

# Ethics in Creativity and Historical Research – A Brief Discussion

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**Abstract**—This position paper considers ethics in relation to the fields of creativity and history. Though routinely attached to contemporary areas such as politics and healthcare, ethics have largely been ignored in historical scholarship despite their unspoken relevance. At the same time, the subject has entered the study of creativity and that of the creative individual. How, then, should the biography of a historical, creative individual be approached? The traditional treatment has depended heavily on what is known as narrative coherence, which remains popular for its ability to serve audience and publishing interests. However, as a selection of scholars have argued, this same coherence routinely alienates the perspectives, works, and stories of those who reside outside the mainstream, including the likes of artists, dissident writers, and other creative or subculture individuals. The current paper suggests that ethics have always been an unconscious part of narrative writing, particularly the biography, and should be consciously moved into practices of methodology.

**Keywords**—biography, creativity, ethics, historical research

## I. INTRODUCTION

THE subject of ethics has a long and involved history, whether in the study of philosophy or through a variety of its applications, such as law and medicine. The past thirty years, coinciding with globalization and post-socialist ideology, has witnessed its increased discussion in matters of economics, politics, and social media. Psychology also, as both a social science and as a therapeutic practice, has made ethics an integral part of the field. Often studied in relation to that field, the area of creativity, when applied to a variety of real-world applications such as education and business training, is also becoming more concerned with ethics.

The study of history, however, perhaps by its very nature, has typically treated ethics as secondary or even non-applicable, where the construction of narrative coherence still commands most methodological considerations. This presents a dilemma for the psychobiographer or standard biographer, particularly when the individual under investigation comes from, or as been situated on, the fringe of society, culture, or politics. The following presents a brief treatment of such considerations.

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## II. ETHICS AND LANGUAGE IN HISTORY

Though the term ethics has its origins in philosophy, its application to various disciplines has been far ranging. At the same time, according to Gallois [1], the language of ethics, incorporating the likes of *justice*, *autonomy*, and *care*, has not been key to the language or thinking of historians, who remain focused on representation and truth in the discipline.

Taking a step aside a moment, to get a sense of how often the term *ethics* itself has appeared in printed English historically, a simple search was made of Google's digital book library, by way of its publically available Ngram viewer. The viewer indicated that the word's frequency grew slowly, from the seventeenth century through the middle of the nineteenth, hovering around the two parts-per-million (2 ppm) level by about the year 1870. However, in the single decade of the 1880s, usage jumped to approximately 15 ppm, a frequency maintained in English-language books for the next hundred years. The next bump began in the late 1980s and continued throughout the 1990s, where the usage more than doubled to a 30-35 ppm level that was seen throughout most of the 2000s.

When separating this second growth spike, along the lines of American and British English, the appearance of *ethics* jumped from approximately 18.5 ppm to 30 ppm in the American case, whereas the British leap was more dramatic, from approximately 12 ppm to a peak of 47 ppm. As of 2008, the last update to the Ngram corpora, the respective frequencies of the term in American and British English were about 23 ppm and 33 ppm. According to second source, the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) [2], which sampled journals, magazines, and books, from the years 1990 through 2012, the 23 ppm for the word *ethics* in American English was consistent. Within this set, the use largely appeared in academic publication, at the approximate rate of 53 ppm.

Without conducting extensive research, there is no way of evaluating exactly what brought on the sudden interest in ethics during these two growth spurts. Generally, however, the end of the nineteenth century witnessed major growth in industrialization, in both Britain and the United States, accompanied by the birth of modern socialist ideas, organized labor, and labor laws. Likewise, the late 1980s signaled several major shifts in economics and politics, including the final days of the Cold War, a rise in privatization along with the decline of labor unions, and the beginnings of European integration that would become the European Union of the 1990s. The years 1999-2002, marking a slight downward turn in the term *ethics* from its peak, was also the time of the European monetary union.

The purpose of this investigation was simply to introduce ethics, not merely as a topic of study in language, but how it might be considered when employing historical methodology. The field of history stresses that students and scholars make themselves aware of the general values and practices of the times, places, and peoples under study. It does so, however, without much reference to ethical standards or philosophies. This can leave the historian with the temptation to apply contemporary moral and ethical standards to peoples and cultures of the past. The problem is referred to as “presentism” [1], which includes the application of so-called timeless morals, along with the so-called inescapable, deterministic, and natural course of time and events. Historians try to avoid this dilemma by concentrating on methodology informed by facts.

The problem, according to Gallois and others, is that history is not merely facts, but interpretive construction, and historians are often not aware of their own biases. This relates to the dilemma of language, both for the historian and when interpreting the specific values and ethics of historical contexts. Gallois argued that both history and ethics were founded on the use of judgment, and that “the language of ethics has descriptive power which enables historians to better explain past cultures” [1]. These judgments of language extend to moral categories, such as *freedom* and *justice*, which change over time. For example, consider American history, which is filled with references to *liberty* and *democracy*. Except what did these words mean to a person of African origin in 1865, to a Caucasian woman before the right to vote in 1920, or to a Japanese-American interned by his or her own government in 1942? Along a longer timeline, what did these words mean to the ancient Greeks, for most of whom there was no practical application?

