



## Moral and historical consciousness

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**ABSTRACT:** In this article I attempt to answer the question - is there is a conceptual link between moral and historical consciousness? I shall first discuss moral concepts and moral development; try to explore what they mean, and what they involve. In doing that I hope to get a reasonable answer to what defines moral consciousness. In the second part I will analyse historical consciousness and argue that there is a conceptual link between moral and historical consciousness. My idea is that reconfiguration of historical events is a necessary feature of understanding the importance of historical events; it is sometimes a necessary feature of coming to an understanding of moral actions and seems to be a part of practical judgement as moral wisdom. Reconfiguration seems to be a necessary part of moral deliberation and coming to appreciate the force of the morally normative.

**KEYWORDS:** moral consciousness, reconfiguration, historical consciousness, significance of historical events.

### Morality, moral consciousness

First, something about the words moral and historical consciousness. Is moral consciousness identical to moral knowledge? When talking about moral consciousness are we just talking about morality? Or is moral consciousness something else altogether? This is not some whimsical questioning about abstruse terminology but something that ought to be set clear at the start.

I discuss morality and history and how they are related. But I also talk about historical and moral consciousness in the sense of being aware of and understanding morality and history and how these two kinds of understanding can be related. The concept of historical consciousness has grown out of concepts like historical awareness and historical literacy and should be “a vital human asset for an orientation to life and the world” (Ahonen, 2005).

Consciousness is the having of experience or being aware of something. It has been widely investigated in modern philosophy but there is no consensus on its status. Conscience is another concept closely related to this investigation. Conscience has its root in Christian morality, especially the protestant one. It is the guide that supplies the individual with ability to distinguish between right and wrong from a Christian point of view. In this sense conscience is a theological concept. I argue for a conception of moral consciousness that is secular. I assume that moral consciousness is the emergent ability of individuals that develops in a dialectic between the individual and their context, the social institutions of their society. In the Hegelian tradition there is a close connection between moral, social and historical development. It is a fundamental truth about human beings that they are temporal beings and they are also moral beings. But being temporal is not identical to being historical. In this investigation I inquire into moral and historical consciousness without committing myself to a grand theory. My aim is to put forward an argument for a close link between these two types of consciousness. This can

have important consequences for how we understand history, for example, that normative moral evaluations are a part of historical consciousness, and for ethics, that it is a historical discipline.

It is difficult to define morality and demarcate its boundaries and we should not expect to be able to do that exactly as we can do for some other concepts. Ethical concepts are not exact concepts but allow for grey areas and problematic examples like vague concepts and open-textured concepts do. So it serves no purpose to attempt to define morality. This feature of moral concepts opens up the possibility that there can be a number of ways of describing a particular event or an action. Yet there are some typical examples of moral thought and ethical inquiry.

One typical example of a moral view is to aim to do the right thing. But what does it mean to do the right thing? There are obviously a number of ways of explicating the meaning of this phrase but two will have to do here. The first is this: Doing the right thing is to do what one would be well advised to do in the light of one's ends and interests. It follows that one's ends and interests must be moral for the right thing to be moral. Typically, the ends or interests are the virtues or the *summum bonum* or happiness. In that case doing the right thing is moral. But if one's ends or interests are not moral, either morally neutral or immoral, doing the right thing cannot be moral. In a game of chess, moving the king from E5 to E6 is neither moral nor immoral but can be the right thing depending on whether it helps you to win the game of chess you are playing. Ignoring cries for help from someone in dire need and injured because of a car accident because you are late for the cinema is an instance of an immoral act. Being late for the cinema is not a reason that can weigh heavier than helping someone in dire need and nobody else in sight who would be able to help. Diving into a swimming pool to save someone from drowning could be considered a courageous act and hence a moral one.

The second understanding of doing the right thing is this: Doing the right thing is doing it because one is duty bound to do it (Deigh, 2010). This means that one ought to do the right thing independently of whether it is advantageous or disadvantageous to oneself, irrespective of accepted practice in society or widespread attitudes. Doing the right thing depends on norms that are independent of the society we happen to live in or the context in which we happen to act at any moment in time. I think we can fairly say these norms are probably based on "rational thought or reason" (Deigh, 2010, p. 10). This way of fleshing out the meaning of doing the right thing would not dispute the descriptions of the examples above but would justify the descriptions differently.

