6. Past in Present

Abstract: This essay offers a set of reflections concerning relations between past and present and the necessity, propriety, and process of making value judgements about the past. Mobilizing a range of insights from figures as diverse as Blaise Pascal, Bernard Williams, and R. G. Collingwood, the discussion highlights some of the pitfalls and inconsistencies of the naïve celebration or condemnation of historical actors and their deeds, and underlines what is at stake when seeking to come to terms with an ambivalent inheritance from past generations.

Keywords: value judgement; relativism; R. G. Collingwood; Bernard Williams; ethics; historicism; historicity; culture war; identity; material bequests

‘We see nothing, just or unjust, which does not change in quality with a change in climate. Three degrees of latitude overthrow jurisprudence. A meridian determines the truth. … It is an odd kind of justice to have a river for its boundary. … The joke is that men’s whims are so widely diverse that there is not a single general law. … Following reason alone, nothing is intrinsically just; everything moves with the times.’¹ By linking temporal and spatial terms, Pascal’s Pensées anticipated by more than a quarter of a millennium L.P. Hartley’s opening declaration in The Go-Between that the past is another country where they do things differently. Pascal was himself preceded by René Descartes, who suggested in the Discourse on Method that ‘reading good books is like having a conversation with the most distinguished men of past ages … [and] conversing with those of past centuries is much the same as travelling.’² A contemporary historian and theorist of history also links the terms of encounters with other cultures in the present with historianship. He imagines a work of history that ‘failed to indicate the distance of the lifeworld being described from the present’, and concludes, reasonably enough, that such a work ‘would be dismissed out of hand as ‘anachronistic’ – the historian’s equivalent of the anthropologist’s ‘ethnocentric’ and perhaps

the most damning term in the historian’s lexicon of judgment’. 3 I doubt any practising historian today or for a long time past would disagree with a proposition emerging from these cogitations, a proposition along the lines: ‘you have to understand inhabitants of the past in the context of their times’. Yet what, if anything, necessarily follows from that proposition?

With the question of value judgements about the past in mind, my claim would be that nothing necessarily follows, and I will begin to substantiate that claim by literalising the metaphor of the past as a foreign country. Recognising that France is a foreign country may be a useful step in understanding matters French but it does not determine what we will think, say, or do in any encounter with French people, whichever side of the channel we meet them on. We interact with ‘foreigners’ much as we long have, via the flow of commerce, ideas, sometimes love, sometimes war, enslavement, genocide. Understanding them may lead to harmony, but it may just mean that we are well-qualified to argue with them on some point of value. Joining battle with someone presupposes some mutual intelligibility – understanding – just as much as does agreeing with them and forging a union. Whatever the process of understanding permits, a philosopher was correct in that at the moment of contact between ‘us’ and ‘them’ it is already ‘too late’ for relativism, because on contact there is no separate ‘us’ and them’, but rather ‘a new “we” to be negotiated’. 4 Precisely because of the encounter it is impossible to sit back and think abstractly about cultural difference, because one either needs to find some common ground, or fight it out in some more or less literal fashion, or ‘agree to disagree’ if the stakes are not too high. The philosopher could easily have added that for the same reasons it is already too late for moral neutrality too.

That self-same philosopher, Bernard Williams, would have been hesitant, however, about literalising the metaphor in the way I do in this essay. Williams contrasted the

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interactive attitudes that we must adopt towards ‘others’ who we encounter in the present
with the cast of mind which we can adopt towards far-off ‘others’ with whom we have no
contact. This more detached attitude permits what he called the *relativism of distance*, and he
suggested, with important caveats, that it can also obtain in our contemplation of the past.
The philosopher-historian R.G. Collingwood also made a point about distance when he
contrasted what he thought to be the proper mode of historical thought to attitudes towards
present occurrences. Historians should refrain from acting as if ‘the massacre of Corcyra was
now being enacted in the next room and we ought to break open the door and stop it’.⁵ I
contend that Collingwood’s basic prescription about modes of historical thought, and,
depending on construal, the relativism of distance argument, do not do the relevant work,
even if one cannot engage in an actual argument with inhabitants of the past, or intervene in
the past.

