

## Chapter One

# Moral Judgments in History

There must be comparatively few among the students of history, and even among its teachers, who can claim to know their way about that tangled field of human knowledge described as “the philosophy of history”. Not only is the literature on the subject enormous, but the arguments are often abstruse in the extreme. How far, for instance, can we be said to possess a real knowledge of the past? In view of the scantiness of our data, can we form any right judgments about it? How exactly do chronicles differ from history properly so called? Where precisely does bare fact end and interpretation begin? How (in view of the personal factor affecting every writer’s selection and presentation of his material) can *any* writer’s views safely be accepted by his readers as just or adequate? What are the main truths to be learnt from the historical process as a whole, or even from distinct parts of it? Here are samples of the mass of questions with which the philosopher of history has to grapple.<sup>1</sup> It is an exceedingly tall order: and the reader will perhaps be relieved to learn that I am not proposing to make in this book any attempt to solve these basic problems. For though I have been a keen student of history from my youth up, and a teacher of it for the last twenty-five years, I make no claim to a place in the ranks of those rare experts who are capable of dealing competently and adequately with the deeper questions the subject raises.

Yet no intelligent student of history can altogether ignore this difficult field of inquiry. However much he may wish to avoid abstractions, he cannot do without some working rules of his own as to what is credible and what is not, and why, as to how the personal predilections of his informants must be allowed for when he is using their statements, and as to what interpretations are to be placed upon the facts deduced. In other words, however

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1. The perusal of a work like Hilda D. Oakeley’s *History and the Self: a study in the roots of history and the relations of history and ethics* (London, 1934), or M. Mandelbaum’s *The Problem of Historical Knowledge: an answer to Relativism* (New York, 1938), will suffice to convince the reader how wide and abstruse the field is.

little of an expert in philosophy he may be, he must have at his disposal a *modus operandi* in handling historical material and problems, roughly analogous to the technical ability of the chemist or physicist, who fulfils a useful function, though he cannot claim to be able to answer the ultimate riddles of material existence.

Within the field of the philosophy of history, however, there is one little area with which I do propose to deal, first generally, and then – throughout the bulk of this book – with special reference to a particular phase of the story of Europe. It is that which concerns the moral judgments we are entitled to pass on the *dramatis personae* of history and on those who have written about them. The task which I thus set myself – apart altogether from the need of rightly selecting and rightly understanding the factual data – is more complex than might appear at first sight. The old assumption that one was entitled to censure and vilify with the utmost severity all whose actions one could not personally approve of, and all whose beliefs one could not personally share, has in these days given place to a milder and more sympathetic approach. The judgments now customarily passed by Christian writers on the non-Christian religions, for instance, by ecclesiastical historians on the so-called “heresiarchs”, by historians generally on great aggressors like Alexander and intolerant despots like Louis XIV, tend to be far less censorious than was once customary. And the change is a change for the better. For if it be not quite true that “*Tout savoir, c’est tout pardonner*”, it *is* true that, unless we make some effort to enter into the mind and motives of an historical character, to understand the spirit of the times in which he lived, and to allow for the limitations to which he was inevitably subject, no adverse judgment we may pass on him or his deeds will have in it much justice or value. In other words, sympathy is an indispensable prerequisite of fairness.<sup>2</sup>

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2. G.F. Bridge, writing in *The Hibbert Journal*, vol. xvi, pp. 50-52, during the first World-War (Oct. 1917), pointed out that, regarding most of the great conflicts of the past, even though our sympathies may be definitely enlisted on one side, we usually have to admit that there was something of value in what the other side was fighting for. Percy Gardner, writing of the sixteenth century, says: “As in almost all the great crises of history, when ideas clash, good and evil, right and wrong were everywhere mingled, and ranged on both sides...” (*The Growth of Christianity* [London, 1907], pp. 225 f.). Similarly, P. Geyl, *The Revolt of the Netherlands* (London, 1932), pp. 15 f.

The question as to whether and how far we are entitled (or perhaps obliged) to express judgments of approval and disapproval on historical characters has, of course, often been discussed: and it may be interesting to glance at one or two of the more recent episodes in the controversy.

