Teaching and Learning the Difficult Past
Comparative Perspectives

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When I taught high school social studies, my classes read one novel each grading period. As I was handing out books one spring quarter, a student raised his hand and asked, “Does someone die at the end of this one?” I cringed. In my hands were twenty copies of John Steinbeck’s *The Pearl*, which ends with bounty hunters shooting an infant. I suddenly realized what my students had already figured out: that I assigned edgy, dark material as a signal of authenticity, a way to distinguish myself from stodgy older colleagues—that I equated good teaching with the ability to shock students out of their complacency and impart the gravity of difficult histories. In short, that I wanted my students not only to understand course material, but to feel it, and believed that scenes of tragedy and suffering would elicit that feeling. Those assumptions were not necessarily wrong, but in hindsight I think they needed a more nuanced consideration than I had given them. Underlying my student’s question were important issues about the role of emotional sensation in the history classroom.

Much of the discourse around historical thinking concerns analytical skills, particularly the frameworks through which students interpret documents, weigh evidence, and recognize the constructed nature of the past (Wineburg, 2001). Less frequently discussed is the implicit role of student emotion (Rüsen, 2004; Seixas & Peck, 2004). When considering difficult or troubled histories, one could argue that dispositional outcomes are at least as significant as the acquisition of analytical skills, and that in the formation of moral sentiments, visceral feelings of pity, anger, or fear constitute both the means and the end of a lesson. Political theorists (Hansot, 2000; Nussbaum, 2015) have suggested that civic engagement depends on the development of affective bonds between citizens, as well as their inculation in the classroom. It seems imperative then to establish an interdependency between historical thinking and historical feeling.

The following chapter encourages an emotional understanding of the past, but not the sort of sentimental or sensational teaching that forecloses critical thought or fixates on suffering. Instead, it outlines a dialectic model of engagement drawn from concepts of moral imagination and the historical sublime. In this model, which I describe as sublime understanding, feelings of empathy impel students to more sophisticated historical thinking, encouraging them to look both backward and inward, to seek out historical knowledge, to weigh truth in personal terms, and to form ethical judgments in the context of critical introspection. Combining elements of imagination, emotional sensitivity, and moral conjecture, sublime understanding encourages a holistic, existential recognition of the past. After outlining the development of emotional history itself, I will examine its relationship to contemporary debates in philosophy and historical theory, taking incidents of the difficult past as examples. Finally, I will sketch the outlines of sublime understanding, the sensuous, emotional apprehension of the past, and offer some insight into its application in the classroom. Although mine is a theoretical rather than an empirical argument, general methods of implementation should be clear. The approaches set forth are relevant to any age but most easily used with high school or college students, through the use of discussion, debate, creative writing, or role-playing.

**Emotion and Historical Interpretation**

The role of emotion in historical interpretation is often entwined with its role in moral instruction. This convergence dates to the eighteenth century, when philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment, drawing on John Locke’s theories of experience and attention, argued that humans demonstrated an innate “moral sense,” that they are “capable of distinguishing good from evil through an instinctive grasp of the beauty of virtue, and inclined to the good through innate sympathy” (Halttunen, 1995, p. 305). David Hume, in arguing that morality “is more properly felt than judg’d of,” put emotional sensitivity at the core of ethics (p. 305). Francis Hutcheson wrote of a “sense of the soul we may call the sympathetick,” such that “when we see or know the pain, distress, or misery of any kind which another suffers, and turn our thoughts to it, we feel a strong sense of pity, and a great proneness to reliefe, where no contrary passion withstands us” (p. 305). Such claims sparked a humanitarian revolution, with condemnations of slavery, prisons, and domestic abuse rooted in a new language of pity and fellow feeling. If the eighteenth-century economy brought novel forms of suffering, it also expanded moral horizons in ways that made suffering unacceptable, introducing a nearly universal obligation to alleviate pain. The question became how to sensitize individuals to the plight of others, how to “teach virtue by softening the heart and eliciting tears of tender sympathy” (p. 305).

