funny. At first he was " very angry " ; later, he saw the Gilbertian nature of the situation. Nevertheless, he was frankly perplexed. Writing to Acton, he said : " I wish I could induce you to put forward your philosophy of history in a substantial form. I am often called upon to explain it, and can only dimly guess ; but many would like to know more of it ". Acton replied : " If I tried to work out in detail and to justify my theory of history, I should lose all my friends, so I am linked to the penumbra ". He proceeded to discuss, however, Creighton's underlying assumption that " people in authority are not to be snubbed or sneered at from our pinnacle of conscious rectitude ". Acton agreed " thoroughly about the impropriety of Carlylese denunciations ", and the necessity for avoiding what might be regarded as " Pharisaism in History ". However, he continued, " I cannot accept your canon that we are to judge Pope and King unlike other men, with a favoured presumption that they did no wrong. If there is any presumption, it is the other way, against holders of power, increasing as the power increases."

It was in the context of this debate that Acton coined his celebrated aphorism : " Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men even when they exercise influence and not authority. . . ." Acton could not agree that the historian should suspend judgment or withhold judgment ; on the contrary, he believed that the historian should apply the canons of morality with absolute impartiality. " The inflexible integrity of the moral code is to me," he said, " the secret of authority, the dignity, the utility of history." It was not the duty of the historian to find mitigating excuses for evil, but to apply the austere standards of an immutable righteousness :

> If we may debase the currency for the sake of genius or success or reputation, we may debase the currency for the sake of a man's influence, of his religion, of his party, of the good cause which prospers by his credit and suffers by his disgrace. Then History ceases to be a science, an arbiter of controversy, a guide of the wanderer . . . it serves where it ought to reign; and it serves the worst cause better than the purest.

Acton appended to this remarkable letter a series of " canons ". The " canons " were a warning against bias in history, against " doctoring " the facts in the interest of a cause.

> A historian has to fight against temptations special to his mode of life, temptations from Country, Class, Church, College, Party, authority of talents, solicitation of friends. The most respectable of these influences are the most dangerous.
> The historian who neglects to root them out is exactly like a juror who votes according to his personal likes or dislikes. . . . The ethics of History cannot be denominational. Judge not according to the orthodox standard of a system, religious, philosophical, political, but according as things promote or fail to promote the delicacy, integrity, and authority of conscience.
> Put conscience above both System and Success. . . .[4]

Creighton was conscious of the overriding obligation of charity, and he did not feel that the historian was called upon to adopt the rôle of moral arbiter of mankind. He recognized that there are often extenuating circumstances, and that there are many gradations of

culpability. " I am hopelessly tempted to admit degrees of criminality," he admitted, " otherwise history becomes a dreary record of wickedness." In any case, Creighton was too conscious of his own sin to wish to be the critic and censor of other men's sins. " I go so far with you," he told Acton, " that (history) supplies one with few heroes, and records few good actions ; but the actors were men like myself, sorely tempted by the possession of power, trammelled by holding a representative position. . . ." " I can rarely follow the actions of contemporary statesmen with much moral satisfaction," he added. " In the past I find myself regarding them with pity : whom am I that I should condemn them ? Surely they knew now what they did." " This is no reason for not saying what they did ; but what they did was not always what they tried to do, or thought that they were doing." In a letter to R. L. Poole, Creighton expounded his own philosophy :

> My view of history is not to approach things with any preconceived ideas, but with the natural *pietas* and sympathy which I try to feel towards all men who do and try to do great things.
> *Mentem mortalia tangunt* is my motto. I try to put myself in their place : to see their limitations and leave the course of events to pronounce the verdict upon system and men alike.[5]

Acton modified his review and carefully removed everything that might seem to savour of animosity. He freely acknowledged that Creighton was not unaware of " the sunken rock of moral scepticism ", and he conceded that Creighton was not deliberately seeking " to lower the standard of moral judgment ". Nevertheless, whatever Creighton's personal intentions might be, the inevitable consequence of his persistent hesitation to apply the moral law to the judgment of guilty men was to raise serious doubts concerning its validity.

> In this transition stage of straggling and struggling ethical science, the familiar tendency to employ mesology in history, to judge a man by his cause and the cause by its result, to obviate criticism by assuming the unity and wholeness of character, to conjure with great names and restore damaged reputations, not only serves to debase the moral standard but aims at excluding it. And with it the office of historical science to maintain morality as the sole impartial criterion of men and things, and the only one on which honest minds can be made to agree.[6]

Creighton, he said,

> is not striving to prove a case, or burrowing towards a conclusion, but wishes to pass through scenes of raging controversy and passion with a serene curiosity, a suspended judgment, a divided jury, and a pair of white gloves. Avoiding both alternatives of the prophet's mission, he will neither bless nor curse, and seldom invites his readers to execrate or to admire.[7]

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Eight years later,[8] in his Inaugural Lecture as Regius, Professor of Modern History in the University of Cambridge, Acton took up the cudgels again. He argued that it was no less necessary to make moral judgments in history than in daily life. " History," he boldly averred, " is a most powerful ingredient in the formation of character and the training of talent, and our historical judgments have as much to do with hopes of heaven as public or private conduct."[9] Historical judgments, he insisted, are moral judgments, and they are fraught with the same eternal consequences.