Lord Acton was disposed to express strong and indignant disapproval of all acts of persecution and oppression.<sup>3</sup> When in 1887 Dr. Mandell Creighton brought out the third and fourth volumes of his *History of the Papacy*, dealing with the Popes of the period 1464-1518, he was vehemently criticized by Lord Acton for judging the Borgias so leniently. An interesting correspondence between the two scholars ensued.<sup>4</sup> Shortly after this, Creighton delivered a lecture on "Historical Ethics",<sup>5</sup> in which he explained his principles at length, and offered an elaborate justification of the leniency for which he had been reproached. As an historian, he said, he was more concerned with the results of statesmen's actions than with their personal characters. British historians, in depicting the history of their own country, were apt to suffer from a hypocritical self-righteousness: statesmen have, in the nature of things, to face more complicated dilemmas than private persons have: as trustees, they are not free to do as they like, nor can they disregard public opinion. We cannot in fairness, Creighton urged, disregard the spirit of their age: persecution, for instance, followed inevitably from the universally accepted belief that religious uniformity was absolutely necessary for social well-being. And so on. Yet at the end he confessed himself ready to condemn morally deeds which harm the popular conscience, efface the recognized distinctions between right and wrong, and

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3. See *Letters of Lord Acton to Mary, daughter of... W.E. Gladstone* (1904), pp. lxxi f., 70, 121 f., 144, 148, 185-187 – mostly referring to what he had written in 1881-1884. Motley, needless to say, had already judged similarly: "And because anointed monarchs are amenable to no human tribunal,... it is the more important for the great interests of humanity that before the judgment-seat of History a crown should be no protection to its wearer. There is no plea to the jurisdiction of history, if history be true to itself" (*History of the United Netherlands* [ed. 1875-76], vol. iii, pp. 505 f.). The last sentence reads awkwardly – one expects "from the jurisdiction...". Yet it is printed as I have quoted it in all the editions. Unless "to" is a slip for "from", Motley must have meant "no plea in defence of a royal tyrant".

4. See *Life and Letters of Mandell Creighton*, vol. i, pp. 368-378.

5. Published after his death by his widow in *The Quarterly Review*, vol. ccciii, pp. 32-46 (July 1905).

hinder moral progress: he specified treachery and assassination as instances.

These closing avowals showed that Creighton had not been wholly unaffected by Acton's criticism. In his Hulsean Lectures on *Persecution and Tolerance* delivered at Cambridge in 1893-94, and published in 1895, he allowed himself to be much more severe. In persecuting, he maintained, the Christian Church forgot the rebuke directed by Christ against the intolerance of His disciples (Luke 9: 54-56); and her mistake was not intellectual – it was moral. She must be judged, not by her success, but by her fidelity or otherwise to her Master. Persecution arose from man's natural desire to have his own way, and from the State's wish for uniformity; but it could easily have been seen to be in open contradiction to the principles of Christianity.

Meanwhile Lord Acton, in his preface to L.A. Burd's edition of Machiavelli's *Il Principe* (1891), had criticized the constant habit of imagining statesmen to be exempt from all obligation to respect the moral law (especially such law as is admittedly binding on private individuals) and of reckoning success as their one sufficient title to our approval. When in 1895 he was appointed Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, he took occasion, in his inaugural lecture, to denounce with unsparing severity the prevalent custom of finding all sorts of excuses for the dark deeds of the past, and pleaded on the contrary that we ought to maintain "the moral currency" in its purity: "if we lower our standard in History", he concluded, "we cannot uphold it in Church or State".<sup>6</sup>

In 1898 Dr. Creighton re-stated his position in an address on "Heroes", and summarized some of the arguments he had used in the earlier lecture on "Historical Ethics".<sup>7</sup> He finished with some rather stronger concessions to the demands of righteousness in judgment than he had previously made.

The veteran historian, Henry Charles Lea, in a presidential paper read to the American Historical Society in 1903,<sup>8</sup> discussed

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6. *A Lecture on the Study of History* (ed. 1895), pp. 63-74, 135-142. This lecture was delivered in June 1895, was first published the same year, and is reprinted in Acton's *Lectures on Modern History* (1906), pp. 23-28, 340-342.

7. See Mandell Creighton, *Historical Lectures and Addresses* (1903), pp. 305 – 323.

8. Published in *The American Historical Review*, vol. ix, pp. 233-246 (Jan. 1904).

“Ethical Values in History” – interestingly enough, with special reference to Philip II. He started with a rejection of Acton’s principle, on the ground that allowance must be made for the wide variation in men’s views, from age to age and from race to race, as to what is righteous and what is wrong and punishable. It is not fair to judge an historical character on the strength of a moral code which he could not possibly have recognized. We must judge the individual by his conscientiousness only; and if, though conscientious, he acted badly, we must reserve our blame for the age in which he lived. Of Lea’s specific application of this principle to Philip II we shall have to take note later. All that needs notice here is the general plea that, although Philip’s actions were cruel and harmful, the blame for them must fall, not on him, but on the influences by which he had been moulded.