One problem – there are others⁶ – with arguments against historical value judgements
that depend on concepts of distance is that they can elide different meanings of ‘distance’
between past and present. To be sure, there is temporal distance, but that is not the only sort
of distance in question. The argument does not make sufficient allowance for the proximity
or even contiguity of past and present in a significant set of historical enquiries. The past
delivers material bequests to the present, such as money, property, economic and
environmental structures. These bequests create beneficiaries and whatever the opposite of a
beneficiary is. They can be important to ‘us’ (individual or collective, depending upon the
nature of the bequest) in establishing conditions of possibility for what we can do in our lives.
There are also bequests of non-material culture from past to present: ways of thinking, being
and doing shaped by previous ways of thinking, being and doing. Now we can live in

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⁶ Donald Bloxham, *History and Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2020), considers a range of objections
that apply whether or not the historical inquiry in question concerns the past of one’s own society.
ignorance of the past-present linkages, but one job of historians (plus the heritage industry, etc., etc.) is precisely to explore them. As historical explorations raise consciousness of the connections as well as disconnections between past and present, they establish historians (etc.) and their audiences as parties to a relationship, or rather series of relationships, between parts of the past and parts of the present.

Whatever *prescriptions* there might be about conducting historical inquiry in the spirit of the relativism of distance, at the level of *description*, very many people simply are interested in history precisely because of the relationships that they perceive with the past. For such people it is not a question of whether they relate to the past but how they relate to it. To use an idiom familiar to historians, at issue in the relationship of present and past are two different associations of the word ‘historicism’. Historicism can imply ‘historical consciousness’, which I shall define as the recognition that people thought and lived differently in the past, that the past was different to the present. It can also imply a sense of ‘historicity’, which I shall define as the awareness that the present has been shaped by the past. Both connotations may be correct, and neither implies that the past was exactly the same as the present, but whereas ‘historical consciousness’ tends to separate present and past, ‘historicity’ tends to draw them together. A sense of historicity can move the focus away from ‘relativism’ and towards ‘relatives’ in the sense of ancestors to whom we have some quasi-familial relationship, some similarity in some respects. The perception of some proximity or similarity, embedded in the sense of historicity, explains why so many Americans are interested in American history, so many French people in French history, etcetera. Herein lies the difference between many sorts of history and anthropology. 

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7 The basic point about the relationship and difference between history and anthropology, elaborated in the next paragraph, is not original to me. Williams himself may have made the point somewhere but I cannot locate the reference. On parallels between historians’ and anthropologists’ interest in ‘otherness’, see Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1963), 16ff.
Despite the formal and logical similarities between understanding people in the context of their times and of their culture, history in the global northwest has had more difficulty with negotiating the ramifications of relativism/relationality than has anthropology in most of its historical variants. This is because with anthropologists (generally speaking), the consideration of temporal change comes ‘after’ the apprehension of cultural difference. Anthropologists generally locate physically and culturally distant ‘others’ in the present and may study ‘their’ past to shed further light on them, but that historical element of the examination has few ramifications for reflection on their ‘otherness’ from the perspective of any present-day interface between ‘us’ and ‘them’. In other words, study of the pasts of ‘others’ does not close such anthropological gaps as have already been opened by distinguishing between their ways and our ways in the present. Conversely, the societies that have produced most paid historians have produced, in numbers disproportionate to the total, historians who study the history of their own society. For the French historian of France, the route may begin by charting ‘otherness’ in the past, but in the knowledge that at some point there may be a convergence between Their ways and Our ways, between Them and Us. In the title *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples* the temporal differentiation indicated by *History* is tempered by the identity of cultural-linguistic commonality. In *The Rise of the West*, historical movement (‘rise’) exists alongside referential stability (‘west’).

