

History as Moral Commentary: Ideology and the Ethical Responsibilities of Remembrance.¹

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Abstract.

Many theorists and historians have advocated an ethical turn in scholarship within the recent past. The idea of the moral responsibilities of a historian extends back to scholars of the ancient world and early Christian writers but, until recently, had been minimized in favor of Enlightenment ideals concerning the existence of objective truth. Following upon the exposure of epistemological fragilities by many academics in the mid-twentieth century, the ethical turn has argued for a return to the attitude of the moral purposes of the historian. Academics espousing these views have asserted the existence of moral and ideological underpinnings in all historiographical works and have argued the benefits of scholars, openly acknowledging this aspect of their work. This paper seeks to investigate this recent trend among historians and suggests that, in spite of the persuasive arguments for the adoption of this methodological stance, there are aspects to it that are problematic and must be addressed. I will achieve this through an analysis of recent works that offer prominent examples of the “ethical turn,” and also through the work of a contemporary moral philosopher. My intention is to both examine this important direction in historiographical theorizing and to point to areas that demand more attentive examinations on the part of historians. It is hoped that this will encourage heightened awareness on the part of academics.

Within the recent past a certain trend in historiographical theorizing has emerged, one that is concerned with the ethical purposes of the historian and the ideological nature of historical texts. While this turn in the historical discipline has been recognized and analyzed by many academics, many of whom have described it as a new phenomenon, it can be argued that, in many ways, history’s ethical face is not a new development, but a much older tradition that extends back to the ancient world and to many early Christian writers. The ethics of the historian and the moral purposes of their works played a prominent role in the writings of Herodotus, Thucydides and other ancient historians and, likewise, many early modern English writers of historical texts urged the moral uses of historical study.¹ Nancy F. Partner has alluded to this

feature of the ethical turn in relation to ancient texts in an essay from *A New Philosophy of History*, where she entitles one of her text headings: “Is There Anything New Here? Ancient Prototypes and Modern Practices.” Likewise, the ethical turn is also prominent in the writings of religious writers.² Augustine’s sermons represent powerful examples of the moral underpinnings of historical accounts, all the more so because they are self-consciously composed within a visible ideological framework. The ethical concerns that feature in these texts are directed towards the exhalation of God and the certainty of a final judgment and eventual end. In this sense, “the goal of history is beyond history.”³

Despite the earlier widespread recognition of the ethical nature of historical work, scholars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries actively engaged in attempts to mould history into a formal discipline by aligning it with positivist methods, which had gained prominence through their use in the natural sciences. This shift in attitudes concerning methodology and epistemology resulted in the loss of the previously acknowledged ideological underpinnings of history. The conception of history has thus undergone a “translation from a moral to a social science.”⁴ At the close of the twentieth century, however, these ideas emerged again full force, due to the efforts of influential theorists who sought an “ethical turn in historiographical theorizing,”⁵ believing in “how thoroughly ethical the project of studying the past is, and how disabling has been its banishment from the waking life of working historians.”⁶ This new avocation of the ethical aspects of historical enquiry operates on the premise that all historical works, whether they are consciously structured so by their authors or not, possess ideological underpinnings. The ethical turn calls for a conscious and willing acknowledgement of this theme by historians, much as the linguistic turn sought an open awareness of the primary importance of language as a matrix that structures reality. This idea of histories being prefigured by ethical concerns is discussed most strikingly by Hayden White in his work *Metahistory*.⁷

This paper serves primarily as a historiographical review of some potent theorizing on this topic. As such it does not claim to be exhaustive. A great deal of critical discussion on the ideological and ethical nature of history has been generated in the recent past (when historians and theorists began to seriously question the traditionalist view of scholarship that stressed its value-free nature and its ability to discover “truth”) and a thorough discussion of all of these texts would be more appropriate for a book than an essay. Thus, only a few examples of this trend will be considered here, ones that have been selected as representative of wider issues.

Likewise, one of the aims of this paper is to survey a wide range of works dealing with the theme of ethics in historical scholarship. The works of moral philosophers will be considered alongside those of historians. The breadth of schools of historical analysis being considered is also wide, ranging from works that are based heavily on post-structuralist ideas and literary criticism to those that adhere to a more traditional style of empirically based analysis. At this juncture it is necessary to state that the terms ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’ have distinct and separate meanings. Morality can be viewed as a generalized code of conduct that guides an individual through daily life. Alternately, ethics represent a more formalized system of conduct. It is a systematized set of codified moral ideas that apply to specific situations. Many, especially those interested primarily in moral theory and not the practical application of ethics, conflate these two terms. As this paper is concerned with theory-driven positions concerning ethics and morality, I will likewise use the two interchangeably.