Miss Lily Dougall made a useful, if incidental, contribution to the discussion in the course of an essay she wrote for the composite work entitled *Concerning Prayer*.<sup>9</sup> She was not specifically dealing with historical characters (though she had occasion to refer to Dr. Creighton’s Hulsean Lectures); she was discussing sin as such. Her main point was that sin, being any quality or deed of man which differs from God’s ideal for him, is often present when men are doing what they suppose to be right; and it is present because they have not done their best to find out what *is* right. She disagreed therefore with Dr. Creighton’s view that persecutors always knew that persecution is condemned by the spirit of the Gospel. She laid great stress on man’s duty of ascertaining what really is God’s Will, as being equally needful with the desire to do what he already believes that Will to be. On the propriety or otherwise of blaming others she hardly touched.

A frontal attack on the problem (rather on the lines adumbrated by H.C. Lea) was made by Mr. (now Professor) H. Butterfield, Fellow of Peterhouse, Cambridge, in his small book, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, published in 1931. He conceded to the historian the right of expressing his own personal preferences and antipathies, so long as he was aware that he was acting in a purely private capacity and that he was making

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9. *Concerning Prayer* (London, 1916), pp. 140-166.

certain special assumptions for the purpose. Nay, more: he allowed that not only his intellect, but also his instinct and his sympathy, must be alive and awake. Nor must he forget that the characters of history were morally responsible. But he stoutly denied that, in his official capacity qua historian, he has any right to pronounce any particular act, institution, or person of bygone days to have been morally good or bad, right or wrong, sinful or righteous. His business is to be a witness, not a judge – to understand and explain, not to blame, excuse, or applaud – to forgive and reconcile, not to punish or avenge. Mankind cannot be divided into black and white, friends and enemies of progress; nor is it sufficient to admit that there have been good men on both sides of the great conflict. One must keep clear of the typical Whig fallacy, which – after abridging and oversimplifying the history of the past – insists on applying to it the standards of the present, traces a continuous line of freedom from Luther down through successive Protestant and Whig champions to the British constitution of to-day, and views Catholicism as alone responsible for conflict, cruelty, and reaction. As a matter of fact (Professor Butterfield urges), if Luther could have foreseen what liberty would become in our own day, he would certainly have combined with the Roman Church to suppress it. Catholicism was not solely responsible for the cruelty of the struggle; and freedom has developed, not from Whiggery alone, but from the conflict and co-operation between it and its opponent.

Professor Butterfield refers, towards the close of his book, to the very different use of history recommended by Lord Acton, and he condemns it as owing its origin, not to objective historical judgments, but to the Whig preferences of Lord Acton himself. To Acton's plea that it is better that our moral judgments in history should be too severe rather than too lenient, he replies that this reduces itself to saying "Better be unjust to dead men than give currency to loose ideas on questions of morals", and comes near to saying "Better be unhistorical than do anything that may lower the moral dignity of history".<sup>10</sup>

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10. I have tried to give a fair summary of Professor Butterfield's position as a whole, without bothering to quote detailed references to this and that page of his short book. A very good instance of the application of his views may be seen in the rap over the knuckles administered anonymously in *The Times Literary Supplement*, January 16, 1937, p. 35, to Dr. Arnold J. Toynbee for

Something in the nature of a reply to Professor Butterfield was furnished in the Hulsean Lectures of Professor Herbert G. Wood, of Birmingham, entitled *Christianity and the Nature of History* (1934). After remarking that Acton's position had been anticipated by Sallust, Tacitus, and Froude, and Butterfield's by Thucydides, Hegel, and Bury, Dr. Wood declared his agreement with Mr. Butterfield on three points: (1) that greatness in history cannot be equated with moral goodness, and that the historian is primarily concerned with greatness; (2) that the distinction to be drawn is not simply one between black and white, saints and sinners; and (3) that the historian is probably not called upon to act as a judge, but as an expert witness. He adds, however, that the historian is still describable as "the arbiter of controversies", because his task is to give evidence on both sides. "The historian must not set out to show which party was in the right, but he should try to show how far each party was in the right". In conceding that the historian has to go to his work with instinct and sympathy awake, has to discover not only facts but significances, to give his expert witness correctly, to understand, reconcile, forgive, and so on, Professor Butterfield implicitly concedes that he must also pass moral judgments. It does not – as he seems to assume – follow from the frequency of indiscriminate and one-sided verdicts, that *all* our moral judgments on the past are purely relative; if they were, history could have no significance whatever – which is absurd. Even if we conclude that no "lesson" we can draw from history is ever more than probable, "yet the probability may be so clear and so strong that we neglect it at our peril". Finally, Dr. Wood denies that Lord Acton's theory of history was characteristically Whig, and observes that many of Mr. Butterfield's own particular judgments would probably have been endorsed by Lord Acton