Morality is shaped by a special type of normativity. We use many concepts to describe and investigate morality, concepts like good and bad, right and wrong, that are normative and also moral. Ethics attempts to figure out what is this special type of normativity. The two understandings of morality described above might come up with different answers to questions about the nature of this moral normativity.

Moral development is a fact of human life. Practically everyone shares the belief that in developing from a child to an adult most of us become mature human beings. The innocence of childhood is lost and moral responsibility, moral sensitivity and judgement take its place in a normal adult person. Interestingly, this is an assumption shared by both the Aristotelian theory of moral development and the Kohlbergian one.

There are results from empirical research that spell out how capable children are from very early on. It is even stated that they have some of the foundations of morality from the time they are born. It is not just that they are innately hardwired for morality but they are capable of learning very fast from a young age. Morality is about our relations to other people and to ourselves. It was often accepted as a fact in twentieth century research on children that they could not understand the interests of others. But this is not true. "Literally from the time they're born children are empathic. They identify with other people and recognize that their own

feelings are shared by others. In fact, they literally take on the feelings of others” (Gopnik, 2009, p. 204). Facial expressions reflect emotions. Newly born babies can imitate facial expressions and seem to connect the relevant emotions with them. One year olds understand desires and intentions and they understand the difference between intentional and unintentional actions, meaning that they have a fairly complex notion of the constituents of the human mind (Gopnik, 2009). Empathy enables very young children to be altruistic and one can even find it in fourteen months old babies. “Two-year-olds can imagine what to do to give other people pleasure or to soothe their pain” (Gopnik, 2009, p. 211).

Children are moral beings from their first year in life and they should be treated as such, as moral and rational beings. This obviously does not mean that children are mature human beings, they are not, they have not yet obtained the necessary experience to mature. It takes time to develop, they need time to learn, it is not until they are adolescents or in their twenties that we can say that are fully mature. This does not mean that they will stop developing at that time but they will have arrived at the point in their own development where they are able to decide what to do on their own terms so to speak, they will have discerned what is relevant in their situation to the decision they intend to take, they understand the principles involved, realise how their action might affect those around them and see how their feelings react to the context in which they find themselves. They must also see if their judgement of their situation and their possible action is justified.

It is a fairly long way from feeling empathy for the face you see opposed to yours in your crib to a young human being fully equipped to reflect on and decide morally. In between come many things. We know that experience in early childhood can influence our development in various ways, serious deprivation can warp our development and deeply influence how we turn out as mature adults. Children who suffer violence can become adults who are more likely to resort to violence. Children who have loving parents are more likely to become well rounded mature adults. But the path from youth to maturity is not in any way fully determined by our experience in youth or by our DNA. Environment has enormous effects on how we develop but it seems also to be true that we influence our environment that in turn affects us (Gopnik, 2009).

One of the important things in our lives is the development of character and virtues. Character and virtues are stable dispositions that regulate our behaviour. We usually talk about moral character because developing an immoral character is not a reasonable aim in life. Virtues are stable, desirable dispositions, vices are stable undesirable dispositions. But why are these notions important, what do they offer us in addition to the development we have talked about already?

The most important thing they offer us is a description of how we turn into moral human beings when we grow up. This is not a simple series of events in anyone’s life but something that happens over time, varies from one individual to another, from one time period to another, from one society to another. But in spite of that we can find common factors that tell us that the concepts of moral character and virtue really do manage to capture something in our development. Morality is a social institution reaching into the psychological. A rule like ‘never lie’ is social in the sense that it is an accepted practice in most, if not all, societies. But for it to be effective it must become a part of the psychological make-up of all individuals in those societies. The challenge in education and child-rearing is not to enforce the social rule but to make the rule a reason for the individuals to behave. Moral development is not completed if the individual behaves according to the social rule because it is a social rule. It is only if she has accepted the rule, wants to follow it, has made it a part of how she wants to live her life. She knows she ought never to lie and she wants never to lie, she wants to be the kind of agent that never lies. When the virtues have become such a part of the agent’s life, her character is formed and she flourishes.