We dare not, Acton said, relativize morality, as though morality was a thing of place or circumstance. "The code that is greatly modified by time and place," he solemnly warned, "will vary according to the cause. The amnesty is an artifice that enables us to make exceptions, to tamper with weights and measures, to deal unequal justice to friends and enemies."[10] It is better, he believed, "to risk excess in rigour than in indulgence, for then at least we do no injury by loss of principle."[11] We need to keep ever before us, he continued, the caution of the Duke de Broglie: "Beware of too much explaining, lest we end by too much excusing". "I exhort you," Acton repeated, "never to debase the moral currency or to lower the standard of rectitude, but to try others by the final maxim that governs your own lives, and to suffer no man and no cause to escape the undying penalty which history has the power to inflict on wrong."[12]

It was the duty of the historian, in Acton's judgment, fearlessly to rebuke vice and by no means to clear the guilty. "The plea in extenuation of evil and mitigation of punishment," Acton warned, "is perpetual. At every step we are met by arguments which go to excuse, to palliate, to confound right and wrong, to reduce the just man to the level of the reprobate."[13] As historians, we must steel ourselves against all such solicitations. We must, he reiterated, devote "our best energy and treasure to the sovereign purpose of detecting error and vindicating entrusted truth".[14] To hush up crimes was an offence almost as grave as committing them. The man with the sponge, in Acton's view, was almost as bad as the man with the dagger.[15] Acton's objection to Ranke as an historian was that he "disliked the black cap and the solemnity of moral verdicts".[16] Acton also complained of those historians of the Middle Ages who, "in their anxiety to exculpate the Church, praised the spirit when they could not defend the deed." Such dubious casuistry, he insisted, is destructive of true morality, and the consequence is that "we have no common code", and that "our moral notions are always fluid". These historians, he continued, argue that "you must consider the times, the class from which men sprang. The surrounding influences, the masters in their schools, the preachers in their pulpits, the movement they obscurely obeyed, and so on", and the final result is that "responsibility is merged in numbers, and not a culprit is left for execution". This practice of convenient extenuation leads to "the depression of morality"; it encourages us "to contemplate with distressing complacency the secret of unhallowed lives".[17]

In the concluding section Acton set out, in classic form, his views on the place of morality in the interpretation of history. The statement is characteristically adorned with an impressive variety of allusive quotations:

> History, says Froude, does teach that right and wrong are real distinctions. Opinions alter, manners change, creeds rise and fall, but the moral law is written on the tablets of eternity. And if there are moments when we may resist the teaching of Froude, we have seldom the chance of resisting when he is supported by Mr. Goldwin Smith: "A sound historical morality will sanction strong measures in evil times; selfish ambition, treachery, murder, perjury, it will never sanction in the worst of times, for these are the things that make times evil—Justice has been justice, mercy has been mercy,

> honour has been honour, good faith has been good faith, truthfulness has been truthfulness from the beginning ". The doctrine that, as Sir Thomas Browne says, morality is not ambulatory, is expressed as follows by Burke, who, when true to himself, is the most intelligent of our instructors : " My principles enable me to form my judgment upon men and actions in history, just as they do in common life ; and are not formed out of events and characters, either present or past. History is a preceptor of prudence, not of principles. . . . The principles of true politics are those of morality enlarged : and I neither now do, nor ever will admit of any other ".[18]

Acton subscribed to the view of his illustrious mentor, Ranke, that history can be studied with the objectively and impartiality of a science[19] and that " the strict presentation of the facts is . . . the supreme law of historiography ". Acton's determination, however, to present the facts, and nothing but the facts, was fortified by the pleasing awareness that few great men can survive the searching scrutiny of history : " My dogma is ", he wrote to Creighton, " the general wickedness of men in authority ", and the conviction that, on closer examination, every idol will be found to have feet of clay. " No public character has ever stood the revelation of private utterance and correspondence. Be prepared to find that the best repute gives way under close scrutiny." History, he said, " is better written from letters than from histories ", and our strategy ought to be to " let a man criminate himself ".[20]

" Hundreds and even thousands of the moderns," he declared triumphantly, " have borne testimony against themselves, and may be studied in their private correspondence and sentenced on their own confession ".[21] Thus, as historians, we must " never be surprised by the crumbling of an idol or the disclosure of a skeleton " ; we must " judge talent at its best and character at its worst " ; we must " suspect power more than vice. . . ."[22] Acton agreed with James Mozley who wrote :

> A Christian is bound by his very creed to suspect evil, and cannot release himself. . . . He sees it where others do not ; his instinct is divinely strengthened ; his eye is supernaturally keen ; he has a spiritual insight, and senses exercised to discern. . . . He owns the doctrine of original sin ; that doctrine puts him necessarily on his guard against appearances, sustains his apprehension under perplexity, and prepares him for recognizing anywhere what he knows to be everywhere.[23]

" Always expect to find vice and virtue mixed in the character of man," he noted, " strength and weakness, good and evil in their motives, truth and error in their opinions."[24]

Acton insisted that the historian must judge all men, and particularly great men, by the standards of an uncompromising morality. He declared :

> I wished to judge by manifest canons and not by sympathy ; to apply the canons equitably, to friend and foe, leaving no room for favour, or privilege, or prejudice. For I observed that everybody is determined by likes and dislikes, by something in his own wishes and experience, and all this I knew must be shut out of conscientious history. Therefore, I somewhat dreaded the arbitrary margin of extenuating circumstances and qualified guilt.[25]