The answer was often sensationalism. From the lurid details of the penny press to the depictions of whipping in anti-slavery literature, one finds gratuitous descriptions of suffering and shocking images of violence—a veritable “pornography of pain”—undergirding the era’s humanitarian
causes. These aesthetic conventions excited readers’ compassion and reinforced their sense of propriety, but also titillated them with a taste of the taboo, a type of voyeurism which, for some, raised “serious doubts about the underlying virtue of [the] exercise” (Haltunen, 1995, p. 308). Thus ran the line from emotional to moral engagement—taut with compassion, fraught with transgression.

Eighteenth-century writers also recognized the power of the emotions in historical thinking. Hume (1751) believed that history would “strengthen virtue” when it exposed readers to the past in rich, imaginative terms and accentuated the moral choices that historical actors faced. Confronted with the decisions of their predecessors, he wrote, readers would naturally feel “some new impression of affection or disgust, esteem or contempt, approbation or blame” and pronounce past actions “criminal or virtuous” (pp. 205–206). For Hume, moral judgment was a vital function of historical thinking, since it heightened readers’ sentiments and enlarged their souls through an immersive portrayal of the past (Farr, 1978).

Edmund Burke (1767) reached similar conclusions, though with some important caveats. For instance, whereas Hume assumed that an objective rendering of events was enough to arouse sympathy with historical actors—insisting that “all the circumstances and relations must be previously known” to reach a fair appraisal—Burke stressed the importance of selective evidence in crafting a narrative. Historical writing depended on “obscurity,” meaning elements of mystery, suspense, irony, and suggestion. “It is one thing to make an idea clear,” he wrote, “and another to make it affecting to the imagination” (p. 101). For Burke, it was tragedy that made history most compelling. He acknowledged the moral ambiguities underlying this fascination, conceding that the reader’s “delight” in suffering should prompt “no small uneasiness” (pp. 72–73). Nevertheless, he saw it as the most effective means of moral awakening.

History and imagination became even more entangled during the nineteenth century, when Romantic aesthetics of emotion and self-realization reached their apex. It was during this period that Thomas Carlyle praised the historical fiction of Sir Walter Scott, which taught “that the bygone ages of the world were actually filled by living men, not by protocols, state papers, controversies and abstractions” (Southgate, 1996, p. 128). For Carlyle, historical understanding was more than the analysis of dusty documents. True history was suffused with sensation and intuitive imagination, a reliving of visceral experience. Thus, its accuracy and value depended on the moral sensitivity of the present. Friedrich Nietzsche (1874/1980) was equally suspicious of facts overwhelming feeling. In a typical remark, he wrote,

Historical education is wholesome and promising for the future only in the service of a powerful new life-giving influence. That is, only when it is ruled and guided by a higher power and does not itself rule and guide. History, so far as it serves life, serves an unhistorical power.

For the Romantics, one studied the past not out of dusty antiquarianism but as a means to personal self-realization.

Yet eventually this “life-giving influence” would fall out of favor. By the end of the nineteenth century and through much of the twentieth, historians suppressed the feelings their narratives engendered, hoping to professionalize the field by framing history as a social science capable of objectively rendering the past (Novick, 1988). Collecting and arranging sufficient evidence, the thinking ran, would reveal dispassionate truth. Emotions did not enter into it.

Subjectivity reappeared during the 1970s and 1980s, but in forms less oriented to the reader’s emotions. It was integral to European social history, for instance, the stories of peasants, women, and other groups who subverted dominant historical narratives. Drawing on the Annales school of 1940s and 1950s French history, writers began to reconstruct the forgotten worldviews of cat murderers and village heretics, opening a premodern world of strange customs and suppressed beliefs (Darnton, 1984; Ginzburg, 1982). Social history reminded readers of “the irreducibility of individual persons to the rules of large-scale systems” and called into question subtexts of progress and inevitability that underlay much historical writing (Phillips, 2013, p. 199). Some critics found European social history overly specific, “concerned more with [colorful] description than with explanation”; or, conversely, as essentialist, implying a “consensus culture of entire periods of life” (Wickberg, 2007, pp. 673–675). It also posed an epistemological problem, for how could modern readers relate to a radically different past, in which thoughts and feelings themselves seemed to be arbitrary constructions rather than innate human characteristics? After all, what people feel, and the ability of the documentary record to preserve those feelings, are complicated issues (Peters, 1973, pp. 509–510). When studies heightened the differences between past and present, they made the distance seem unbridgeable. The more varied history appeared, the less relatable it became.