### III. ETHICS AND REFLEXIVITY ON HISTORY

Despite history’s origins in philosophy, like so many other endeavors, historians themselves tend to self-reflect very little, and the training or encouragement to do so is typically absent from most graduate programs in history. Nonetheless, Gallois [1] argued that reflexivity, though potentially disabling if overdone, is also useful in disentangling history from the historian. This disentanglement includes four guiding principles: (i) What were the actual codes from the period under investigation? (ii) How did cultural practices become codified or non-codified ethical norms? (iii) What is “the historian’s retrospective identification of a particular ethical culture? (iv) What are the historian’s moral judgments?

Historians spend most of their time interpreting and evaluating the lives and events of others. Although recent decades have seen some philosophical discussion on subjectivity, the topic remains a minor methodological consideration. In addition, with the increased interest in theory and narrative among younger historians, even methodology has lost its priority [3].

In their introduction to *Beyond Narrative Coherence*, Hyvärinen et al. [4] critiqued both the traditional and contemporary problems associated with overreliance on the narrative form. As it has been conventionally constructed, and used widely throughout the humanities and social sciences, narrative depends too heavily on linear storytelling. This

procession of beginning to middle to end, one insisting on thematic closure, has become the guiding virtue of coherence. This serves the purpose of appeasing the reader, or merely serving the narrative itself, which consequently ends up privileging the dominant and prevailing perspectives within cultures and subcultures. For those living outside these acceptable narratives or value structures, as in the case of artistically creative and politically traumatized people, such coherence can easily lead to marginalization.

As Andrews [5] pointed out, communicating traumatic experience suffers the dilemma of relying on conventional language, to reveal stories that can lack coherence, meaning, or even comprehensibility. Having worked with trauma testimonies for a time, the author of the current paper understands what Andrews meant by framing this kind of testimony in the conventional narrative configuration. Such framing builds an artificial wholeness, which ultimately serves the listener, not the teller or the experience. This situation is more than a methodological concern, but also an ethical one. An objective when working with trauma testimony is to not reduce or decontextualize the testimony, which is easy to do, for the sake of merely improving the narrative or making it more accessible to an audience.

Whereas decontextualizing and artificial coherence are trouble enough for historians and social scientists, in areas such as mass media and entertainment, *either-or* propositions tend to blatantly supersede any intricacies of language, experience, context, or coherence. As a result, popular narratives of history are often reduced to little more than dichotomized stances for audience consumption. The intricacies of an artwork, for instance, or of an individual life, or of a landmark event, typically end with a simple judgment of *good* or *bad*? In a specific example, concerning his critically acclaimed book on the decision to use atomic weapons against Japan, one of the most controversial, complex, and ethically ambiguous moments of the twentieth century, Walker [6] stated that most of the questions and comments he has ever received merely concern whether the bomb was a good idea: yes or no. However, the ethical considerations of history present more than simplistic judgment. They challenge the ways of comprehending complexity and the accuracy of reporting and analysis.

### IV. PSYCHOLOGY AND BIOGRAPHY

Whether a historian, or for that matter, a psychologist, should worry about ethics in a past context might seem sufficiently removed from the business of living people. After all, historical scholarship is typically dealing with deceased individuals, and whatever such scholars say or do is not going to cause stress on those individuals. However, as Thomson stated, historians are not excused from uncritical usage of sources, particularly life stories, which have “a cultural overlay and a psychological underlay” [7].

Batson [8] covered this point in a book chapter on simulating other minds, a process which entails a higher order of imagination, empathic awareness, and perspective formation. These skills benefit an array of critical thought and emotional understanding, not the least of which include the reduction of stereotyping and prejudice. Narvaez and Mrkva [9] took this

further with an in-depth review on the development of moral imagination, which ties closely into human emotions. In their work, detached imagination equates to emotional disengagement, whereas a healthy moral imagination supports the ability to abstract and reason about situations other than the present moment.

The lesson should not be lost on scholars of other people, whether psychologist or historian. A classic example includes the work of Sigmund Freud, who is considered the originator of the psychobiography. As with all forms of psychology and history, speculation plays a part and is not without merits. Researchers routinely make critical inferences from examined information, and typically the more information available, the better the inferences. However, Freud, as both psychologists and historians have done on occasion, fell into a biased trap of his own design. In this particular case, in his groundbreaking psychobiography of Leonardo da Vinci [10], Freud turned standard biography into a psychosexual study of the artist-engineer's childhood, one that concluded with Leonardo having a neurotic, obsessional personality [11].

Although Freud's psychobiography was the first of its kind, and is still recognized as a model for approaching historical figures in this way, the work was based on slim evidence. Freud also relied too heavily on a misinterpreted word from the Italian language [11]. Elms [12] explained that while Freud provided an important methodological framework for doing psychohistory, his analysis of Leonardo went terribly astray, lapsing into interpretations designed merely to reinforce Freud's own theories. In other words, Freud examined neither his own reflexivity nor his anachronistic employment of presentism, relying instead on choices that served his methodology, his desire for narrative coherence, and the ethical and moral standards of himself and his audience.