Theorists in the area of the ethical turn have stressed the importance of ethical considerations among historians, but have argued that these concerns have often been subordinated and not acknowledged by working practitioners within their texts. Moral beliefs have always permeated scholarship but have been denied by many historians because they challenge, if not utterly destroy, the epistemologic claims of the author. One has a sense of the “repressed moral dimension of historical inquiry.”⁸ In the interests of investigating this claim, an examination of Carlo Ginzburg’s *The Cheese and the Worms* will also be offered here. This is because Ginzburg’s ethical purposes are clearly evident in this text (as Dominick LaCapra has demonstrated), but are not investigated by Ginzburg himself, who maintained a vision of his work as value-free and epistemologically sound.

The ethical turn in historical scholarship has emerged primarily in response to the epistemologic debates that have shaped the discipline for the last forty years. The debate over the presence of “truth” and objectivity in historical scholarship has prompted many to arrive at a position where they recognize the impossibility of truthful representations of the past and have begun to question what, if not ‘truth,’ underlies the historical text. Likewise, if the historian (through a text) cannot present truth, what purpose does their work serve? It is these sorts of questions that have enlivened academics to the idea of the ethical turn and inspired many historians to treat history and ethics as intimately linked concerns that feature in all historical representations. The ethical turn demands a new discussion concerning the purposes and

responsibilities of history, one that has moved beyond the simplistic equation of scholarship with the representation of the “truth” and the “facts” about the past.

The new theorizing builds upon the premise that “history is only present within language, and is thereby shaped by material conditions, politics, ideology, and the very form of its saying and writing.”⁹ If history can be seen as offering no objective truths concerning the past, then its ethical dimension takes on a new importance as the ultimate purpose of the historian. These thoughts have inspired recent theorists to face the ethical questions that underlie their profession. This paper will present some of these recent discussions. An attempt will be made to critically analyze recent theorizing on the ideological underpinnings of historical texts and to suggest the limitations of some of these ideas. Likewise, the implications of this new direction in historical scholarship will also be discussed with reference to two possible outcomes: the interminability of debate that could be generated through openly moralistic constructions of historical accounts and the issue of moral relativism.

The Cheese and the Worms is presented by its author, Carlo Ginzburg, as an account that recovers an aspect of the past that had been obscured and ignored, the life of a single individual – an Italian miller named Menocchio who was executed by the Inquisition in the sixteenth century. Throughout his text, Ginzburg attempts to represent his tale as one that he ‘discovered’ in the archives, a true story that needed only telling, not refashioning by the author. In this respect, Ginzburg aligns himself with traditional historiographical teachings, wherein “history has attempted to construct itself as a discourse that preserves a certain veracity to its knowledge claims.”¹⁰ Despite Ginzburg’s assertion of the documentary realism of his narrative (his reliance on the facts and the pure and unadulterated historical record) and his own objectivity, there is an ideological and moral undercurrent to his work that can be revealed through some of the statements that he makes concerning Menocchio and the culture that he inhabited.¹¹

Ginzburg himself acknowledges the degree to which ideology and moral positions can figure into a historical work, he writes of “the fear of falling into a notorious, naïve positivism, combined with the exasperated awareness of the ideological distortion that may lurk behind the most normal and seemingly innocent process of perception.”¹² However, he does not openly acknowledge, much less discuss, the role that his ethical beliefs may have played in his construction of the narrative and it is left to the attentive reader to piece them together through some of the assertions that he makes.

One of the main goals of *The Cheese and the Worms* is to illustrate the oppressive dominant culture that was foisted cruelly upon Menocchio by his persecutors and to view how he, steeped in the liberating and often tolerant influences of popular culture, attempted to battle it. As LaCapra has insightfully noted, there is perhaps less of Menocchio and more of Ginzburg to be found in his construction and representation of the miller. Ginzburg's account aims to liberate Menocchio from the culture that constrained him; it can be read as an attempt to rescue the individual from the harshness of the culture that he inhabited. History, for Ginzburg, thus has a very ethical purpose -- it seeks to give a voice to the voiceless, to tell tales of resistance in the face of adversity and the hegemonic pretensions of certain dominant cultural systems. Ginzburg writes that "culture offers to the individual a horizon of latent possibilities -- a flexible and invisible cage in which he can exercise his own conditional liberty."¹³