A second wave of subjectivity, drawn from postmodern literary theory, presented even more difficult problems. Postmodernists pointed out that historians followed generic plot structures which determined their presentation and interpretation of evidence. Thus, they concluded, the truth of historical documents, like that of literary texts, depended on meaning inscribed during retelling but independent of the actual circumstances of its creation. For postmodernists, there seemed to be no firm line between historical fact and literary fiction (White, 1973). Historians responded forcefully to the postmodern critique. They acknowledged that the field
was not purely objective—that good history interweaves storytelling with truth claims that are subject to correction—but refused to deny altogether the existence of truth or one's ability to apprehend the past. Artifacts provided one basis for counterargument, since physical records were “not mere discourse on other discourses ... however socially constructed, [they] reach out to the world and give a reasonably true description of its contents.” Another basis was personal experience, which, despite tricks of memory or perception, could establish connections with reality through time and space (Appleby, Hunt, & Jacob, 1994, pp. 249-250).

Experience can play a legitimate role in historical interpretation, but it brings us back to the conundrum of historically constructed thoughts and feelings, first raised by European social historians. What part should individual experience play in a collective narrative? How can we grasp the experience of others, especially people from the past, who perceived and acted differently than we do? To answer these questions, one needs to remember that historical thinking can be, and perhaps must be, a moral enterprise, and therefore to examine its relationship with moral philosophy, which has wrestled with similar questions of subjectivity and relativism.

Moral Philosophy and Historical Interpretation

Philosophers have begun to recognize that empathy, imagination, and metaphor are not mere flights of fancy but in fact are integral to moral reasoning. Because human beings define moral terms (such as justice or obligation) and frame moral dilemmas (such as acceptable limits on freedom) through exemplification, and because circumstances rarely conform to a rigid set of rules, determining right and wrong in daily life is often an imaginative exercise. Conceiving of it as such allows the individual to step back from the sterile, confusing, and conflicted process of rule-following “to discern what is important in any situation or relationship and to act wisely in light of our discernment” (Johnson, 1993, p. 5). In short, moral imagination cultivates sensitivity and responsibility rather than inflexibility and dependency. It provides a space for supposition and experimentation with new identities. It navigates between absolutism and relativism to nurture both common moral judgments and introspective self-reliance. It preserves the essence of emotivism—Hume’s contention that moral judgments ultimately derive from how we feel about things—while infusing elements of communitarian and existentialist thought. These latter additions merit discussion because they put moral questions in direct conversation with history, underscoring the confluence of imagination, emotion, and historical thinking while also addressing the uncertain relationship between past and present.

Writing from the communitarian perspective, which advocates social bonds and a shared moral sensibility, Alasdair MacIntyre (2007) has sharply criticized Hume’s emotivism. He argues that if ethical choices are “nothing but ... expressions of attitude or feelings” then there exist no grounds for moral community or reasoned debate, a breakdown which he sees at the heart of today’s culture wars (p. 12). MacIntyre contends that the remedy is not a return to imposed orthodoxies but instead an intercourse based on mutual sympathy and moral imagination. Notably, he outlines his case in historical terms. “In successfully identifying and understanding what someone else is doing,” MacIntyre writes, we place “a particular episode in the context of a set of narrative histories, histories both of the individuals concerned and of the settings in which they act and suffer.” He continues:

Man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal ... But the key question for men is not about their own authorship; I can only answer the question “What am I to do?” if I can answer the prior question “Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?” We enter human society, that is, with one or more imputed characters—roles into which we have been drafted—and we have to learn what they are in order to be able to understand how others respond to us and how our responses to them are apt to be construed.