It is true that when " the main rules of morality " are applied all round history is converted " into a frightful monument of sin ",[26] and history becomes " a scene of guilt, a record of sin and crime " in which " the wicked flourish like the bay-tree (and) the virtuous expect

to suffer persecution ".[27] The historian must, nevertheless, " judge resolutely ".[28] History, he reiterated, is an " iconoclast ": it " shows up horrors, errors, follies, crimes of the ablest and the best. . . ."[29]

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Acton, however, recognized the existence of two important qualifications in relation to the moral interpretation of history : that public behaviour is more important, and morally more significant, than private behaviour ; and that homicide exceeds in enormity every other crime.[30] Among his notes Acton jotted the following observations : " Charity not so applicable " ; and again, " do not so much mind the sins of private life ".[31] Writing to Lady Blennerhassett, he said that, from the point of view of history, the seven deadly sins do not exist. " *Que Louis XVIII ait été glouton, Pitt ivrogne, Washington colère, Burke peu délicat en affaires, Hamilton peu fidèle en marriage, Fox jouer, Schelling brutal, cela me touche bien peu* ".[32] In Acton's eyes " persecution was a crime of a worse order than adultery ", and the actions of Ximenes, which were public crimes, were " considerably worse " than the notorious debaucheries of Pope Alexander VI, which were private vices.[33]

In the addenda appended to his letter to Creighton, Acton expressed the judgment that " homicide is the greatest crime ". " To admit excuses and pleas in mitigation of so great a crime," he said, " is to open the door to all manner of partiality ". A murderer, he added, is good for nothing but hanging.

> I do not know how to differentiate Carnot and Danton . . . Guy Fawkes and Napoleon. As I know nothing more infamous than murder, the worst of these appears to me not more infamous than the best. Because St. Just was also a thief, and Borromeo a hero of devotion, I dare not think worse of the one or better of the other. The glare of the sun extinguishes all other lights. I have no instruments delicate enough to detect the stars at noon. If, for the purposes of history, murder is the worst of crimes, those who promote it or defend it, before or after, share in proportion the guilt of the culprit. And I feel that my hands are cleaner, that I am on the safer side, if I commit all such to the execration and vengeance of men. . . . Ximenes seems to me worse than his victims.[34]

It is not surprising that Acton considered the Massacre of St. Bartholomew the greatest crime of modern times.

It is worth noting, in passing, that Acton's qualifications go far to invalidate his own principles of ethical rigorism. How can a moralist, without the sacrifice of consistency, make an ethical distinction between a man's public acts and his private vices ? It may be entirely proper for an historian to recognize such a distinction ; but, from the point of view of pure morality, no deep dichotomy can be admitted between a man's public conduct and private behaviour. A utilitarian may argue that many bad men have been good kings ; but this is an empirical judgment, not a moral one. Acton, by acquiescing in a pragmatic distinction between a man's public acts and private vices, is disloyal to his own austere principles of uncompromising morality.

Again, Acton uses the crime of homicide as a means by which to judge the moral turpitude of a man. In Acton's view, murder, in politics, as in the criminal law, is the " low-water mark ". It is the

" weakest link " in a man's character ; if that link breaks, there is no use tinkering with the rest of the chain. Dollinger was sceptical about Acton's test of the weakest link ; he preferred to judge men by the whole of their lives. Dollinger was of the opinion that Acton was moved by an excessive zeal to condemn, and that he was lacking not only in charity, but also in discernment.[35]

Towards the end of his life Acton became gentler. According to the testimony of his son, " during what was almost our last conversation, he solemnly abjured me not to rash-judge others as he had done, but to take care to make allowance for human weakness."[36] He condemned " the exceeding vividness " of moral judgments in Macaulay and Carlyle, in Michelet and Paine. He pleaded nostalgically in favour of " a little abstinence from perpetual judging ". In fact, he conceded, " the best way of doing justice is a little reserve in uttering judgments—or writing for grown-up men ".[37] Ranke, he claimed, became the first of historians because he abstained from " the cheap moralities of Spittler and Schlosser—of the ill-tempered censors."[38] " The secret of R(anke)'s art was to rescue his public men from the cheap judgment seat, the short shrift."[39] He described Ranke as a person who thought it unwise to have people too bitter and contemptuous in their attitude to the past.[40] " No cause," Acton affirmed, " is too odious to be fairly stated ".

Acton believed that there are only two kinds of politics—Machiavellian and moral ; and that basically there are only two kinds of historiography—Machiavellian and moral, what he called elsewhere " apologetic " history and " conscientious " history. He was unhappily conscious that he had few, if any, disciples. " I am absolutely alone," he lamented, " in my essential ethical position."[41] Acton was dismayed at the coolness of his old mentor and master. " Dollinger," he wrote, " looks for the root of differences in speculative systems, in defect of knowledge, in everything but moral causes ; and in this I am divided from him by a gulf that is almost too deep for sympathy. He refuses to see all the evil there is in man."[42]

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Herbert Butterfield[43] has subjected to fresh examination the validity of Acton's thesis and the place of moral judgments in the interpretation of history. In an early book, *Christianity and History*,[44] Butterfield discussed Acton's favourite dictum that all great men are bad men, and that hardly any public reputation can survive the exposure of private archives : " I think he would have been kinder if he had made the whole world kin, and would have been less unbalanced himself if he had started simply on the footing that all men are sinners ".[45] What is required of each man, Butterfield implied, is the penitent confession : " God, be merciful to me, the sinner ". It is altogether too simple a diagnosis to say that a few bad men are responsible for the evils which we all deplore. The unhappy truth, the tragic truth, is that other men are no better than we are. Thomas Carlyle was once asked who was responsible for the horrors of the French Revolution, and he replied, every man in France—every man was to be blamed who in one way or another had come short of his public duty.[46]