There are various complex issues that must be tackled if I wanted to flesh out a fully developed theory of character, virtue, flourishing and the good life (see, for example, chapter 1 of Kristjánsson, 2015). Virtue must be a stable disposition of character resulting regularly in virtuous actions. But virtues are not algorithms such that if you possess them they result in virtuous actions. We must choose the action in the light of how we evaluate our circumstances, how we see the morally relevant features of the situation. In order to do that we need practical wisdom or practical judgement. This practical wisdom works in tandem with the virtues enabling the agent to choose the right action for the right reason and from the right emotion. Reflection guided by practical wisdom is the key to developing into a fully virtuous agent (Kristjánsson, 2015). The practical wisdom has two features relevant here. The first is that it comes “only with experience of life” and it involves recognising some features of a situation as more important than others (Hursthouse, 2012). I think it is right that experience of life is a key ingredient in developing into a mature agent and it must involve recognising the morally relevant features of every situation we find ourselves in. Experience, though, covers many things.

### Theories of moral development

It should surprise no one that ethicists have argued for various takes on moral development. I will only mention two, the Aristotelian one and the Kohlbergian one. Aristotle argued for his theory of moral development in the fourth century BC and Kohlberg in the twentieth century AD. Both of them divided moral development into stages and Kohlberg added that all children and adolescents must go through all the stages in the right succession.

Aristotle starts with stages that are below the ordinary moral starting point of a child. The first stage of moral development is the stage of the many. Children at this level are pre-moral or amoral but adults who are still at this level are likely to have developed characters that are vicious. This stage is characterised by non-reason-informed feelings, pursuing simple pleasures and avoiding pain and having no notion about what is truly pleasant or disgraceful. This means that the voice of reason does not inform their actions and the appropriate method for teaching or encouraging moral development is habituation but this only applies to the children, the adults are not likely to be changed for the better by any means.

There is no reason to describe all the stages but at the sixth and final stage the moral agent becomes fully virtuous in the Aristotelian model. Their desires and appetites are such that they seek only after things which are moral and agree with reason. They seek for those objects that are the mean or close to the mean according to Aristotle’s theory of the mean and they have fully developed their virtue of practical wisdom or *phronesis*. Aristotle thinks that there are three things that can make an agent good: nature, habit and reason. These three things must be in harmony in human moral agents for them to be good and virtuous. A fully virtuous agent is not perfectly virtuous, that only applies to the gods, and they could degenerate into immoralities but overall they must act morally in most circumstances to count as fully virtuous (Kristjánsson, 2007).

In the twentieth century the most famous doctrine of moral development is the one Lawrence Kohlberg formulated. He took his inspiration from the psychologist Jean Piaget who had argued that cognitive development came in stages and he had also put forward his own version of a theory of moral development. Kohlberg believed that children developed from a pre-conventional level where the main determinants of action are the avoidance of pain and punishment, and at this stage children could also handle questions about what was in it for them when they were required to act. At the next level, the conventional one, they could take into account the social norms in their own society and the reigning stereotypes about good boys or

good girls. Authority and social order became reasons they could understand and could influence their decisions to act. At the third level the child reaches the post-conventional level and is able to take into account in their moral reasoning universal principles and considerations based on social contract (Kohlberg, 1981).

Kohlberg believed that relatively few reached the last stage and adults could be manipulated by pain and punishment. The conventional level is typical of adolescents who in their moral reasoning take the conventions of their own society to be the main criteria of right and wrong. At the post-conventional level it is universal principles that are the criteria for right and wrong. Kohlberg's theory has been influential in research in this area.

Earlier I distinguished between two understandings of 'doing the right thing'. The first was basically desiring the *summum bonum*, the second acting on duty meaning on principles that at least in some instances could be independent of the context we happened to find ourselves in or of our societies. Aristotle is an example of the first type, Kohlberg of the second type. But both of them agree that agents develop in stages, it takes effort and good surroundings to go from one stage to another and it is probably true that only a few or not many reach the highest stage. Both of them agree that we need to master the moral vocabulary in order to develop and it includes both concepts such as 'good', 'right', 'morally good', 'better' and 'morally better'. Both of them argue that moral development consists in fostering character and virtues and there is an ultimate stage of moral development. The mix and the emphases are not the same but the ingredients are. They even agree that one of the most important ingredients in moral development is our relation to our own societies but they would disagree on the role and function of it. Both of them seem to assume limited moral abilities in children and are in conflict with the latest knowledge of moral abilities in young children. I have not been describing these two views to take sides on which of them is right but only to draw out what is moral consciousness.