For MacIntyre, storytelling provides a moral foundation because it translates the vitality of individual sentiments into a social conversation. “I am not only accountable,” he observes,

I am one who can always ask others for an account, who can put others to the question. I am part of their story, as they are part of mine ... Pondering the differences between your account of what I did and my account of what I did, and vice versa, these are essential constituents of all but the very simplest and basest of narratives.

Thus, joint deliberation becomes the basis for moral discernment and a healthy democratic society.

MacIntyre attributes the same flaws to existentialism as he does to emotivism; from his perspective, each conceives of the individual as autonomous, subjective, ahistorical, and thus antisocial. He differentiates the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre from his own almost entirely on their ideas of narrative. For Sartre, he writes,

... to present human life in the form of a narrative is always to falsify it ... Human life is composed of discrete actions which lead nowhere, which have no order; the story-teller imposes on human events retrospectively an order which they did not have while they were lived.

(MacIntyre, 2007, p. 214)
Although this disjointedness produces malaise, for Sartre it also opens the possibility of the transcendent self, the individual exercising moral responsibility irrespective of context. “Refusal of the inauthenticity of conventionalized social relationships” becomes the basis of integrity in Sartre’s writing, to the point that personhood exists outside of social or historical position (p. 214). Whatever the vagaries of circumstance, one’s actions and choices are inescapably one’s own. Such a stance may preclude collective moral deliberation, as MacIntyre claims, but it is precisely existentialism’s ahistorical quality that makes it a valuable tool for history students.

Consider a basic existentialist question: Why do others engage in acts of heroism or villainy, and what would I do in their place? Applied to actors of the past, simply posing the question has the potential to undermine sentimental or sensational histories. It complicates predictable pieties about suffering and perseverance, for example, or the evils of intolerance—prescriptive lessons in which a student “can easily come to think that his conscience is not on the line,” that “the common good might be achieved without the virtue of integrity,” that he is entitled to thoughts and feelings without the work of moral reckoning (Bromwich, 2014, pp. 26, 29). Insofar as sentimentality depends on predetermined moral stances, it positions the student above his subject, using the advantage of hindsight to create an illusion of moral clarity. In the process, it imparts a smug pity and cheap wisdom that demands little understanding of the past and only superficial adherence to moral tenets of the present, a shallow conventionality that Sartre characterizes as bad faith.

An existential stance can also preclude the simple moral arithmetics that often creeps into ethical dilemmas. A common debate in American history classes is whether the United States should have dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Many students approach this topic as a math problem, weighing Japanese against American lives—or perhaps American lives against American principles—in order to arrive at an answer on one side or the other. In my experience, they recognize that emotion should somehow inform their decision but struggle to integrate their facts and feelings. Some students base answers on vindictiveness or compassion, falling prey to sentimentalism, while others affect an air of steely resolve, an emotional restraint that seems appropriate to the gravity of the exercise but can itself be an example of bad faith. Rather than explaining what they would do and why, the latter group reframes the question in more abstract terms—what should I do, for example, or what would one do? By calling forth objective answers to a subjective question, these shifts represent subtle acts of moral abdication. Toughness, tenderness, or sobriety are all valid responses to the exercise of military power, but basing the discussion on normative expectations or abstract principles lessens individual responsibility and marginalizes the elements of uncertainty and humility inherent to historical understanding. Students must feel while they think. At the very least, by framing past events as ethical dilemmas existentialism frightens them with personal meaning.

Personal meaning, in turn, can impel students toward a richer rendering of the past itself, encouraging them to seek out relevant details and fill in context, and perhaps to wrestle with the interpretive questions that animate professional historical practice. Writing about moral reasoning, John Kekes (2005) praises the role of imagination in problem solving, non-linear thought, counterfactuals, and ethical decision-making. Needless to say, the same techniques form the basis for historical interpretation. Combining thought and feeling conjures a past that cannot be neatly aligned with present perspectives but neither is unknowably remote or even confined to explanation on its own terms. Instead, it lures students into a past both strange and familiar, contingent, uncertain, and debatable—a moral conversation or confrontation in which students can put historical actors to the question, beginning the lesson with Sartre but ending it with MacIntyre.

