

Political Moralists in King Arthur's Court

The Thesis: Judging past societies by our own moral standards is an essential part of taking history seriously in our moral and political thought.

The Challengers:

Bernard Williams: “Political moralism, particularly in its Kantian forms, has a universalistic tendency which encourages it to inform past societies about their failings. **It is not that these judgments are, exactly, meaningless** – one can imagine oneself as Kant at the court of King Arthur if one wants to – **but they are useless and do not help one to understand anything.**” (*In the Beginning Was the Deed*, p. 10)

R.G. Collingwood: “We ought not to call it [the past] either better than the present or worse; for we are not called upon to choose it or to reject it, to like it or dislike it, to approve it or condemn it, but simply to accept it.” (Quoted in *In the Beginning Was the Deed*, p. 67)

I. History and Relativism

Two Kinds of Relativism:

Vulgar Relativism: Whenever you encounter a cultural group with differing moral standards, whatever they think is right for them, and whatever your group thinks is right for you, and there are no independent standards which apply to both groups.

Relativism of Distance: Whenever you consider the practices of a cultural group that you cannot interact with, there is no practical point to using your own moral standards to judge their behavior.

Williams’s Argument: *Vulgar relativism* is impossible because cultural boundaries are not given independently of practical judgments, and such judgments require evaluating others by our own standards. Thus, for contemporary societies, it is always early or too late for relativism. For past societies, however, the *relativism of distance* is always an option. Moreover, it is often the best option because if we’re too interested in judging the past by present standards, we will fail to understand how past social arrangements made sense to the people at that time.

II. Reason and Commitment

Case 1, *Judicial Fashion*: By encountering the historical tradition of judges wearing powdered wigs, we can come to see the historical contingency of our own practices of judicial fashion. Recognizing this contingency leaves us with the option of retaining our current practice.

Lesson: *We can wholeheartedly adopt standards of fashion while regarding them as mere contingencies of history.*

Case 2, *Slavery*: By encountering the historical tradition of race-based slavery, we can come to see the historical contingency of our own practices of recognizing individual liberty. Here maintaining our current practice is not optional – it is required.

Lesson: *Sincerely maintaining our moral judgments requires seeing them as binding, independently of the fashion of the moment.*

III. Politics and King Arthur's Court

Twain's Arthur: *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* is neither an exercise in valorizing the modern over the medieval, nor a romantic defense of the past. Rather, Twain uses this fictitious encounter between the past and the present to shine a critical light on both societies.

History's Arthur: Accounts of Arthurian 'history' were constructed for explicitly political purposes (e.g. Geoffrey of Monmouth, Edward I).

IV. Interacting With the Past

Political Appeals to the Past: We are faced with the past insofar as we or our contemporaries take it as a model to strive for or as a standard against which to judge present societies. As with our encounters with present societies, we can only navigate these practical questions by making judgments using our own moral standards.

The Political Legacy of the Past: Our actions and judgments are neither simply subsequent to nor simply the result of the past – they are always, in part, a *response*. Thus we do interact with the past, if only in a one-sided way. The moral quality of existing arrangements is influenced by the moral quality of the prior conditions from which they arose. Thus we cannot rightly judge the present without judging the past.

V. Explaining the Errors of the Past

Explaining Difference: Both the political moralist and Williams's 'realist' must explain why present political standards are different from those of the past. Both accounts will involve identifying false empirical beliefs about, e.g, the capacities of people of different genders, races, classes, or cultural groups. And both will appeal to relevant differences in circumstances.

Explaining Error: The political moralist has the additional burden of explaining errors in moral judgment. But the political moralist's account of error should be based on a Millian account of contingent and incomplete moral progress, not a Kantian or Hegelian triumphalism.

VI. Conclusion

Four ways in which judging past societies by present moral standards is an essential part of taking history seriously:

- Taking our moral standards to be applicable to the past is a necessary consequence of a sincere commitment to those standards.
- Applying our moral standards to the past is important insofar as we take the past as a source of warning and inspiration in deciding on courses of action in the here and now.
- Applying our moral standards to the past is necessary to properly evaluate where we are now – the present is a product of the past, and so how things stand morally now depends in part on how things stood morally then.
- Applying our moral standards to the past is a useful way of testing those standards and of testing whether we are correctly applying them in the here and now.