" Nothing more completely locks the human race in some of its bewildering dilemmas and predicaments," Butterfield wrote, " than to range history into a fight of white men, pure and righteous, against the diabolically wicked, instead of seeing that human nature—including oneself—is imperfect generally ".[47] Thus " the historian cannot give a judgment on their personalities, save in the sense that he can say : ' All men are sinners ' ".[48]

Butterfield recognized that pride, not homicide, is the sin of sins. " Judgment in history," he wrote, " falls heaviest on those who come to think themselves gods, who fly in the face of Providence and history, who put their trust in man-made systems and worship the work of their own hands, and who say that the strength of their own right arm gave them the victory ". " We are speaking," he hastened to add, " of an interim judgment taking place in the historical sphere and not a final assessment ". The Greeks spoke of *Hubris* which invites *Nemesis* : and, in popular thought, we speak of pride which goes before a fall. Butterfield declared that there is a moral judgment in history which tells us that a man by aping providence blasphemes God and brings tragedy upon himself and the world ; and he added this warning : " If men put their faith in science and make it the be-all and end-all of life, as though it were not to be subdued to any higher ethical end, there is something in the very composition of the universe that will make it execute judgment on itself, if only the shape of the atomic bomb ".[49]

Our belief that there is a moral judgment operative in history, however, does not give us the right to act as judges over others. " There is a sense," Butterfield continued, " in which all that we may say on this subject and all the moral verdicts that we may pass on human history are only valid as self-judgments—only useful as we bring them home to ourselves ".[50] We have no justification or excuse for the sin of self-righteousness.

Butterfield returned to the theme in a later work, *History and Human Relations*.[51] In this work he showed himself much less ready to philosophize. It is better, he thought, for the historian to stick to his last, using the empirical methods which modern historiography has canonized. In particular (and this is the substance of his thesis), it is not possible for the historian to pass moral judgments because we are all under sin and our judgments are vitiated, not only by lack of perspective, but by prejudice. He concluded that " the kind of ethical judgments which historians like Lord Acton have been anxious to achieve are possible only to God."[52] " Moral judgments," he asserted, " must be recognized as an actual hindrance to enquiry and reconstruction " ; they are, by their nature, " irrelevant to the enquiry and alien to the intellectual realm of scientific history ".[53] Moral judgments are not only mischievous, they are also presumptuous. " We may say," he explained, " that precisely because all men are sinners and precisely because the rest of the truth about the matter cannot be disentangled short of the Judgment Day, the vindication of the moral element in History neither requires nor permits the separation of the sheep from the goats by the technical historian."[54]

Butterfield claimed that moral judgments, being highly selective

(" no historian can keep this ethical vigilance continuous or trouble to be making moral judgments absolutely all the time ") are of dubious value (" the occasional dip into moral judgments is utterly inadequate to the end it purports to serve "). " The effect of the whole situation," he said, " is to make the judgments in question depend on the historian's unconscious selection of the moments at which he will think fit to raise the moral issue ".[55] Butterfield deplored what he called " spasmodic incursions into the field of ethics ". He pointed out, by way of example, that some Whig historians reserve their severest judgment for those who have supported " absolutism ", and the consequence is that the rest of the wide world of moral action either is " ignored, as a mere matter of private life, or is reserved for a concession made in parenthesis ".[56] Moral judgments, in any case, are, as often as not, " pseudo-moral judgments masquerading as moral ones—mixed and muddy affairs, part prejudice, part political animosity—with a dash of ethical flavouring wildly tossed into the concoction ".[57]

Butterfield returned to the view that moral judgments serve little useful purpose save as the basis for self-judgment. " It is questionable," he argued, " whether any retrospective ethical judgment . . . is worth anything, except in the form of the judgment that all men are, and men always have been, sinners." And this particular thesis, he continued, " owes its power and authenticity to the fact that in reality it is translatable for each of us into a self-judgment ".[58] Even when, as in the case of murderers, we are compelled to pass judgment, we must " reflect sadly on the bitterness of the necessity and say : ' There but for the grace of God, go I ' ".[59] We are bound, he insisted, by the law of charity : " No law of God or man, and no alleged utility, can supersede the law or transcend the utility of extending charity to all men, or can set imaginable limits to the law of charity ".[60] " Genuine ultimate assessments of worthiness," he pointed out, " are beyond the power of our mathematics to calculate ". And the reason is not hard to seek :

> The historian can never quite know men from the inside—never quite learn the last secret of the workings of inspiration in a poet or of piety in a devout religious leader. For the same reason he can never quite carry his enquiries to that innermost region where the final play of motive and the point of responsibility can be decided.[61]

Concerning the issue at controversy between Creighton and Acton, Butterfield commented :

> Creighton was surely right when he said—after second thoughts on the subject—that he, for his part, could not bring himself to be the judge of Pope Alexander VI and must make allowances for time and circumstance. Acton, on the other hand, must have been right in believing that the historian does not know enough to exonerate such a man, and that, whatever might be discounted for the age of the Renaissance, the ethics of the New Testament had at any rate been in circulation for nearly fifteen hundred years. . . . The truth was that Creighton could not know enough to exonerate. Neither, on the other hand, did Acton in reality know enough to condemn the man himself.[62]