Dominant culture, which Ginzburg describes in Menocchio's day as rife with "dogmatism and conservatism," constrains the individual, placing them in an invisible cage.¹⁴ Here, they are able to exercise a degree of liberty and agency, but the controlling institution of society always regulates these. For Ginzburg, Menocchio becomes a folk hero of sorts because he resisted the confines of dominant culture and formed his own, distinct, world-view that represented an opposition to the culture of the ruling classes through a manifestation of popular culture. In this sense, Ginzburg views Menocchio as "one of our forerunners."¹⁵ Menocchio spoke up against oppression and, by liberating Menocchio from the authoritarian confines of the culture that oppressed him, Ginzburg likewise makes a statement on the injustice of subjugation and "mechanisms of exclusion."¹⁶ The dominant culture executed Menocchio for his radical, liberating beliefs, so it has fallen to the historian, to Ginzburg, to resurrect them.

Ginzburg's text stresses the importance of the individual in history -- the individual who thought for himself and rebelled against the corruption and control of culture. Ginzburg views Menocchio as one who did not engage in a "passive reception of someone else's ideas."¹⁷ Rather, he rallied against what he viewed as unjust within his own culture, even though society tried, and eventually succeeded, in silencing his challenging views. Menocchio, trapped in the invisible cage of culture, did not necessarily understand the "enormous play of forces that was silently conditioning his existence," much as we today may not possess such an understanding.¹⁸ The point is that he developed his own ideas even when they stood in open defiance of accepted

social norms. This aspect of Menocchio endeared him to Ginzburg, who raised him to the status of spokesman for the persecuted and downtrodden.

The moral underpinnings of Ginzburg are clearly visible at this juncture. So too is his stance on the role of the historian, which is to play the part of a liberator. The historian becomes a moral agent in Ginzburg's work. Through the act of restructuring the life of an individual through language, a moral purpose is achieved. History serves to redeem the past and many of its characters, and what is redeemed is "thus liberated."¹⁹ Ginzburg writes:

dominant culture and subordinate culture are matched in an unequal struggle, where the dice are loaded. Given the fact that the documentation reflects the relationship of power between the classes of a given society, the possibility that the culture of the subordinate classes will leave a trace, even a distorted one, was indeed slim.²⁰

The objective of the historian is to rescue these oppressed cultures, to illustrate to those in the present that there is always an alternative to the dominant culture, there is always a reason to think independently.

The work of the historian serves to liberate the individual from the past for the benefit of what their experiences of subjugation can tell us in the present and in the future. Thus, "the historian's work is begun for the future, and the future is the open possibility to which the historian's work offers the past as a gift."²¹ An examination of *The Cheese and the Worms* is illustrative of the moralistic purposes and stances that can be viewed in many historical texts. While Ginzburg does not deal openly with these issues, they are present in his work and have been pointed to by others, Dominick LaCapra most prominently. This paper will now turn its attention to historiographical theorists who have readily acknowledged the ethical dimension of historical accounts and have encouraged the so-called ethical turn. Of those to be considered, Dominick LaCapra again features prominently.

LaCapra conceives of the construction of historical accounts as an activity that highlights the "historian's obligations to the living on behalf of the dead."²² Essentially, history is "the project of working through the past in the interest of the living and still-to-be-born."²³ Both Ginzburg and LaCapra can be seen to have a view of history as an ethical activity that is intimately related to ideological concerns and moral purposes. LaCapra, however, openly and enthusiastically advocates this position while Ginzburg seeks to submerge it within his text and rely on an almost naïve positivism in his denial of the manner in which his own moral stances

have informed his account. In *History and Criticism*, LaCapra argues for, among other things, the adoption of a view of history as a moral narrative in answer to his own question of “how can history be not simply a profession but a vocation?”²⁴ All history has an underlying ideological aspect to it, thus all historians have a certain ethical responsibility in their endeavors.