Histories with a major identity component tend to rely especially on *genealogy*, *analogy*, or *metonym*, though these are not always distinct and the genealogical element tends to run through each. It is, in any case, the genealogical element on which I will focus here. Genealogy is a question of connecting oneself to those whom one chooses as relevant forebears. An enduringly powerful genealogical form, though far from the only one, is the ‘national story’ strand of history. It is concerned with epochs, episodes and people from a given nation’s past.
National genealogy seeks to establish that ‘Wir-Gefühl’, that sense of ‘We-hood’ or ‘Us-ness’ that was promoted by historians in early medieval Saxony, as by the monk Bede (c.673–735) in England or the Royal Frankish Annals whose production coincided with Charlemagne’s founding of a grand public court. Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *The Constitution of Church and State* invoked a national clerisy of schoolteachers tasked ‘to preserve the stores, to guard the treasures, of past civilization, and thus to bind the present with the past; to perfect and add to the same, and thus to connect the present with the future’. Coleridge bears out the conviction of one scholar of nationalism that if ‘there is no memory, there is no identity; no identity, no nation.’ An issue for the nation-builder is that ‘On the one hand, the nation is always coming into being but not yet fully itself, hence the need for it to be educated about itself. On the other, it has always already existed, is eternal, and its people are linked with one another in a linear fashion through history, hence the need for the nation’s past to be vindicated.’

The vindicatory, ancestral, focus is promoted in societies of many different stripes that are disposed to find sources of pride in the past. Pride is encouraged in much official and public discourse in Britain, a country with a decided pre-occupation, not to say obsession, with parts of the past. This is obviously not a value-neutral pre-occupation. It is suffused with judgements about good and bad, right and wrong, praiseworthiness and blameworthiness. The memory of the ancestors, or a select bunch of them at any rate, is supposed to be revered. Those in the present who advocate pride in or applause of the past are not, then, in a position to dismiss shame, dismay, or anger about the past as category errors. The pride-advocates

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have implicitly rejected historical neutrality or a relativistic attitude to the past, so on pain of inconsistency their disagreements with shame-advocates, etc., are really about the criteria and content of judgement, not the propriety of judgement.

It is, nonetheless, instructive how frequently pride-advocates retreat to neutralist or relativist positions when they encounter shame-advocates or the angry or dismayed. The shifting fall-back position appears to be a necessity in the quest to have and eat cake. Value judgement is made where it shines a kindly light, and the relativism of distance invoked where it does not. Inhabitants of the past are of ‘us’ in certain ways but not in others, and their allocation to either side of the divide conveniently maintains the integrity of our usable past. The enduring greatness of Greek civilisation is neatly separated from Greek slavery, which of course has nothing to say to Us, Now. Victorians are men of Their times when massacring Africans or deploying child labour, but Our forebears when it comes to their achievements in industry, engineering, and civics and, perhaps, whatever we can claim to have been the beneficial side of empire. In the process of identity construction it is not a matter of casting a genuinely critical eye over aspects of the past and employing consistent evaluative thought. It is a matter of partial evaluation that ends in excusing, justifying, spuriously mitigating, or minimising or otherwise obfuscating those aspects. Here the appeal to neutralism, relativism, or a ‘proper historical perspective’ can serve as a way of concealing the longstanding existence of a culture war in which one coalition of forces has had decidedly more success than the other. With the ongoing state of war denied, opposing forces can be blamed for starting the culture war, engaging in socially-corrosive identity politics, unpatriotic ‘self-hatred’, and so on.

Permitting only positive or neutral/relativist attitudes towards the relevant past also safeguards material gains inherited from that past. The gains were either deserved, which is the positive view, or, in the neutralist view, the claim that some might have been ill-gotten is
an inappropriate/ahistorical value judgement. Either way, talk of, say, reparations, is deemed illegitimate, which is important given that in many instances where the case for reparations might be made the first steps occur through political debate rather than via the triggering of existing legal mechanisms.

With the categories of ‘the material’ and ‘the identity’ in mind, statues like those of Edward Colston appear as interesting composite entities. They are material presences in the present, but they do not materially benefit anyone. They are rather concrete symbols. They are akin to medieval tomb effigies, created to endure as embodiments, through the personage embodied, of some value or achievement or tradition. They are self-conscious efforts of particular people in the past to articulate something for posterity, i.e. for the present of future people. Figuratively as well as literally they ‘stand for’ something here and now.

When the statues are in public places it is unsurprising that they become focal points of identity debates. They need not: ignorance may reign about relevant issues; those acquainted with the issues may be relevantly in agreement. But at any time debate may arise. At stake in such debates are differing assessments of particular past deeds; disagreements about values; re-assessments of the embodied individual; and competing convictions that this element of what the statue could be said to ‘stand for’ is more important in some way than that element.