## V. THE ETHICS OF CREATIVITY

In a treatment that opened the study of creativity to social psychology, Amabile [13] established the importance of culture on creativity, as opposed to the popular framing of creativity as a purely individual effort. In terms of ethics and creativity, to date the edited book by Moran, Cropley, and Kaufman [14], *The Ethics of Creativity*, might be the most rounded and comprehensive single collection of its kind. Though the entries were built mostly around creative and general human development, much of the material is applicable to other areas, such as scholarship and ethics for historians, particularly biographers.

One chapter from that collection was Narvaez and Mrkva [9] who, as already mentioned, argued the importance of moral imagination on ethical conduct and choices. Additionally, Coeckelbergh [15] discussed "moral craftsmanship" or moral creativity, suggesting that ethics themselves already include an aesthetic dimension. The author made an important point about the practice of explicit instruction, which the apprentice requires in order to develop his or her particular craft. However, as expertise develops, imagination, improvisation, and practical creation take over, leading to more unique applications of knowledge, aesthetics and ethics. In other words, experts are always reinventing, or at least adjusting, their ethics in some

way, just as they are continually reinventing their creativity and themselves in some way.

In contrast to the preceding paragraph is what Nagel [16] called a "view from nowhere," one that presupposes humans already follow some predetermined moral good that merely needs to be applied to the practical world. Echoing Nagel, Coeckelbergh questioned this traditionally detached, Platonic-based intellectual view. As an alternative, contemporary philosophers have come to understand the role of imagination and emotion in moral and ethical considerations. Moral craftsmanship concerns the relational world: a non-Platonic, non-Cartesian, and non-Kantian view of morality and even knowledge. "Instead, it is about real-world know-how, feeling one's way through the world, about grasping, about handling, and about touching" [15]. In other words, the way people form many of their standards, individually and collectively, evolve not from a blank slate, but from the untidy world around them and from the concrete problems they face.

The lesson is relevant to the biographer, particularly when treating disenfranchised, marginalized, and traumatized individuals. Even in the mainstream of life, eminent novelists, artists, scientists, and even certain politicians are often both responding to and actively shaping the environment in which they find themselves, interacting with and changing their own standards and practices as they go.

As an example of a creative expert crafting his own ethics, set within a context of controversy, consider the case of Robert Oppenheimer, typically referred to as the creator of the atomic bomb. What is often overlooked is that Oppenheimer's primary role was leader of the nuclear weapons research program at Los Alamos, an instrumental position but far from the only significant one in the Manhattan Project. Often overlooked are his highly gifted and motivated teams of individuals, many of whom were far more vehement about developing nuclear weapons and dispatching them against all enemies, real or perceived. To ask whether Oppenheimer's decision to work on the atomic bomb was ethical, whether his reactions pre- and post-1945 to war and nuclear proliferation were ethical, or whether he himself were an ethical person, invites little more than reductive non-answers. An investigator must understand the context of the Manhattan Project, including the enormity of power and wealth behind the project, and Oppenheimer's specific role, influence, and limitations within it. Hence, a requirement for the biographer of such a figure is to properly frame the complexities of Oppenheimer's pre-bomb and post-bomb outlooks, giving credence to the political and ideological pressures brought to bear on him and others in the period. This approach sits in contrast to a pattern that many biographers tend to fall into, particularly American biographers, which is to build a narrative coherence around an intriguing, easily comprehensible, lone-maverick figure.

As mentioned earlier in the current paper, Hyvärinen et al. [4] argued how typical storytelling readily disenfranchises, or minimally, misinterprets, the lives of creative individuals, particularly ones who get into political trouble like Oppenheimer did. Until scholarship can more fully address these fundamental, methodological, and moral concerns, which means moving beyond a dependence on narrative and the "view from nowhere," investigators are unlikely to appreciate the true

ethical dimensions of a story such as Oppenheimer's, whether eminent and controversial or not. The workings of moral craftsmanship, as discussed by Coeckelbergh [15], are worth considering, to press beyond the comforts of argumentation and dichotomized right and wrong. Producers and consumers of scholarship should have more grounding in constructing ethical dimensions that exceed the perceptual limitations of the human mind, and thus cope with the hard problems of complex moral formation and judgment.

## VI. CONCLUSION

In the realm of scholarship, in fields such as creativity and history, conveying information, and presentations of that information, face their own challenges. One of these is narrative coherence, which serves an important function, but should not become the driving element of the story. This becomes more evident when a scholar wishes to pursue the study of individuals or groups from the past, for whom a standard narrative could foster a diminished or marginalized judgment. The general historian's job might not entail ethical considerations directly, but the biographer has the task of interpreting a life. Comprehending, empathizing, and possibly even imagining the ethics, morals, and emotions of such a life are conceivably part of the biographer's treatment. Whether investigating a controversial or even volatile figure, the constructed interpretation of that figure should not fall simply to the established patterns of narrative coherence, nor to the moral or evaluative biases of the researcher, the audience, or the culture.

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