For those who seek to deny this aspect of their work, history will remain always only a profession, but through acceptance of the moral nature of historical scholarship, the historian’s task can become a vocation, a *telos* of sorts. LaCapra is adamant about the need for historians to accept the moral nature of history because “historiography that turns away from critical reflection and ideological issues is not a craft. It is little more than a pampered profession.”²⁵ For the historian to ignore the ideological issues of their own works is for their text to be “blind to its own rhetoric,” their accounts thus becoming banal and devoid of effectiveness because they themselves are devoid of critical thought and moral purpose.²⁶

In *History and Criticism*, one of LaCapra’s main objectives is to illustrate the complexity of historical inquiry, to suggest that it is never a simple matter of unearthing a fact in the archive and attempting to explain it as a means of understanding the past. To this end, he speaks out strongly against “an archivally based documentary realism that treats artefacts as quarries for facts in the reconstitution of societies and cultures of the past.”²⁷ In opposition to this, LaCapra stresses a view of history as a conscious entity, an ongoing dialogue with the dead. As such, the role of the historian is as a mediator between the past and the present, and the issues that he or she presents concerning the past are always bound up with concerns regarding the present. Thus, “any dialogue with the past in professional historiography takes place in a larger social, political, economic, and cultural context.”²⁸ While the dialogue may seem one-sided at times, the dialectical nature of the historical enterprise must always be recognized and issues of representation therefore become central. LaCapra argues for enhanced critical insight on the part of historians so that historical scholarship can be comprehended for what it truly is.

History that simply tells a story about the past and goes no further in its efforts is, at best, dull and forgettable, at worst, reckless and irresponsible because it ignores the duties of the true historian. “The point of historical inquiry for him [LaCapra] is ...to arrive at ‘meaningful guides to thought and practice’ in the present for the sake of the future.”²⁹ *History and Criticism* is therefore “obviously polemical in its attempt to rethink certain assumptions and procedures of the historical craft. It is intended as a critical intervention in a profession where debates about

self-understanding and practice are not as prevalent as I think they should be.”³⁰ It is a call to historians to acknowledge their ethical responsibilities, both to the past and to the present.

The ethical views behind LaCapra’s work are laid bare for the reader, as opposed to forming a hidden, underlying structure as they do in *The Cheese and the Worms*. Indeed, a historical narrative that displays ideological stances above epistemologic certainties is true history for LaCapra, whereas Ginzburg argues for history as an expression of “truth” about the past and constructs his account so that it lacks an investigation, or even an acknowledgement, of his own moral views. The acceptance of the historian’s ethical duties is key because, “historical comprehension, for LaCapra, ought never to be an end in itself. It should be but an element in the solution of present problems for the good of the future.”³¹ Historical scholarship should function as “the articulation of ethical positions in contemporary social and political contexts.”³² According to LaCapra, writing cannot be viewed as “an abstract thing of the mind – indeed it is never simply a thing of the mind.”³³ Rather, historical texts, through the language and rhetoric that they employ, impart and reflect the beliefs of the historian. The difference between the responsible and effective historian, the one who practices a craft and possesses a telos, and the historian who relies on a simplistic conception of his task as a ‘truthful’ representation of the past, and only the past, is the difference between LaCapra and Ginzburg: Between the historian who acknowledges and readily accepts the ethical responsibilities of their profession and the one who attempts to submerge this aspect of their work and pass off their own ideological positions as truth.

Before LaCapra endeavored to awaken the historical profession to its ethical duties, Hayden White’s *Metahistory* sought to expose the moral dimension of all historical scholarship, a task that resulted in praise from some and utter shock and denial from others. White’s intention was for his groundbreaking work “to contribute to the current discussion of the *problem of historical knowledge*.”³⁴ His characterization of historical knowledge as a problematical concept is an apt one and ultimately led him to deny entirely the existence of knowledge about the past in any sort of objective form. White’s primary assertions were that there is no historical knowledge that exists outside of linguistic construction and that language usage reflected not truth but, rather, the preferences of the user. History is therefore little more than textual representation and narrative. *Metahistory* focused mainly on this issue of the “inexpungeable textuality of historical discourse.”³⁵

As texts, historical studies strive to tell a story for the benefit of an audience, to represent events as orderly and in possession of meaning. The primary narrative aspect of historical scholarship led White to the conclusion that there was little difference between a work of history and any other literary work. As with any literary endeavor, the composition of a historical text constituted a deeply personal and poetic act that was based fundamentally on the author's ideological beliefs and moral understanding. What this all amounted to was the argument that the historian dealt less in fact and more in personal belief than the traditionalist view of history was prepared to acknowledge. White's text fundamentally shattered the prevailing notion of epistemologic certainty in history and exposed a picture of scholarship and representation that stressed the fragility of knowledge claims.