### **History and historical consciousness**

History, as Henry Ford famously put it, *is one damn thing after another*. All events take place at some time and place. All things have history in this sense. We can inquire into the history of the universe or evolutionary history by establishing what took place and at what time. But in this context we are interested in history in a narrower sense, human history. Human history can be construed in various ways, it can be the history of individual human beings, it can be local history, it can be history of human societies, history of nations. It seems to me practically impossible to tell the history of individuals without taking into account their interactions with other people, their families and their communities. The reason is very simple, human beings live in communities as a general rule. This should not be taken to exclude the possibility of solitary lives of individuals but such lives will always be the exceptions. History as an academic discipline takes that into account in the sense that the dominant way of understanding history is the examination of communities or of individuals in communities. History, just like morality, is a world of communities and individuals.

How should we construe historical consciousness? One way of doing it would be to analyse it as an awareness of historical events, something that took place in the past in a community or an individual's life. History cannot be in the future and it is problematic to think that those things taking place in the present are history. They only become history when they are in the past. This truth about history has the consequence that we always view history from the present and the present influences our view of the past and our evaluation of the past.

I mentioned earlier that historical consciousness is considered "a vital human asset for an orientation to life and the world" and that it had developed from historical awareness and

historical literacy. This indicates that there might be some complex notions packed in the concept of historical consciousness as it has been discussed by historians and theoreticians of history. Jörn Rüsen is the originator of the concept of historical consciousness using it as a way of describing the role of history in education and how it informs our orientation and helps us make sense of the world around us. He argued for a theory of how historical consciousness developed in the individual from recognising the continuity of traditions to using examples from history and ultimately to a genetic type of historical consciousness (Rüsen, 2004). This way of examining historical consciousness is very broad and the idea that historical consciousness orients us in life seems closely connected to how we make sense of life in Rüsen's writings (Rüsen, 2007). It should come as no surprise that morality is considered closely related to historical consciousness on this view and Rüsen (2004) has argued for moral consciousness being closely related to or even a part of historical consciousness, morality is one way of orienting oneself in life. I find it interesting that Rüsen proposes a developmental hierarchy in historical consciousness in a similar way to Aristotle's and Kohlberg's proposal for moral consciousness.

I do not start from premises that lead directly to historical and moral consciousness being necessarily linked but attempt to keep them distinct. So my argument is different from Rüsen's even though it leads to similar conclusions. My argument here should be considered as an addition to Rüsen's explications.

No historian has direct knowledge of the past except for those past events they have witnessed in their own time but historians get access to times past through the written words of those who lived in earlier times and recount them based on their own experience or someone else's. This can be a laborious process and there are various issues that must be addressed before you come to a reasonable evaluation and interpretation of the documents you have been examining. But if this is true about history then hindsight is the lot of those who try to understand the past with the pitfalls that may cause (Kvernbekk, 2013). Historical consciousness is not identical with the latest in historical research but it shares the same premises: It is an awareness of a course of events coming one after another in a human community, it is directed towards the past, the historian has no direct knowledge of the events, and her view possibly skewed by hindsight.

One of the things that historical consciousness encompasses is awareness of the significance of historical events. But knowing the significance of an event means knowing its importance. How do we know or become aware of the historical importance of events in the past and what does it mean? There does not seem to be any simple answers to this question.

Descriptions of actions can vary and they depend on what you want to describe. One can describe an action as pulling the trigger of a gun. The same action can be described as a killing of a person but then it includes also what happened after the trigger was pulled, the bullet racing from the gun to the person aimed at, entering the body of that person and damaging the heart or another vital organ fatally. Killing someone in this context includes pulling the trigger. There is a direct causal link between pulling the trigger and the person dying. Let us look at another example. Ann Dunham gave birth to a son on August 4 1961. We may not find this a significant event. But we can describe this same event differently. The 44<sup>th</sup> president of the United States was born August 4 1961 in Hawaii and his mother is Ann Dunham. Both these descriptions are true of this same event but the latter one expresses a different significance to the former one. This is one way of figuring out the meaning and significance of historical events, to view them in the light of what took place later. The latter description does not imply that the past was different, only that we can truly describe it differently. I do not think we should believe that the birth was the cause of Barack Obama becoming the president of the United States but it was certainly a necessary condition for it.

