

# Historians and Moral Judgment

## The Question

Should historians make moral judgments about the past? This question has divided the profession for generations. Some argue that judging past actors by present standards is anachronistic and unscholarly. Others contend that avoiding moral evaluation is itself a moral choice—one that can normalize atrocity.

## Arguments Against Moral Judgment

### The Historicist Position

Historicism holds that each era must be understood on its own terms. German historian Leopold von Ranke famously sought to describe the past “as it actually was” (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*), implying that the historian’s task is explanation, not evaluation.

Key arguments:

- **Context matters** - People in the past operated under different beliefs, constraints, and information
- **Humility** - Future generations will likely judge us harshly for things we consider normal
- **Scholarly detachment** - Moralizing can distort analysis by flattening complexity

### The Problem of Anachronism

Judging a 16th-century colonizer by 21st-century human rights standards may reveal more about our values than about the past. Historical actors cannot be held to standards they never encountered.

## Arguments For Moral Judgment

### The Inevitability of Values

Complete objectivity is impossible. The very choice of what to study reflects values. A historian who writes about slavery without condemning it implicitly suggests it was morally acceptable—or at least unremarkable.

### Atrocity and Silence

Some events demand moral response. The Holocaust, genocides, and systematic oppression cannot be described in neutral language without appearing to excuse them. As historian Peter Novick asked: can we write about Auschwitz with the same detachment as the price of wheat?

### Learning from the Past

If history teaches nothing, why study it? Moral evaluation helps us understand how ordinary people participated in extraordinary evil—and how we might recognize similar dynamics in our own time.

## A Middle Path

Most contemporary historians navigate between these poles:

1. **Understand before judging** - Explain why people acted as they did before evaluating their actions
2. **Distinguish between actors** - Not everyone in the past had the same options or information
3. **Acknowledge complexity** - People can be perpetrators in one context and victims in another
4. **Be explicit about standards** - Make clear when you're applying contemporary frameworks
5. **Invite reflection** - Help readers think critically, not just accept conclusions

## Case Study: Confederate Monuments

The debate over Confederate monuments illustrates these tensions. Defenders argue the statues represent “heritage” and historical memory. Critics note that most were erected during Jim Crow to intimidate Black citizens and glorify white supremacy.

Both historical context and moral evaluation inform this debate: - **Historical question:** When and why were these monuments built? - **Moral question:** Should public spaces honor those who fought to preserve slavery?

Understanding the history doesn’t automatically resolve the moral question—but it enriches the conversation.

## Conclusion

Historians cannot escape moral judgment; they can only be more or less thoughtful about it. The best historical writing combines rigorous contextual analysis with honest engagement with ethical implications—always acknowledging the limits of both.