Metahistory argued that, because there were no epistemologically sound facts, historical scholarship was constituted primarily by the individual beliefs of the historian and that these differing conceptions of morality and reality underpinned all historical works. For White, "historiographical disputes on the level of "interpretation" are in reality disputes over the true nature of the historian's enterprise."³⁶ All historical texts were deeply informed, on a meta-level, by the individual concerns of the historian. This is because "commitment to a particular *form* of knowledge predetermines the *kinds* of generalizations one can make about the present world, the kinds of knowledge one can have of it, and hence the kinds of projects one can legitimately conceive."³⁷ It is because of this meta-level, intimately connected with the historian's own moral and ethical aims, that "there does, in fact, appear to be an irreducible ideological component in every historical account of reality."³⁸ Similar to LaCapra's beliefs (which strongly reflect White's influence), *Metahistory* argues that "the ideological dimensions of a historical account reflect the ethical element in the historian's assumption of a particular position on the question of the nature of historical knowledge and the implications that can be drawn from the study of past events for the understanding of present ones."³⁹ For White, history begins not in the past, but with "the historian living in the present."⁴⁰

White's text argues for recognition of the moral and ideological underpinnings of all historical works. Through the denial of objective truth in history, White advocates an interpretation of historical scholarship as an imaginative task that reflects an individual's conception of reality, the manner in which he or she has *prefigured* the field before they begin their analysis.⁴¹ Ideological stances underpin all historical accounts, in White's view. Because

of the lack of objective truth and the moralistic nature of all historical works, White ultimately argues that the only grounds for adjudicating between competing historical interpretations are moralistic and aesthetic, not epistemological. The ideological nature of all texts ensures that they can only be judged on an ideological basis, based on the ethical preferences and conceptions of the reader. By arguing for epistemological relativism, White sought to conflate the fields of history and philosophy, much as LaCapra later attempted. White's eventual hope was that "on the basis of this insight [historians] could rethink their representational choices in light of their political and aesthetic commitments," thus opening the door to a history that had realized its obligations to the present.⁴²

However, it was precisely White's intention to "lay the foundation for a new, creative, life-serving historiography" (through the denial of epistemologic certainty) that illustrated one of the most problematic aspects of the ethical turn: moral relativism.⁴³ It is on this issue that White has been most strongly criticized.⁴⁴ One writer has noted that, in this respect, "White almost bites the relativistic bullet,"⁴⁵ and Ginzburg has characterized his work as suffering from a "debilitating moral dilemma."⁴⁶ The issue of relativism is a very serious one within the context of a call for an ethical turn in historical studies and this paper will later examine it alongside another issue that springs from it, that of the interminability of debate that could possibly ensue if all historical studies were recognized as primarily representations of ideological stances. At this juncture, White's text will again be taken up as it has received some of the most cogent criticisms in these areas. At this moment, I will turn again to the manner in which many current historians have urged the re-adoption of history as an ethical activity that deals with the problem of moral choice.

Nancy F. Partner's essay in the volume *A New Philosophy of History* deals with the concept of ethics in history and the manner in which historical accounts are based on ideological beliefs.⁴⁷ Her piece functions to remind the historian of the manner in which narratives are constructed through both fact and fiction and how history serves a moral purpose within a wider social setting. For Partner, the existence of objective facts is highly debatable and contentious and most representations of reality have as much to do with intellectual construction as with faithful reliance on the "facts" and nothing but the facts. History as a discipline is in part fiction, but fiction with a purpose. Fiction is used by the historian in the interests of fulfilling "crucial and necessary functions in the cultural project which crystallized around the term history."⁴⁸ As

with other proponents of the ethical nature of historical inquiry, Partner acknowledges the imaginative essence of scholarship and epistemologic pluralism. In her discussion of historical representation, as practiced by the early Greeks, she argues that “fiction, as deployed by Herodotus and Thucydides, raised history from a mere descriptive record of events in sequence...the fictions allowed history to be *about something*.”⁴⁹

In agreement with other theorists, Partner takes the view that recognizing the fictive nature of history does not nullify it. In fact, it can raise it to a new level of purposefulness. Historical accounts can thus be structured in such a manner as to provide an inspirational level of meaning for the audience. For Partner, the key issue revolves not around the use of imagination in history but around its *responsible* usage. Her work deplores the use of invention as a means to create something that is deceptive and serves no ethical purpose. She writes “the blameless, shameless unselfconscious freedom to use fictions within the genre envelope of history belonged only to writers who were effortlessly confident of speaking from the moral center.”⁵⁰ In this respect, a morally centred representation of the past can be viewed as an ethical duty of the historian, who must be enlivened to the ideological components of their work so as to deploy a suitable level of responsibility in their use of fictions. The historian has a powerful obligation as “political and ethical observer.”⁵¹ It follows that their works should be attentive to their own ideological choices and present those choices as having something to offer the reader in terms of ethical instruction.⁵² History is invested with a profound purpose as a moralizing activity in this view.