This fact that we understand the meaning and the significance of historical events in terms of what took place later has a wider application to our own consciousness. It indicates that when trying to understand our own actions we may think we know what we are doing when we perform the action but later we come to understand what we were really doing. Sometimes this can be a painful experience if what we really did was shameful, it harmed or denigrated somebody we love. Hindsight allows us to reconfigure our own actions or historical events and hindsight brings temporal distance to our thinking about our own life and enables us to view ourselves more objectively (Kvernbekk, 2013). Hindsight seems to be necessary for understanding what we really do because the present can blind us and prevent our seeing our actions for what they are. It also enables a balanced understanding of ourselves, even an objective one, and balanced understanding is a necessary feature of the moral point of view, taking into account the interests of others as children can do from early on. This seems to imply that the same processes are at work when understanding history and understanding morality, in historical and moral consciousness. The implication of this is that morality is part of understanding the significance of historical events or historical development.

There is another close connection between morality and history. The role of hindsight described above was based on the premise that morality was a human institution and we as human beings had the obligation to think carefully about our actions, not in the expectation that we might discover the will of God, the inevitable rise of the proletariat or the free market but in the expectation that we might be able to understand our actions better.

Jonathan Glover believes that morality needs to be humanized because there is no external moral law, stating:

Morality interpreted in this way becomes tentative, exploratory and partly empirical. It is exploratory on the model of Socrates. Our deepest values are not just obvious. They are not all on the surface. Questioning and argument are needed to discover some of them. But ethics is also exploratory in a different, more empirical, way. It includes seeing the consequences of living by a code of values. A human disaster shows the need to think again about the values (1999, p. 406).

Jonathan Glover is thinking about the moral disasters of the twentieth century, the two world wars, the genocide of the Jews and the class enemies in the Soviet state and China, the genocide in Rwanda. His idea is that we need to look carefully at these events and try to figure out what went wrong, these disasters are a strong indication that something was wrong with our values. This argument of his can be considered in the light of what has been said here about hindsight. We saw how reconfiguration works with hindsight and can change our evaluation of the meaning of an event. I suggest also that this reconfiguration works through the practical wisdom described earlier. Practical wisdom works through experience and recognising some features of a situation as more important than others. Reconfiguring events serves the practical wisdom by drawing out features of events that were not apparent at the time or did not become apparent or relevant until later. Sometimes it is even impossible to see these features of events in the present.

When understanding the meaning of history we use a moral yardstick. It seems to me right to describe the events Glover describes as moral disasters and we should earnestly try to learn from them. This happens through practical wisdom and hindsight. "Seeing the consequences of living by a code of values" happens through using hindsight and practical wisdom. We can reconfigure the code in the light of what later happened and come to appreciate the moral characteristics and the moral consequences of those disasters. If morality was not a part of understanding history then it would be meaningless to call the world wars moral disasters but this is not the case. Moral and historical consciousness are interwoven into each other.

There might be other ways that historical and moral consciousness were connected. One suggestion can be the idea of moral progress (Shiffrin, 2014). Moral development is moral progress. One possible reason for historical consciousness to view an historical course of events

as progress could be the moral progress that is a normal part of life for a human being. This is an optimistic view of historical development and a legacy of the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. It must be said that this is not a widely accepted view but I think we should not forget that the twentieth century is a history of progress in many areas such as science and technology and in some social and political matters as well. The invention and development of the welfare state could be considered as moral progress in politics. The German Chancellor Bismarck established the German welfare state in 1880s and he did it to prevent social unrest. It developed in the twentieth century into the most important factor of citizens' good life in Europe and other parts of the world. With hindsight we can see the providence in these decisions for the lives of ordinary people in the states that adopted those measures even though it was rather the interests of the state that originally justified them. If it is true that the development of the welfare state is a major moral progress for ordinary people then it should play a prominent role in evaluating and understanding the twentieth century. The reason is that understanding the significance of historical events or historical development necessarily involves moral evaluation.

### **Last words**

Morality is one of the most important institutions of human life. Every person undergoes development from youth to maturity that is moral. It seems that this development is in stages. Moral consciousness is awareness of the moral facts of human life and it seems that it interweaves with historical consciousness through hindsight. Hindsight enables us to achieve balance, even objectivity, in our moral views. It helps practical wisdom to understand and appreciate events in our own lives and history and interpret the meaning or significance of historical events or course of events. Thus, moral consciousness and historical consciousness are necessarily linked.

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