Butterfield is aware of the perennial temptation to play the Pharisee. We like to think that if only Russia and her satellites were buried in the sea the rest of us would get along very nicely indeed. " It is unfortunate," Butterfield said, " that people should be whipped into

fevers and hysterias by the myth that the unexampled viciousness of a single power or a single system is the only obstruction to a general disarmament ".[63] We must, he insisted, " abandon the initial attitude of the Pharisee and accept our own part in man's universal sin ".[64]

As an historian, Butterfield is concerned with seeking to discover the facts of the past, not to praise or blame. The primary function of the historian, he insisted, is to reconstruct the past in its own context, not in ours ; to recover, by " sympathetic understanding ", what actually happened. To fulfil this task the historian must divest himself of those preconceptions—moral, political and religious—which are characteristic of our judgments in ordinary life. " We do not deny the importance of morality in life," he hastened to add, " any more than we deny the hand of God in history ".[65]

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Sir Isaiah Berlin, on the occasion of the Auguste Comte Memorial Lecture in 1953 (subsequently published under the title, *Historical Inevitably*[66]), vigorously joined issue with Butterfield and called in question the validity of his presuppositions. The Oxford humanist insisted that we are compelled to judge, whether we want to or not, partly because moral categories are deeply embedded in the structure of our language, partly because it is morally monstrous to say that we cannot judge a Nero, Tamerlane, or Hitler. He pointed out that today we are under attack from two contrary points of view : from those who say we cannot judge because we know too much and from those who say we cannot judge because we know too little.[67] The former argue that belief in the importance of motives is delusive,

> that the behaviour of men is in fact what it is by factors largely beyond the control of individuals ; for instance, by the influence of physical factors, or of environment, or of custom ; or by the " natural " growth of some larger unit—a race, a nation, a class, a biological species ; or (according to some writers) by some entity conceived in even less empirical terms—a " spiritual organism ", a religion, a civilization, a Hegelian (or Buddhist) World Spirit ; entities whose career or manifestations on earth are the object either of empirical or of metaphysical inquiries—depending on the cosmological outlook of particular thinkers.[68]

These views are fatal to the notion of individual responsibility. According to these deterministic philosophies,

> personal freedom is a noble and socially valuable fiction, for society might have crumbled without it ; it is a necessary deception—one of the greatest devices of " The Cunning of Reason " or of History, or of whatever other cosmic force we may be invited to worship. But a delusion, however noble, useful, metaphysically justified, historically indispensable, is still a delusion. And so individual responsibility, the perception of the difference between right and wrong actions, between avoidable evil and misfortune, are mere symptoms of our vanity, evidences of our imperfect adjustment, of our inability to face the truth. The more we know, the greater the relief from the burden of choice ; we forgive others for what they cannot avoid being, and by the same token we forgive ourselves.[69]

Thus, Berlin continued, " we reduce history to a kind of physics ; as well blame the galaxy or gamma-rays as Genghis Khan or Hitler ". Berlin attributed the popularity of these deterministic interpretations to our contemporary " infatuation with the natural sciences ". But

history, Berlin insisted, is not a science, the alleged laws of science notwithstanding.

" By a queer paradox," Berlin continued, " the same position is reached by those who hold what seems at first the diametrical opposite of this position, that we cannot praise or blame, not because we know too much, but because we know too little ".[70] Berlin quoted Butterfield (" a Christian historian of distinction ") as a leading representative of this position :

> For Professor Butterfield, if I understand him correctly, the " human predicament " is a product of the complex interaction of innumerable factors, few among them known, fewer still controllable, the greater number scarcely recognized at all. The least that we can do, therefore, is to acknowledge our condition with due humility ; and since we are involved in a common darkness, and few of us stumble in it to much greater purpose than others (at least in the perspective of the whole of human history), we should practise understanding and charity. The least we can do as historians, scrupulous to say no more than we are entitled to say, is to suspend judgment; neither praise nor condemn ; for the evidence is always insufficient, and the alleged culprits are like swimmers forever caught in cross-currents and whirlpools beyond their control.[71]

From one point of view, Berlin admitted, these Christian historians are right. " Censoriousness, recrimination, moral or emotional blindness to the ways of life and outlooks of others, intellectual or ethical fanaticism, are vices in the writing of history, as in life." But this does not mean that we are arbitrarily to jettison every natural human emotion, as though there was no such thing as indignation or anger.

> But just as our ordinary speech would become fantastically distorted by a conscious effort to eliminate from it some basic ingredient—say, everything remotely liable to convey value judgments, our normal, scarcely noticed, moral or psychological attitudes—and just as this is not regarded as indispensable for the preservation of what we should look upon as a normal modicum of objectivity, impartiality, and accuracy, so, for the same reason, no such radical remedy is needed for the preservation of a reasonable modicum of these qualities in the writing of history.[72]

Once again, Berlin attributes this perversion of history to an infatuation with the natural sciences.

> The invocation to historians to suppress even that minimal degree of moral or psychological evaluation which is necessarily involved in viewing human beings as creatures with purposes and motives (and not merely as causal factors in the procession of events), seems to me to rest upon a confusion of the aims and methods of the humane studies with those of natural science. It is one of the greatest and most destructive fallacies of the last hundred years.[73]

This tendency to reduce history to a category of physics involves nothing less than an emasculation of history.