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bestowing blame on Mussolini in his *Survey of International Affairs*, 1935. "All this distribution of good and bad marks", says the reviewer, "produces some pungent writing. But it is surely beneath the dignity of serious history.... One cannot but respect the sincerity and depth of emotion which are evident in every line of these pages. But Dr. Toynbee writes as an angry man; and if it is true that *facit indignatio versum*, it certainly does not encourage clear thinking". Dr. Stanley Lane-Poole, in the preface to his volume on *Turkey* (1889), in the series entitled "The Story of the Nations", says: "While striving to escape the charge of prolixity, I have carefully avoided the sin of moralizing...."

himself.<sup>11</sup> Miss Hilda D. Oakeley, in her book, *History and the Self* (1934), does not directly attack our problem; but in the course of this “Study in... the Relations of History and Ethics” she throws out various observations which bear upon it. Her position generally is that of a “relativist”, impressed with the scantiness of historical data, with the “invincible relativity of all our historic valuations and judgments,...”, and with the impossibility of possessing direct knowledge of the particular nature and qualities of other selves. She believes, however, that pure relativism is transcended by the principle of freedom; and although here she has mainly in mind, not political freedom, but freedom of the will as opposed to determinism, this principle leads her to a profound regard for the personality of the human individual, both of the past and of the present, as an ultimate value of which history must take account. She does not work out the implications of this conclusion; but its relevance to the general problem of historical value-judgments is obvious.

A more recent consideration of the problem is that given by the veteran medievalist, Dr. G.G. Coulton, in his autobiography.<sup>12</sup> He contends, in the first place, that the true historical method is not something mysterious and esoteric, the exclusive perquisite of specialists, but a quest for probabilities under the guidance of common sense. He repudiates as pedantic and impracticable the attempt to write history without exercising or expressing moral judgments. One cannot understand without judging; and even those who claim that we can, act as judges themselves, not only in the selection and presentation of their material, but still more patently in their criticism of other historians. “Those who warn us off from judging Julius Caesar are most unsparing in their condemnation of Mommsen’s conception of Caesar; yet, ‘if I may think a German Professor wrong, why not a Roman General?’” True, we must avoid over-frequent, biased, and censorious judgments; but just as a judge, starting with complete impartiality, moves, in the course of

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11. See H.G. Wood, *Christianity and the Nature of History* (Cambridge, 1934), pp. 111-142; cf. also pp. 23 f. and 144 ff. (“Christianity and Progress”), 181-183, 203. Cf. also G.G. Coulton, *The Inquisition* (London, 1929), p. 65 (“To ignore the question of human responsibility would make all history meaningless”).

12. G.G. Coulton, *Fourscore Years* (Cambridge, 1943), pp. 317 f., 320-324.



fulfilling his duty, towards a fairly definite leaning in favour of one side or the other (in order to have some guidance to give the jury), so the historian must endeavour to reach a judicial decision regarding the facts lying behind his mass of evidence. "Why should not even the most scientific historian content himself with Goethe's confession of faith: 'I can promise to be sincere, but not to be impartial'?"

The latest contribution I have seen is in Mr. Desmond MacCarthy's review of Dr. Coulton's book in *The Sunday Times*, January 16, 1944. Agreeing largely with Dr. Coulton's main contentions, Mr. MacCarthy observes, by way of qualification, that "the Court of History is not necessarily ethical, though for Dr. Coulton it is... History is also written from the point of view of development, whether of national power or of particular institutions or of economic changes. But here, too, the historian must continually pass judgments. He must judge which events or men were most important as causes of subsequent developments". In this he must beware of personal bias, and of twisting the facts. "The difficulty is... that the same cases are, so to speak, tried in different courts. And his [Dr. Coulton's] own faults as a controversialist are due to his shouting loud in the hope of being heard in a neighbouring court..."

This brief survey of a selection of recent opinions on the subject of moral judgments in history will suffice to show how fraught with pitfalls the subject is. Difference of opinion does not seem likely to arise regarding the injustice of any judgments based on insufficient acquaintance with the facts, on onesidedness in weighing the evidence, on unwillingness to allow for the circumstances of the time, or on a failure to understand the real motives of the agents concerned. Nor, on the other hand, need we in all probability hesitate to pass an adverse judgment in those rare cases in which the agent himself makes it clear to us that he knew he was doing wrong.<sup>13</sup> But what are we to do

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13. The best example of this kind that occurs to me is Cicero's letter to the historian L. Luceius (*Ad Fam.* V, xii, 1-3), in which he begged him to write a history of the Catilinarian conspiracy and, for the sake of friendship, to eulogize in it Cicero's own exploits even beyond what strict truth would justify ("Itaque te plane etiam atque etiam rogo, ut et ornes ea vehementius etiam