Theorists discussing and endorsing the ethical turn in historiography have done so chiefly in the rhetoric of responsibility and duty and have emphasized the good that can arise from the historian’s recognition to of their status as a moralizing influence. Through adopting the idea that historical narrative can be used to represent “the good as well as the true, the historian’s moral imagination would be empowered to speak in its own voice and not just through epistemological surrogates that blunts its authority.”⁵³ And it is not just within the discipline of history that these views have been espoused. Recent practitioners of moral philosophy have also urged the ethical responsibilities of the historian. Edith Wyschogrod has argued for the emergence of a “heterological historian” in the aftermath of the rejection of the Rankean notion of history as an activity that tells of the past as it really happened.⁵⁴ This new history would acknowledge its moral imperative and strive to offer a voice to the voiceless. It would provide

both hope and moral instruction. This, in turn, would provide the historian with a telos, with an overarching purpose. Alasdair MacIntyre's work *After Virtue* likewise argues for the importance of morality to history.⁵⁵

The ethical turn in historical scholarship has been profoundly shaped by the work of philosophers and, recently, moral philosophers (such as MacIntyre and Wyschogrod) have made important contributions to the question of the moral purposes of history. For these writers, the historian also takes on the role of moral agent, their works having a prominent moral dimension. However, it is debateable whether or not such an ideal could ever truly be realized. MacIntyre's work, particularly, is admirable for its phenomenological aspects, but the prescriptive suggestions offered by it remain doubtful. Likewise, it is arguable that the work of the historian can serve an important descriptive function in relation to moral and ethical issues but cannot provide adoptable solutions to ethical issues. Aside from this, MacIntyre's work is also notable due to the extent that it echoes so many of the issues raised by historical theorists, and also because it raises the two primary criticisms to which the work of historians of the ethical turn in history are open to.

After Virtue conceives of history as a giver of moral and intellectual gifts and argues that the current debate about morality cannot be understood without a comprehension of the historical conditions and traditions that have fuelled it. MacIntyre asserts the ethical responsibilities of the historian and puts a great value on historicity. The work argues strongly for a historically based criticism of the Enlightenment project and present-day morality without the usual backing up of evidentiary claims found in most historical texts. *After Virtue* opens with a rather disquieting metaphorical tale regarding the sciences that MacIntyre suggests is paralleled by the situation in morality. He writes that "the hypothesis which I wish to advance is that in the actual world which we inhabit [,] the language of morality is in the same state of grave disorder as the language of natural science in the imaginary world which I described...we have – very largely, if not entirely, lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality."⁵⁶ MacIntyre argues for a conception that moves past Enlightenment ideals, one that actually moves backward to the teachings of Aristotle. He states "every action is the bearer and expression of more or less theory-laden beliefs and concepts; every piece of theorizing and every expression of belief is a political and moral action."⁵⁷ This is similar to the ideas of LaCapra and White that stress the ideological nature of all intellectual activity and the ethical responsibilities of the academic.

After Virtue suggests that the primary reason for the interminability of debate within morality has been occasioned by the loss of our understanding of the ethical within an ongoing tradition or narrative. MacIntyre argues for a view of “the unity of a whole human life [as] a narrative unity.”⁵⁸ He stresses “in particular the unity of a certain kind of narrative, the narrative of life as a quest for the human good.”⁵⁹ MacIntyre’s discussion of narrative and its importance aligns his text prominently with historical scholarship. *After Virtue* suggests that the way to recapture this sense of a narrative tradition, and the place of the human within it, is to situate our conception of morality within a larger context, as an imparter of communal standards and values. This is reminiscent of Partner’s arguments for the role of history as a vehicle for the espousal of civic values. MacIntyre asserts that in past societies morality was a fundamental part of a larger tradition and that this tradition “provided a moral background to contemporary debate in Classical societies.”⁶⁰ He suggests that the interminability of the debate will end when we are all directed to a common moral center, just as Partner argues that responsible, ethical history arises from a historian speaking from a moral center.