> This exhortation to the students of humanity to practise austerities, and commit deliberate acts of self-laceration, that, like Origen, they might escape all temptation to sin (involved in any lapse from " neutral " protocols of the data of observation) is to render the writing of history at once pathetic and ridiculous.[74]

In practice it *is* possible (Butterfield notwithstanding) to distinguish superficiality " from depth, bias from objectivity, perversion of facts from honesty, stupidity from perspicacity, passion and confusion from detachment and lucidity ".[75] Thus, " our best historians ", Berlin

said, " use empirical tests in sifting facts, make microscopic examinations of the evidence . . . and show no false fear in attributing responsibility to individuals ".[76] Berlin boldly concluded :

> It needs more than infatuation with a programme to overthrow some of the most deeply rooted moral and intellectual habits of human beings, whether they be plumbers or historians. We are told that it is foolish to judge Charlemagne or Napoleon, or Genghis Khan or Hitler or Stalin for their massacres. For that is at most a comment upon ourselves and not upon " the facts ". Likewise we are told that it is absurd to praise those benefactors of humanity whom the followers of Comte so faithfully celebrated, or at least that to do so is not our business as historians : because as historians our categories are " neutral " and differ from our categories as ordinary human beings as those of chemists undeniably do. . . . To this we can only answer that to accept this doctrine is to do violence to the basic notions of our morality ; to misrepresent our sense of our past, and to ignore the most general concepts and categories of normal thought. The time will come when men will wonder how this view, which combines a misunderstanding of empirical methods with cynicism exaggerated to the point of eccentricity, can ever have achieved such remarkable fame and influence and respectability. . . . Principally it seems to me to spring from a desire to resign our responsibility, to cease from judging provided we be not judged ourselves.[77]

Views such as these, he declared, are symptomatic of the times in which we live, they always appear " at moments of confusion and inner weakness ". " Such views, although they may spring from a natural reaction against too much moral rhetoric, are a desperate remedy." By eliminating from our consideration " the most important psychological and moral distinctions known to us ", we obscure " our vision of the real world, and further confuse an already sufficiently bewildered public about the relations of value to fact, and, even more, the nature and methods of the natural sciences and historical studies ".[78]

* * * *

There the debate rests. What conclusion do we reach concerning the place of moral judgments in history ? Do we agree with Acton that the historian has an inescapable obligation to apply impartially the canons of morality to all men, or at least to the great men of the past ? Do we echo the judgment of Berlin that, as morally responsible persons, we are bound to apply ethical criteria to our interpretation of history ? Or do we, contrariwise, align ourselves with Creighton and with Butterfield ? Do we hesitate to take upon ourselves the rôle of judge on the ground that, since we are sinners, it ill behoves us to adopt the double rôle of accuser and assessor ?

A prior question is involved : to what extent is it possible for the historian to achieve a real measure of objectivity and impartiality in relation to the facts of history ? To what extent is it possible to eliminate bias and to avoid distortion ? Ranke, the founder of modern empirical historiography, insisted that the task of the historian is " to show what really happened " ; it is not the task of the historian to judge the past nor to instruct the present for the benefit of the future. " The strict presentation of the facts," he reiterated, " is the supreme law of historiography ".[79] In 1902, J. B. Bury reaffirmed the view that " history is a science, no less and no more ", in his Inaugural Lecture as Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge. History,

he claimed, is henceforth " really enthroned and ensphered among the sciences ", having forsaken its old alliance with the arts where " the sanctions of truth and accuracy could not be severe ". Instead, " girded with new strength ", he continued, " she has definitely come out from among her old associates, moral philosophy and rhetoric, . . . and has begun to enter into closer relations with the sciences which deal objectively with the facts of the universe ".[80] But, as Norman Sykes pointed out,[81] academic fashions change with remarkable rapidity, and nowhere has the revolution been more notable than in the field of historiography. Professor Harold Temperley, the friend and disciple of Bury, in his own Inaugural Lecture in Cambridge in 1930, avowed that " in my own memory the idea that history is a science has perished ". Still more remarkably, in a volume of *Cambridge University Studies* published three years later, the writer of the chapter on " History ", R. E. Balfour, wrote :

> Fifty years ago it was hardly disputed among serious men that history was a science, destined to become more and more exact as time went on, until at some not very distant date it would be possible to lay down laws for the conduct of human affairs derived from past history and the experience of mankind. Today the reaction against this excessive optimism about the scope of history has gone so far that it is rare to find anyone, even in academic circles, who will defend the scientific character of history.[82]

The wheel has gone full circle, so that, according to the same writer,

> The art of the historian finds its closest affinity in that of the portrait painter, who has the double task of producing a good likeness and a work of art. . . . Like the portrait painter, the historian must achieve not merely accuracy of detail, but truth of general aspect and of proportion. This latter indeed is the more important of the two ; and a historian who is inaccurate in detail but correct in the broad view, is less misleading than the one who is accurate but mistaken. . . . Good histories are as rare as good portraits ; and in either case the means by which they impose themselves upon us is not their accuracy but their verisimilitude.[83]