Yet, as we have seen, it is very difficult to comprehend a worldview remote from one’s own. Confronted with moral dilemmas, how can one weigh the possibilities that were actually available to historical actors? Is it a fallacy to judge the past by the standards of the present, of course, but so too is it to assume that historical figures always fulfilled their moral capacity, that time absolves all sins, or that human beings lack any common moral sense across eras. Determining our own moral conduct requires a fair measurement of those who came before; it cannot abide simplistic invocations of “a different time” beyond our reach. Imagination provides the answer to this quandary. Rather than judging others “by compiling a list of their more important publicly observable actions,” Kekes (2005) suggests that students seek out contexts, “re-create the possibilities particular agents have faced,” and “[ascertain] both the possibilities that were available to the agents and the possibilities the agents believed themselves to have” (p. 173). The layers of interpretation in that sentence indicate the complexity of the endeavor, but also its conceptual value.

Historians themselves struggle to discern moral culpability, which profoundly affects their interpretations. An example is the debate between David Brion Davis and Thomas Haskell over the relationship between abolitionism and the market economy during the nineteenth century. Davis (1992) was one of the first historians to argue that anti-slavery activism salved the conscience of Northern capitalists, allowing them to overlook the oppression of their own workers. Moral evasion was not their stated intent, he acknowledged, but operated as an insidious form of false consciousness, a self-deception driven by economic interest and obvious only in hindsight. Haskell sharply disagreed that self-deception was at work, and whether or not one finds his counter-argument compelling, it is important to note his reliance on imaginative scenarios.
Haskell (1992) writes that historians must assess “humane values and acts” without reducing them to mere “epiphenomena”—in this case, without assuming that capitalist economics necessarily outweighed stated moral imperatives. “In the midst of a great change in moral sensibility,” he writes, “the fact that abolitionists could have been more concerned with the plight of the free laborer [than they were] does not justify the speculation that they really knew they should be and only failed to be because they deceived themselves.” Haskell asks readers to pretend that fifty years from now all the world becomes vegetarian. Surely our descendants would wonder, aghast, at how today’s carnivores accepted “such an arbitrary line between human misery and the misery of nonhuman, but certainly sentient, creatures.” Indeed, they may erroneously conclude that “our comparatively intense concern for oppressed human beings . . . [provided] a certain moral insulation to even more ruthless predatory practices” against animals. In doing so, however, they would be making the same mistake that Davis does. One cannot say, simply because someone expresses moral objection to a practice, that “others must know in their hearts that it is wrong and can only maintain a clear conscience by deceiving themselves,” nor that projects to alleviate other forms of suffering constitute a mere diversion from some deeper guilt. “The limits of moral responsibility have to be drawn somewhere,” writes Haskell (1992),

and that “somewhere” will always fall far short of much pain and suffering that we could do something to alleviate . . . Whatever limits we do set can therefore always be challenged and made to look arbitrary or “selective” by insistent questioning—for they are actually nothing more than conventions.

(pp. 125–126)

The technical aspects of Davis and Haskell’s exchange might be out of reach for middle or high school students, but interpretations of intentionality are not. At the heart of their dispute is the same question that divided Sartre and MacIntyre: To what degree does circumstance absolve shortcomings? And, in this case, how do we account for outliers, the saints or radicals who pointed out wrongdoing before it was widely denounced? For if it is often unfair to claim (as Davis does) that historical subjects should have known, it is just as unfair to claim that they could never have known. Put differently, it might be accurate to say that most historical subjects operated within arbitrary but defensible ranges of moral latitude . . . but that seems profoundly unsatisfying.