To be effective, the moral center must provide “a notion of a public good which is prior to [,] and characterizable independently of [,] the summing of individual desires and interests. Virtue in the individual is nothing more or less than allowing the public good to provide the standard for individual behaviour.”⁶¹ For MacIntyre, the moral center can be provided by Aristotle and his moral philosophy: this will put a stop to the emotivism that he sees as embedded in our culture. He defines emotivism as “the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character.”⁶² According to MacIntyre, emotivism ensures that there is “no rational way of securing moral agreement in our culture.”⁶³ Essentially, what he describes is relativism.

As has been noted, Hayden White has argued that all historical accounts have an ideological underpinning and are prefigured by the moral preferences and epistemological beliefs of individual historians. Thus, the only grounds for advocating the claims of one historical account over those of another are moralistic and aesthetic, not empirical or epistemological. Dominick LaCapra, Nancy F. Partner and Alasdair MacIntyre have argued for an open acknowledgement of the moral aspects of history and a vision of the historian as having certain ethical responsibilities, while Carlo Ginzburg has shown that ideological stances are often

present in historical texts. This is an intriguing suggestion and it has received both praise and criticism from theorists and practicing historians alike. However, it seems to me that, if all history truly is an exercise in morality, the debate between competing claims must be interminable.

If all claims advanced in historical texts are ethical in nature, then the current situation, in which “an endless supply of competing, verifiable accounts, the significance of which is always in question”⁶⁴ are produced, will never abate because it cannot. There will never be one ideological stance or epistemological conception that extends to all. Hence, claims can never be adjudicated and there is no basis on which to possess standards for deciding between claims other than one’s personal beliefs. This ensures that a degree of moral relativism will always prevail in historical scholarship because competing accounts are rooted in a morality that will be particular to the individual and thus cannot be denied on any empirical or methodological grounds.

MacIntyre argues that a return to the ideas of Aristotle can provide society with a moral center that will end the interminability of the debate, but it is itself arguable that his avocation of Aristotle represents only one more competing claim.⁶⁵ The debate is already never ending, with a plurality of interpretations constantly being argued, and placing it with the context of a debate over morality, ethics, and ideology would make it not only interminable to an even greater degree, but also more contentious. Through asserting the moral nature of history, we arrive at a situation that is constituted chiefly by “the necessary interminability of historiographic writing.”⁶⁶

This interminability will be characterized by the constant advancement of differing conceptions of moral truth and ethical behaviour and there is always the danger that such activity can result not in fruitful debate, but in hegemonic pretensions. This is an unsettling idea, perhaps the most unsettling, that arises out of the ethical turn. “What is morally right in relation to one moral framework can be morally wrong in relation to a different moral framework,”⁶⁷ and this ensures that, not only will a consensus never be reached, but also that the situation might even degenerate to a point where the claims of one moral viewpoint are enforced on individuals over and against their own moral beliefs. This is an issue that I feel that no theorists and advocates of the ethical turn have adequately considered. In addition to this concern, the ethical turn also carries with it the possibility that, given that there is no epistemologically sound ground upon

which to assert claims of reality, certain historical events (if they do not fit within an individual's ideological framework) can be ignored.

White's *Metahistory* argues that, "the ideological dimensions of a historical account reflect the ethical element in the historian's assumption of a particular position on the question of the nature of historical knowledge and the implications that can be drawn from the study of past events for the understanding of present ones."⁶⁸ The ethical dimensions of a historical text thus arise because the historian, according to White, prefigures them, on a preconscious level. Most theorists of the ethical turn are accepting of this notion, but it is arguable that it is an overly simplistic one. It represents the ideological considerations of the historian as the foundation for all of their texts but says nothing of the other, often overlapping, concerns, which can be seen as impacting the formation of texts, just as much as moral ones. The role of cultural and social factors in conditioning the perception of reality of the historian is thus utterly overshadowed. This represents another area in which the ethical turn could benefit from more focused theorizing.

