

Weak Historicism: On Hierarchies of Intellectual Virtues and Goods

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Abstract: This article seeks to reconcile a historicist sensitivity to how intellectually virtuous behavior is shaped by historical contexts with a non-relativist account of historical scholarship. To that end, it distinguishes between *hierarchies of intellectual virtues* and *hierarchies of intellectual goods*. The first hierarchy rejects a one-size-fits-all model of historical virtuousness in favor of a model that allows for significant varieties between the relative weight that historians must assign to intellectual virtues in order to acquire justified historical understanding. It grounds such differences, not on the historians' interests or preferences, but on their historiographical situations, so that hierarchies of virtues are a function of the demands that historiographical situations (defined as interplays of genre, research question, and state of scholarship) make upon historians. Likewise, the second hierarchy allows for the pursuit of various intellectual goods, but banishes the specter of relativism by treating historical understanding as an intellectual good that is constitutive of historical scholarship and therefore deserves priority over alternative goods. The position that emerges from this is classified as a form of *weak historicism*.

Keywords: virtue epistemology, intellectual virtues, epistemic virtues, intellectual goods, historical understanding, historicism

Introduction

Imagine two historians engaged in complex scholarly research. One of them is at work on a Leopold von Ranke biography; the other one participates in a project aimed at reconstruction of national accounts (that is, comprehensive measurements of production, income, and expenditure activities) in various European countries in the nineteenth century. Both historians face a daunting task, but for different reasons. The

Ranke scholar finds herself confronted with a vast amount of specialized literature on Ranke's youth, Lutheran background, appointment at Berlin, teaching activities, philosophical outlook, archival trips to Venice, and involvement in the Bavarian Academy of Sciences and Humanities. Drawing on this wealth of literature, she writes a biography that aims to tie together the strands of Ranke's life and work, realizing that such a work of synthesis not only requires thorough familiarity with the existing literature, but also makes significant demands on her imaginative power, insight, and judgment. The second historian, by contrast, has nothing to synthesize. In his newly emerging field of research, all attention is focused on a quest for data that will allow for statistical generalization. Whereas arable farming and stockbreeding are relatively well-documented economic sectors, accurate data about horticultural production in the nineteenth century are notoriously rare.¹ Fortunately, this second historian has stumbled across some wonderfully detailed business accounts kept by Flemish fruit and vegetable growers. His task, then, is to distill from this material the relevant production and expenditure data, to estimate the growers' market share through comparison with other horticultural farms in the country, and to calculate on this basis, with the highest possible reliability, the sector's contribution to Belgium's gross domestic product.

Imagine, furthermore, that both of these research projects figure as case-studies in a philosophical investigation of intellectual virtuousness. Given that virtue epistemologists are nowadays increasingly interested, not merely in simple "the cat is on the mat" sorts of knowledge, but also in such complex forms of understanding as required for appreciating Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* or for grasping the nuances of another person's character, this thought experiment is not entirely unrealistic. If such virtue epistemologists as Linda Zagzebski, Robert C. Roberts, and W. Jay Wood argue that intellectual virtues are especially relevant to "high-end kinds of knowledge like scientific discoveries, the subtle understanding of difficult texts, [and] moral self-knowledge,"² they might do worse than examine the intellectual

¹ Jan-Pieter Smits, Edwin Horlings, and Jan Luiten van Zanden, "Sprekende cijfers! De historische nationale rekeningen van Nederland, 1807-1913", *NEHA-Jaarboek*, 62 (1999), 59.

² Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood, *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), p. 8. Linda Zagzebski makes a similar point in her "Recovering Understanding" in Matthias Steup (ed.), *Knowledge, Truth, and Duty: Essays on Epistemic Justification, Responsibility, and Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 235-251. See also Wayne D. Riggs, "Understanding 'Virtue' and the Virtue of Understanding", in Michael DePaul and Linda Zagzebski (eds.), *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology* (Oxford:

virtues exercised by historians engaged in Ranke biographies or working on historical national accounts. So imagine that these philosophers ask: Which intellectual virtues do the Ranke biographer and the student of Flemish horticultural returns have to practice in order to make a worthwhile contribution to historical scholarship? Must they practice the same set of intellectual virtues, in the same order, and to the same degree? Or do these two historians have to practice different kinds of intellectually virtuous behavior in order to contribute to a better understanding of the past?