Sublime Understanding

Theorists have begun to reevaluate the role of subjectivity in historical writing. They do so not in the belief that truth is purely relative or artificial, as postmodernists claim, nor that a student’s feelings should outweigh considerations of documentary evidence. Instead, they reclaim personal experience as a pathway to the past, reviving narrative elements designed to arouse imagination and evoke fellow-feeling, and combining them with the existentialism underlying much twentieth-century philosophy. These efforts result in a sort of metacognitive two-ness, in which history becomes an uncertain, unsettling, even uncanny way to discover the world. Note the bifurcated categories and transcendent feelings outlined in recent works of historical theory. Phillips (2013) characterizes “present historical truth as a conflict between immediacy and distanciation” (p. 80). Wickberg (2007) describes an “integration of ideas and emotions . . . [in] a direct sensuous apprehension of thought” (p. 668). Ankersmit (2005) writes of a simultaneous “discovery” and “recovery” of the past, beginning with a “moment of loss,” when one recognizes “a reality that has somehow ‘broken off’ from a timeless present,” and culminating with a “moment of desire or love,” when one “[transcends] the barriers between past and present.” By combining these elements—which we might designate historical thinking and historical feeling—Ankersmit argues that one can achieve the “sublimity” of true understanding (p. 9). Synthesis of the two comprises the central tenet of the historical sublime, of knowing the past emotionally as well as intellectually.

To achieve sublimity, historians have returned to works of European social history and to recent scholarship on psychological trauma. From social history there has been renewed attention to sensibilities, the feelings and worldviews that suffuse an era. Establishing the emotional landscape of ages past requires one to “dig beneath the social actions and apparent content of sources to the ground upon which those sources stand: the emotional, intellectual, aesthetic, and moral dispositions of the persons who created them” (Wickberg, 2007, p. 662). This sort of intellectual excavation necessarily relies on “generalized values and modes of perception and feeling” that affect the historian as well as his or her subjects (p. 669). Its most notable proponent was Johan Huizinga, whose Waning of the Middle Ages (1924) sought to capture the experience of medieval living. Huizinga infused personal, even preternatural qualities into his writing, arguing that one could not understand the subject from archival work alone, but needed to “walk across meadows and hills, until he can also see the sun shining in the past” (Otterspeer, 2010, p. 136). Indeed, Huizinga did not mind small anachronisms in history books, provided that they appealed to the reader’s sensitivity and revealed deeper truths about the spirit of the age. “It was this belief in passion that led him . . . to emphasize direct contact with the past,” which he compared to “a moment’s drunkenness” (Otterspeer, 2010, p. 137).

Historians have also sought sublimity through the discourse of trauma, a therapeutic rhetoric in which narration validates personal experience and encourages self-realization. Therapeutic language is not an entirely new in teaching the difficult past. Fifty years ago, Theodor Adorno (1966/2003) declared “critical self-reflection” the paramount form of
education after the Holocaust. By “[turning] to the subject,” Adorno wrote, “one must come to know the mechanisms that render people capable of such deeds [as genocide], must reveal these mechanisms to them, and strive, by awakening a general awareness of those mechanisms, to prevent people from becoming so again” (pp. 20–21). Essentially, he argued, to inoculate themselves against Nazism, students must imagine the social conditions that allowed it to flourish, transforming therapeutic self-knowledge (drawn from Freud) into an antidote against structural violence. Yet Adorno underplayed the implications of this imagined connection with the past. Recent studies go further, invoking concepts such as collective memory and personal testimony to replace the public, ostensibly objective rhetoric of history with the textured but private rhetoric of memory, a subjective turn that relies on elements of the sublime (Ankersmit, 2003, p. 4). For example, Felman and Laub (1992) write that bearing witness to the difficult past provides “not simply a testimony to a private life, but a point of conflation between text and life, a textual testimony that can penetrate us like an actual life.” For those who recount a horrific event, they argue, “there is only one comfort: its alignment with the horror experienced by previous witnesses” (p. 2, italics in the original). For Felman and Laub, then, affirmations of individual experience derive authority from a trans-historical communion with other sufferers, an imagined moment of shared sensation.