The recent arguments for the presence of moral and ideological underpinnings of historical texts and for recognition of the ethical responsibilities of the historian are provocative issues that have commanded much attention and are deserving of more. The importance of moral philosophy on the ethical turn cannot be ignored and texts such as that by Wyschogrod are deserving of a great deal of analysis and considerations from historians. The ethical turn, as this paper has endeavored to show, commands the attention of scholars both from within the discipline of history and outside of it. I must confess that I can find no rational or methodological reasons for disputing the claims of the theorists that have been discussed within this essay. However, on an almost intuitive level, I am deeply hesitant and conflicted concerning their assertions. I perceive, firstly, a danger in viewing all historical accounts as essentially moral activities, and secondly, fear, on some level of ethical and ideological pluralism – to say nothing of the hegemonic pretensions that can often be bound up with such systems of thought. I see this recent (not so recent, really, when one considers ancient and medieval views of history) development in historiography as an intrinsically complex one that needs a great deal of consideration and careful meditating upon. It may, perhaps, carry with it some unforeseen implications and open new and unstable avenues of debate.

ⁱ For his generous support and insightful suggestions, the author would like to thank Dr J Kitchen. His thoughtful criticisms have helped to improve this paper from its initial inception to its finalized version.

¹ Beverley Southgate, *History: What and Why? Ancient, Modern, and Postmodern Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2001 [1996]), 32-41.

² As this development in the discipline has been termed by Michael Dintenfass, "Truth's Other: Ethics, The History of the Holocaust, and Historiographical Theory After the Linguistic Turn," *History and Theory*, 39 (2000), 1.

³ W.H. Dray, "The Philosophy of History," in *The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, Paul Edwards ed. (New York: MacMillan, 1967), 251.

⁴ Dintenfass, "Truth's Other," 20.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁷ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁹ Mark Jackson, "The Ethical Space of Historiography," *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 14 (2001), 468.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 467.

¹¹ Dominick LaCapra has offered a great deal of insightful criticism surrounding many aspects of Ginzburg's account, including its underlying moral position. See Dominick LaCapra, "The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Twentieth-Century Historian," in his *History and Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

¹² Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1992 [1976]), xvii.

¹³ *Ibid.*, xxi.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, xvi.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, xxvi.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 155, nn. 58.

²¹ Jackson, "The Ethical Space of Historiography," 471.

²² Dintenfass, "Truth's Other," 11.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ LaCapra, *History and Criticism*, 11.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

²⁹ Dintenfass, "Truth's Other," 9.

³⁰ LaCapra, *History and Criticism*, 135.

³¹ Dintenfass, "Truth's Other," 18.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ LaCapra, *History and Criticism*, 52.

³⁴ White, *Metahistory*, 1, author's italics.

³⁵ Dintenfass, "Truth's Other," 3.

³⁶ White, *Metahistory*, 13.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 21, author's italics.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴⁰ Russell Jacoby, "A New Intellectual History?" *American Historical Review*, 97 (1992), 408.

⁴¹ White, *Metahistory*, 30.

⁴² Wulf Kansteiner, "Hayden White's Critique of the Writing of History," *History and Theory*, 32 (1993), 278.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 294.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 287.

⁴⁵ Jacoby, "A New Intellectual History?" 411.

⁴⁶ Kansteiner, "Hayden White's Critique of the Writing of History," 274.

⁴⁷ Nancy F. Partner, "Historicity in an Age of Reality-Fictions," in *A New Philosophy of History*, Frank Ankersmit and Hans Kellner, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, author's italics.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁵² Nancy F. Partner has, in accordance with her views on the purpose of historical writing, produced work that is ideologically driven and openly acknowledged by its author as such. See Nancy F. Partner, “No Sex, No Gender,” *Speculum*, 68 (1993), as an example.

⁵³ Dintenfass, “Truth’s Other,” 20.

⁵⁴ Edith Wyschogrod, *An Ethics of Remembering: History, Heterology, and the Nameless Others* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 66.

⁵⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984 [1981]). A number of excellent critiques, both on MacIntyre’s prescriptive suggestions and his historicism can be found in John Horton and Susan Mendus, eds., *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives of the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

⁵⁶ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁵⁸ R. Jay Wallace, “After Virtue and Whose Justice?” *History and Theory*, 28 (1989), 334.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 121.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 236-237.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 11-12.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁶⁴ Hans Kellner, “Never Again Is Now,” *History and Theory*, 33 (1994), 127.

⁶⁵ as Jackson asserts in “The Ethical Space of Historiography”: “Historical writing continually engages in its own contestation and rewriting of previous discourses about the past” 469.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* Jackson’s piece deals extensively and persuasively with this aspect of the ethical turn.

⁶⁷ Gilbert Harman and Judith Jarvis Thomson, *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 3.

⁶⁸ White, *Metahistory*, 22.