Recent scholarship in historiography, or the study of how historians study the past, has lent a certain urgency to these questions. It has been argued that historians do not at all agree about what counts as intellectually virtuous behavior. A case has been made that different traditions of historical scholarship – for example, economic history as practiced by the student of nineteenth-century Belgian national accounts and intellectual history as represented by Ranke’s biographer – may have rather different perceptions of the sort of intellectual behavior that historians have to exercise. Although such perceptions tend to overlap, the differences between them can be significant enough to warrant the conclusion that, empirically speaking, historians are not always unanimous about what counts as intellectually virtuous behavior.³ Moreover, even if historians agree on the importance of such an intellectual virtue as “accuracy,” what it means to them to be accurate in their research and writing cannot be stated unequivocally. It depends, among other things, on the relative weight they attribute to this particular virtue, that is, on how they relate accuracy to other intellectual virtues, such as firmness, courage, and caution. This is why only thick descriptions – descriptions of intellectual virtuousness sensitive to the particularities of a historian’s context and situation – can flesh out what it means to be intellectually virtuous.⁴ This, finally, becomes all the more apparent when we expand the range of

Clarendon Press, 2003), pp. 203-226; Jonathan L. Kvanvig, *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 185-203.

³ Herman Paul, “Performing History: How Historical Scholarship is Shaped by Epistemic Virtues”, *History and Theory*, 50 (2011), 1-19.

⁴ This is nicely illustrated by Daston’s and Galison’s richly textured and contextual account of what “objectivity” meant to various generations of scholars in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. See Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007). Focusing on roughly the same period, I have tried to show how such highly appreciated virtues as honesty and caution took on specific meanings depending, among other things, on the constellations of virtues in which they were supposed to figure: Herman Paul, “Distance and Self-Distanciation: Intellectual Virtue and Historical Method around 1900”, *History and Theory*, Theme Issue 50 (2011), 104-116; Herman Paul, “The Scholarly Self: Ideals of Intellectual Virtue in Nineteenth-Century Leiden” in Rens Bod, Jaap Maat, and Thijs Weststeijn (eds.), *The Making of the Humanities*, vol. 2 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), in press.

our analysis beyond modern-day academics so as to include historians from other times and places. Confronted with historiographical practices from early Han China or the early Frankish Middle Ages, which differ significantly from what would nowadays be recognized as historical scholarship, it is hard, if not impossible, to escape the conclusion that what historians regard as intellectually virtuous behavior is to a large extent “shaped by historical contexts.”⁵

The question that then rises is to what extent such differences across time and situations can be justified. Let me clarify at the outset that “justification” in this context is not a shorthand for “epistemologic justification.” Epistemic justification, after all, is focused on the reasons people have for holding certain beliefs about the world. According to William P. Alston, “To say that S is justified in believing that *p* is to imply that there is something all right, satisfactory, in accord with the way things should be, about the fact that S believes that *p*.”⁶ Yet, in the case of historians who privilege certain intellectual virtues over others, the question is not to what extent these scholars are justified in believing certain things about the past, but to what extent “there is something all right, satisfactory, in accord with the way things should be” about the fact that they privilege certain virtues over others in their attempts to contribute to a better understanding of the past. The issue at stake is not beliefs about the world, but intellectually virtuous behavior.

I speak about justification, nonetheless, because of the normative connotations of this word. Justification refers to satisfactory states of affairs, to something that is considered “all right,” or to practices that are “in accord with the way things should be.” It presupposes “duty,” “obligation,” and “requirement.”⁷ To speak about historians being justified in privileging certain intellectual virtues over others, then, is to speak about the relative appropriateness of such conduct. It raises the question on what grounds it is appropriate for the student of Belgian national accounts to prioritize other intellectual virtues than the Ranke biographer. More specifically, it raises the question whether and on what grounds one can possibly claim that both historians make a worthwhile, desirable, appropriate contribution to understanding the past, even though they assign different weight to different virtues.

⁵ Paul, “Performing History” (see above, n. 3), 11.

⁶ William P. Alston, “Concepts of Epistemic Justification,” in Alston, *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 83.

⁷ Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 4.

By thus equating “justified conduct” with “worthwhile, desirable, and appropriate contributions to understanding the past,” I wish to be understood not only as employing justification in a broader sense than is customary in epistemology, but also as dissociating myself from foundationalist accounts of justification. Saying that historians are justified in privileging certain virtues over others does not imply that such an act of privileging is justified to the extent that it produces justified knowledge about the past. Given that I measure desirability and appropriateness, not in terms of justified knowledge, but in terms of worthwhile contributions to understanding the past, I employ a standard that is best described as *non-foundationalist* and *contextual*. It is non-foundationalist in the sense that what counts as a worthwhile contribution to understanding the past depends not only on its ability to make sense of source material, but also on its ability to make an improvement on the existing literature. The standard is contextual, moreover, in so far as improvement depends on the state of the literature, that is, on the (historically contingent) situation in which the historian finds him- or herself. Yet, as I shall explain in what follows, despite its high sensitivity to context, the standard I employ for measuring appropriateness is also *non-relativist*, in the sense that the Ranke biographer and the student of national accounts, in so far as they want to make a worthwhile contribution to understanding the past, are not free to choose whatever virtues they like.