" It is difficult," argued G. J. Renier, " to see how the historian can avoid judging by every single deed which he recounts ".[84] By his selection of the facts, by the way he marshalls his material and presents his case, he reveals his presuppositions and point of view. Professor G. M. Trevelyan, in his Presidential Address to the Historical Association in 1947, discussed this question in an address entitled, " Bias in History ". " Because history is not an exact science but an interpretation of human affairs, opinions and varieties of opinions intrude as inevitable factors." " To record facts without explanation or comment," he insisted, " is to write chronicles or annals, not history ".[85] Karl Bath makes this same point : simply to record and catalogue facts, he said, " is not history : it is photographed and analysed chaos ".[86] Unless the historian " *has* a point of view ", wrote R. G. Collingwood, " he can see nothing at all ".[87] " Scientific " history, in the sense of history without presuppositions, " bloodless " history, " neutral " history, is a figment of the imagination.[88]

There is, then, an inescapable element of subjectivity in all historiography, an element of bias and a measure of distortion. Edmund Wilson, in a recent B.B.C. Broadcast, said that history is popularly regarded as " the art of choosing your own particular fiction and using the past to endorse it. . . ."[89] " Such cynicism," he added,

" does at least emphasize that although history is based on the facts, it is first and last an act of interpretation and imagination : of selection, shaping, and presentation ".[90] G. M. Trevelyan judiciously observed : " We ought always to remember . . . that history is a matter of opinions, various and variable, playing on a body of accepted facts that is itself always expanding. On the other hand, we must take care not to be too sceptical and not to say that all historical judgments are guess-work or prejudice ".[91]

The Christian historian will keep continually before him the words of Jesus : " Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment " (John 7 : 24). He will recognize that, in the exercise of his profession, he is called to bring a discriminating judgment to bear, to use discernment, avoiding superficiality on the one hand and cultivating honesty on the other hand.

" Moral disapproval," Trevelyan affirmed, " should be part of the historian's bias, indeed it is a part of his duty, but its expression requires art and judgment to do well ". Trevelyan recognized, however, that " if the historian stops to exclaim over every wrong deed that he records, his history will become too like that of Gildas, a book of lamentations, a commination service ".[92] Thus the historian needs to avoid not only the temptation to undue censoriousness and Pharisaic self-righteousness, but also the contrary danger of vacillating indecision and moral evasiveness. According to Bauer the historian should avoid, with equal care, tendentiousness and colourless impartiality.[93]

The historian must be responsible. " Bias in history, in the bad sense of the word," Trevelyan said, " has been and still is a most potent instrument for evil ". " It is the duty of the historian," he insisted, " to display a bias for the moral law, impartially applied ". " I agree," he added, " with Lord Acton ". " With a wrong bias," he continued, history " can be gravely distorted ". " God give us a true bias," he concluded.[94]

We recognize that the judgments which we make are ultimately an expression of our moral presuppositions. In Trevelyan, morality finds its sanction in philosophy. He lamented that many " an historian may be a great scientific researcher or a fine artist in historical narrative, and yet lack the true judgment of values, have the wrong sort of bias, be in fact, no philosopher ".[95]

The Christian historian, however, finds the sanction for morality not in philosophy but in the revealed will of God. Acton affirmed that the moral law is written on the tablets of eternity, and the Apostle Paul declared that there is a moral law written on the hearts of men (Romans 2: 15). This, in the ultimate analysis, is our justification for seeking to make moral judgments in the interpretation of history.

[1] *A History of the Papacy from the Great Schism to the Sack of Rome*, (London, 1897) Vol. IV, pp. vi-vii.

[2] For a penetrating biography of Acton, see Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Lord Acton : A Study in Conscience and Politics* (London, 1952).

[3] *Life and Letters of Mandell Creighton*, by his wife. (London, 1913), Vol. 1, p. 370.

[4] Printed in *Essays on Freedom and Power*, ed. G. Himmelfarb (London, 1956), p. 339.

[5] *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, pp. 371f.
[6] *Historical Essays and Studies* (London, 1907), p. 427.
[7] *Ibid.*, p. 428.
[8] June 1895.
[9] *Lectures on Modern History* (London, 1930), p. 8.
[10] *Ibid.*, p. 25.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 27.
[12] *Ibid.*, p. 24.
[13] *Ibid.*, p. 24.
[14] *Ibid.*, p. 5.
[15] " The strong man with the dagger is followed by the weaker man with the sponge "—quoted, G. P. Gooch, *History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1913), p. 389.
[16] Add. MSS., 4997, 5011 (Cambridge University Library). Quoted, L. Kochan, *Acton on History* (London, 1954), p. 130.
[17] *Op. cit.*, p. 25.
[18] *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.
[19] In his circular letter to the contributors of the *Cambridge Modern History*, Acton wrote : " Our scheme requires that nothing shall reveal the country, the religion, or the party, to which the writers belong ".
[20] *Essays on Freedom and Power*, p. 340.
[21] Inaugural Lecture, *Lectures on Modern History*, p. 7.
[22] *Ibid.*, p. 24.
[23] *Ibid.*, p. 27.
[24] Add. MSS. 5684.
[25] Add. MSS. 4863.
[26] *History of Freedom and Other Essays* (London, 1907), p. 568.
[27] Add. MSS. 4981.
[28] *Historical Essays and Studies*, p. 354.
[29] Add. MSS. 5011.
[30] Acton, writing to Creighton, said :

> We all agree that Calvin was one of the greatest writers, many think him the best religious teacher in the world. But that one affair of Servetus outweighs the nine folios and settles, by itself, the reputation he deserves. So with the Mediæval Inquisition and the Popes that founded it and worked it. That is the breaking point, the article of their system by which they stand or fall.

