

Daniel Levy, 08/12/19, History Debating

Should we judge historical figures by the morals of today?

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, and today I'll be arguing that we should NOT judge historical figures by the morals of today. My points will be that peoples' morals are a product of their society and so to be brought up with them isn't their fault, and that in any case judging historical figures from *one* approach- the moral approach- is inaccurate and hinders understanding. I'll be arguing using historical examples and moral philosophy.

My first point is that people and their morals are a product of their society. It may be fair to condemn an amoral society but it isn't fair to judge a member of that society for morals they were brought up and grew up with.

Quote "Women should leave reasoning to men, and are not fit for important jobs."
Unquote. That was the view of Immanuel Kant, a Prussian in the 18th century. By today's standards, that view is offensive and wrong, but such views were orthodoxy in his time. We can see that our values and views today cannot be compared with those of another era: what was orthodox and normative for them was so for them. What is so for us is for us. This position is called moral relativism- and it is the one I argue today.

How do we acquire morals? Firstly, I don't think people are born with them. The Hitler Youth, founded in 1922, is evidence that young people generally accept the values they are brought up with- a generation were indoctrinated into holding a certain set of values that are radically different from those Germans hold today. And this shows us that our morals are acquired by experiences, upbringing, and the people around us. They aren't constant throughout generations.

We can look at slavery in the Early and Late Modern Eras as a prime example of this. In the 17th and early 18th centuries, Britain profited vastly from it and there was no opprobrium attached to rape, torture, and beating slaves to death. But from the late 18th century onwards, perceptions changed drastically, and people condemned it.

In both eras, humans had the same anatomy and so the same capacity to think and judge. What changed then were the societies which they lived in and the morals of those societies. Since standards of morality varies throughout societies and thus history, we cannot judge historical figures by a single moral standard- our standard- and we have to judge them *relative* to the moral standard of their society. And this doesn't mean we reject morality and social justice, far from it; it just means we judge it in a different way. For example, H. P. Lovecraft held absurdly racist views even for his time and so we can judge him for them because we are doing so relative to the views of his society.

My second point is that we need to examine the role of morals in judging historical figures overall and consider other factors, like ability, in judgement. I know that the motion is more focussed on the judgement of morals by today's standards or other standards, but I think the idea of judgement of historical figures is so broad that we can't discuss it whilst limiting the discussion to one factor.

Let's look at the Louis XIV, Louis the Great, the epitome of the absolutist centraliser- he believed in total despotism and religious intolerance (as seen in his revocation of the Edict of Nantes). Surely none of those values are great? Even if they were standard beliefs in his society, holding them doesn't merit greatness. But we call him Great because of his *ability*- his skill as a monarch and his impact on the power of France.

By confiscating his epithet due to his morals people who don't know who he is may hear his name and think him to be an average or insignificant king, just one Louis in a line of 18, which hinders understanding- precisely the opposite of what you want to do when judging historical figures.

And you can apply this logic to any great monarch throughout history. To judge historical figures based on today's morals is therefore impractical, because to judge anyone throughout history we have to approach it from more than one angle.

To conclude, I believe that we shouldn't judge historical figures by the morals of today, because we should judge them to relative to their societies and by other factors. Thank you for listening.