In a sense, then, this paper seeks to reconcile a historicist awareness of how intellectual virtues are shaped by their historical contexts with a non-relativist account of historical scholarship. I shall argue that the two historians chosen as our case-study are justified in employing different *hierarchies* of intellectual virtues, because they are engaged in what I call different historiographical situations. Likewise, in response to historiographical traditions that are significantly different from what would nowadays be recognized as sound historical scholarship, I argue that historians are justified in pursuing whatever intellectual goods they want, but that, as scholars, they are unjustified in prioritizing any of these goods above historical understanding – the intellectual good that I consider as constitutive of historical scholarship.

I

Let us start with the question to what extent the Ranke biographer and the economic historian share the same set of intellectual virtues. Assumed that both of them do

whatever they can to excel in their jobs, their sets of virtues are likely to display at least some overlap. Among other things, both historians do their best to be accurate, in the sense of attentive to precision. Both try to be just, in the sense of giving fair consideration to all relevant sources or factors. Both also seek to practice the virtue of intellectual courage that is as indispensable for assessing the role of Lutheran providentialism in Ranke's philosophy of history as it is for estimating the market share of Flemish fruit-growing companies in the Belgian horticultural sector (in the absence of other hard data). At the same time, there appear to be differences. Understanding the intricacies of Ranke's character requires a dose of empathy, charity, and humility that is not normally needed for calculating monetary profits and losses. Likewise, synthesizing a significant body of secondary literature requires the ability to negotiate a delicate balance between autonomy and generosity vis-à-vis earlier authors on the subject that the world's first specialist on Flemish fruit growers does not have to care about.

Does this imply that the sets of virtues employed by our two historians are not identical? Such a conclusion would be foregone. For although the economic historian neither has to capture the fine texture of a person's character nor has to relate to a pile of secondary literature, this does not imply that he can afford to ignore such virtues as empathy, charity, and generosity. He needs a certain amount of empathy, for example, to make sense of accounts that are confusingly amateurishly kept. Likewise, a healthy dose of humility will prevent him from too large an amount of confidence in the significance and reliability of his statistical generalizations. So, the fact that different historians in different situations assign different weight to different virtues does not warrant the conclusion that their sets of virtues are non-identical. Their difference may be no differences of *kind*, but differences of *degree* and *emphasis*.

Could one argue, then, that the tasks faced by the Ranke biographer and the agricultural specialist are so different as to require different *hierarchies* of intellectual virtues? While the list of virtues necessary for a Ranke biography may be headed by empathy and firmness, the most important virtues for the economic historian may be attentiveness and accuracy. This means that our two historians have to prioritize some virtues over others, in the sense of practicing the virtues that are most important in their research with more energy and to a higher degree than those that are less crucial for the task at hand. Calculating the monetary profits and losses of a Flemish fruit grower is a task so different from understanding the mindset of a nineteenth-century

German professor that an historian engaged in project number one needs to give priority to other intellectual virtues than an historian involved in project number two.

Under what circumstances, then, is it justified to prioritize some virtues over others? What makes the two historians' tasks so different that they are justified to assign different weights to different virtues? I should like to suggest that hierarchies of intellectual virtues depend on *historiographical situations*, that is, on the interaction between (1) the genre of writing, (2) the historian's research question, and (3) the state of the literature. Genres of writing include the research article or monograph, based on extensive primary source research, the literature survey, which analyzes recent research conducted in a particular field of inquiry, and the textbook, which synthesizes the current state of insight into a particular theme or period. Rudimentary as this typology is – a more detailed typology would be desirable – it suffices to illustrate that hierarchies of intellectual virtues cannot be identical in all circumstances. A textbook author usually is in greater need of synthetic power – which may correspond to the virtue of intellectual firmness – than the author of a detailed research article. Besides, the historian's research question, or the problem that he or she aims to help solving, plays a crucial role. A chapter on the question “At what hour did the murderers of Julius Caesar gather on the Ides of March 44 B.C.?” is likely to engage in a rather different type of research than a book on “China, Europe, and the making of the modern world economy.”⁸ Whereas the first project aims to settle a factual matter (“when”), the second engages in complex types of explanation (“why”). Likewise, the historian who tries to reconstruct Belgian national accounts (“how much”) has to perform intellectual labor different from that of the historian aiming at understanding the intricacies of Ranke's character (“what was the man like”).