Quoted, F. E. de Janosi, " The Correspondence between Lord Acton and Bishop Creighton ", *Cambridge Historical Journal*, Vol. VI, 3 (1940), p. 215.
[31] Add. MSS. 5478 ; 5011.
[32] Quoted, Lionel Kochan, *op. cit.*, p. 74.
[33] Add. MSS. 6871.
[34] Add. MSS. 4863.
[35] Add. MSS. 4909.
[36] Letter to *The Times*, October 30th, 1906.
[37] Add. MSS. 4929, 182.
[38] Add. MSS. 5478.
[39] Add. MSS. 5011, 59.
[40] Add. MSS. 5011, 89. Quoted, Herbert Butterfield ; *Man on his Past: The Study of the History of Historical Scholarship* (Cambridge, 1955), p. 93.
[41] Add. MSS. 5403.
[42] Quoted, G. P. Gooch, *op. cit.*, p. 393.
[43] Regius Professor of Modern History in the University of Cambridge.
[44] London, 1949.
[45] *op. cit.*, p. 29.
[46] *Ibid.*, p. 37.
[47] *Ibid.*, p. 40.
[48] *Ibid.*, p. 45. One is reminded of Dostoievsky's comment.

> " You cannot be a judge of anyone. For no one can judge a criminal until he recognizes that he is just such a criminal as the man standing before him, and that he perhaps is more than all men to blame for that crime. When he understands that, he will be able to be a judge." *The Brothers Karamazov* (E.T., New York, N.D.), p. 398.

[49] *Ibid.*, p. 60.

[50] *Ibid.*, p. 62. As long ago as 1842 Gladstone made this point. According to his biographer, Lord Morley, " though anger burned fiercely in him over wrong, nobody was more chary of passing moral censures ". What he said of himself, when he was three and thirty, held good to the end :

> Nothing grows upon me so much with lengthening life (sic !) as the sense of the difficulties, or rather the impossibilities, with which we are beset whenever we attempt to take to ourselves the functions of the Eternal Judge (except in reference to ourselves where judgment is committed to us), and to form any accurate idea of relative merit and demerit, good and evil, in actions. Quoted, Frank Pakenham, Lord Longford, *The Idea of Punishment* (London, 1961), p. 54.

[51] London, 1951. [52] *Op. cit.*, p. 110. [53] *Ibid.*, p. 103.
[54] *Ibid.*, p. 104. [55] *Ibid.*, p. 104. [56] *Ibid.*, p. 105.
[57] *Ibid.*, p. 114. [58] *Ibid.*, p. 106. [59] *Ibid.*, p. 110.
[60] *Ibid.*, p. 112. [61] *Ibid.*, p. 116. [62] *Ibid.*, pp. 118f.
[63] *Christianity, Diplomacy, and War* (London, 1953), p. 72.
[64] *Ibid.*, p. 60.
[65] *History and Human Relations*, p. 103.
[66] London, 1954. [67] *Ibid.*, p. 37. [68] *Ibid.*, p. 7.
[69] *Ibid.*, p. 42. [70] *Ibid.*, p. 43. [71] *Ibid.*, pp. 44f.
[72] *Ibid.*, p. 52. [73] *Ibid.*, p. 53. [74] *Ibid.*, p. 53 n.
[75] *Ibid.*, p. 60. [76] *Ibid.*, p. 76. [77] *Ibid.*, pp. 76f.
[78] *Ibid.*, pp. 78f.
[79] Quoted in *The Varieties of History from Voltaire to the Present*, ed. F. Stern (New York, 1956), p. 57.
[80] *Ibid.*, pp. 210f.
[81] *Sixty Years Since* (Southampton, 1960), p. 10.
[82] It is not difficult to substantiate this conclusion. Cf. the testimony of Charles A. Beard :

> As an outcome of this crisis in historiography, the assumption that the actuality of history is identical with or closely akin to that of the physical world, and the assumption that any historian can be a disembodied spirit as coldly neutral to human affairs as the engineer to an automobile have both been challenged and rejected. *The Philosophy of History in our Time*, An Anthology, ed. H. Meyerhoff (New York, 1959), p. 142.

[83] *Cambridge University Studies*, ed. H. Wright, (Cambridge, 1933), pp. 186, 197. Quoted, N. Sykes, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
[84] *History : Its Purpose and Method* (London, 1950), p. 253.
[85] *An Autobiography and Other Essays* (London, 1949), p. 69.
[86] Quoted in R. L. Shinn : *Christianity and the Problem of History* (New York, 1953), p. 7.
[87] *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1946), p. 108.
[88] " Without hypothesis and synthesis history remains a pastime of antiquitarians: without criticism and erudition it loses itself in the domain of fantasy ": Henri Pirenne (Quoted, G. J. Renier, *op. cit.*, p. 259).
[89] It was Napoleon who said that " history is a fable agreed upon ". Voltaire anticipated him. " History," he declared, " is after all only a pack of tricks we play on the dead ".
[90] *The Listener*, November 15, 1962, p. 803.
[91] *The Listener*, October 4, 1962, p. 506.
[92] *Autobiography*, p. 78.
[93] Quoted, G. J. Renier, *op. cit.*, p. 251.
[94] *Ibid.*, pp. 80-81.
[95] *Ibid.*, p. 81.