Sublime understanding also leads to what Phillips (2013) describes as “untutored questions,” those that spring naturally from imaginative experience. After reading about the experience of Jewish women in Nazi Germany, for instance, students might wonder, “How did they react? How did they negotiate the ever-building tensions? What were their options?” By making history more vivid, these questions naturally impel students to seek answers, which in turn prompt comparisons to their own reactions and experiences. This process offers “an unusual sense of closeness to historical experience . . . [giving] weight to broader, less technical inquiries that are very compelling” (p. 191). Reddy (2001) goes further, arguing that historical inquiry should never begin with imposed categories of race, class, or gender, but simply by asking, “Who suffers? Is the suffering an unavoidable consequence of emotional navigation or does this suffering help to shore up a restrictive emotional regime? That is, is this suffering a tragedy or an injustice?” “In developing specific answers to these questions,” he contends, “identities, the cultural field, and political institutions come back into play as historical phenomena, but not as independent theoretical entities” (p. 130).

Visceral experience and untutored questions may provide the fullest initiation into historical study, but what of the tendency to collapse past and present sensibilities, to apply one’s own feelings to an era beyond their reach? Historians have begun to push back on that issue as well. Fulbrook (2002), for instance, likens a completely inaccessible past to “the [absurd]

notion that the histories of particular groups or topics can only be written by historians belonging to . . . the group or topic about which they are writing.” As she points out, such an assumption relies on painfully narrow interpretations of group identity and authenticity, which ultimately deny the possibility of common humanity (pp. 167–168). Having established at least a normative basis for historical feeling, then, Fulbrook differentiates between two types of feeling: sympathy, in which the historian identifies directly with historical actors, and empathy, in which the historian tries to understand past experiences at a slight remove from his or her own emotions. This is a helpful distinction insofar as sympathy alone may lead to uncritical sensationalism or sentimentalism. Unfortunately, Fulbrook takes it a step too far, dismissing the role of sympathy altogether. Both sympathy and empathy are integral to understanding the past. Achieving the historical sublime involves progress from one of these categories to the next, from blind engagement to measured knowledge, but never the abandonment of a student’s sense of personal judgment. Put another way, students’ emotions should lead to a dawning recognition of the constraints that people faced but they should not, as Fulbrook contends, become “a neutral tool . . . quite unrelated to that of sympathy” (p. 167). By that logic, empathy would almost invariably lead to moral exoneration.

Moral reckoning is inescapably inscribed in historical analysis, and to forego judgment altogether is to “confer forgiveness unjustly” to those in bygone eras (Gaskell, 2013, p. 40). If the historian’s task is to “[enable] the people of the past to be seen as exercising moral agency,” and in the process to develop the student’s own moral agency, imagination should lead to a fair appraisal but never to neutrality (Wertz, 2000, p. 69). To achieve sublime understanding, to truly feel the past, students must interact with history on its own terms as well as on theirs. They must incorporate documentary evidence, tentative truth-claims, and dialectic challenges to resist charges of pure subjectivity, but so too must they ask themselves fundamental questions about responsibility, courage, and freedom. Goethe once quipped, “No one can make judgments on history who has not experienced it in himself” (Safranski, 2014, p. 8). Once someone has experienced it, however, even imaginatively, making judgments seems morally incumbent. Notes Phillips (2013):

The real mark of the sentimentalist is not that he or she feels things more acutely . . . but that he takes feelings more seriously—others’ as well as his own. In his social sympathies as well as in matters of self-scrutiny, the sentimentalist trusts himself to an ethical gauge drawn in part from reflection on his own inward state.

(p. 193)

Learning history is not about hoarding facts. Nor is it merely the application of analytical skills. Nor is it a morality tale, with pat lessons about
conventional behavior. To learn history, and especially difficult histories, is to seek out personhood across the ages, to become sensitized to the differences between past and present or between others and oneself. Exposure to ethical quandaries confronts students with a challenge to their self-conception, imparting curiosity, discontent, and humility; it activates emotions to increase their self-awareness. The types of questions that lead to these feelings are almost limitless. What constitutes a legitimate threat to national interests or human rights? How can leaders wield power responsibly? How should policymakers weigh competing goods? What level of sacrifice does justice demand? In answering them, however, students cannot simply celebrate or indict people of the past. They must understand them in their time and place and wrestle with the same quandaries. They must explore their responsibilities and hopes as well as their hubris. And if they would make different decisions in hindsight, they must realize that future generations will judge them by the same standard.

References