Finally, the state of the literature also serves as a constitutive element of historiographical situations. How different is the task of our Ranke biographer, whose research builds on dozens of older monographs and hundreds of previously published articles on the “father of modern historiography,” compared to the pioneering work that our second historian conducts in Flemish business archives. Whereas the former

⁸ John Ramsey, “At What Hour Did the Murderers of Julius Caesar Gather on the Ides of March 44 B.C.?” in Stephan Heilen *et al.* (eds.), *In Pursuit of Wissenschaft: Festschrift für William M. Calder III zum 75. Geburtstag* (Hildesheim; New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 2008), pp. 351-363; Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton; London; Princeton University Press, 2000).

is, explicitly or not, in constant conversation with alternative interpretations, the latter has neither the benefit nor the burden of such an existing body of literature. So, when I claim that our two historians find themselves in different historiographical situations, this term refers to an interaction of genre, research question, and state of scholarship that works out differently for each of these two historians.

My claim, then, is that different hierarchies of intellectual virtues are justified in different historiographical situations. Depending on their historiographical situation, historians will have to prioritize certain virtues over others or concentrate on some virtues more than on others. They are justified to do so because their understanding of the past will not be increased without such situational fine-tuning. What it means to increase historical understanding after all depends on the genre, the research question, and the state of the literature. How historical insight can be improved cannot be specified without paying attention to the demands of a specific historiographical situation. Historians aiming to contribute to a better understanding of the past are therefore not only allowed, but even required to prioritize their virtues in the light of the situation in which they find themselves. Different hierarchies of intellectual virtues are justified on the basis of different historiographical situations.⁹

II

All this suggests at least two reasons why it would be inappropriate to approach our historians with a checklist at hand, ticking off which virtues they need and which ones they do not need. In the first place, the practicing of an intellectual virtue – or a moral virtue, for that matter – can never be described in binary terms (“yes” or “no”). For if it is true that the Ranke biographer and the economic historian have many intellectual virtues in common, but employ these virtues in different ways – each in their own

⁹ I do not claim that different hierarchies of intellectual virtues are justified on the basis of the historian’s personal interests or preferences, although such factors usually exercise a considerable influence on how historical scholarship is conducted. This, in turn, is not to deny the legitimacy for historians to follow their own interests or preferences, but rather to acknowledge that such interests and preferences do not contribute to the *justification* of historical understanding. In other words: even if historians, as is usually the case, do their work in a manner strongly influenced by their personal interests and preferences, only their historiographical situations can justify their hierarchies of intellectual virtues. In more practical terms: when a book reviewer judges that the authors of a certain publication should have exercised more tact and carefulness in their explanations of past events, this judgment is based on what the authors should have done in their historiographical situation – not on whether the authors like such virtues as tact and carefulness or have a capacity for them. This implies that the book reviewer operates from the assumption that hierarchies of intellectual virtues cannot be justified on the basis of personal interests or preferences.

way prioritizing some virtues over others, as is appropriate in their historiographical situation – then it is, in the first place, not particularly informative to say *that* the two historians are accurate and fair. It would be more revealing to learn *how* they practice these virtues, each in their own way, in their own situation. This implies, secondly, that a checklist approach unavoidably results in “thin” descriptions of intellectually virtuous behavior. Thin are those descriptions that pay no attention to the specific demands placed upon historians by the historiographical situations in which they find themselves. “Thick” descriptions, by contrast, try to specify what historians in a given historiographical situation have to do in order to increase their understanding of the past (which intellectual virtues are most crucial in their situation and how hard these virtues must be practiced in order to reach adequate understanding). Accordingly, only thick descriptions can explain the difference between the Ranke biographer and the horticultural historian, in so far as their intellectual virtues are concerned.¹⁰

A third, additional reason for rejecting the checklist approach is that virtuous behavior is never an issue of either/or, but always a matter of degree. Carefulness, for example, is not something one either possesses or not, but rather a virtue one can practice to a greater or lesser extent. Nobody is perfectly careful or completely careless, just as there is not a single person who is either perfectly good or totally deprived of goodness. Yet one can try to be more careful, in the sense of practicing this particular virtue harder than one previously did, just as one can do one’s best to become a morally better person. Virtues are measured on a scale rather than with a “yes or no” checklist. Instead, then, of asking *whether* historians practice the virtue of caution, we should inquire: *how* cautious are they?

For these three reasons, I am not particularly interested in the question whether there are “universal” intellectual virtues, that is, intellectual virtues that all historians in all situations have to practice. Mark Day, for instance, makes a case for precision and consilience (or accuracy and fairness, in my terminology) as the two single most important virtues for historians.¹¹ Although his examination of which virtues historians actually cherish results in an impressively long list, he deliberately condenses these empirical findings into a twofold imperative: “maximize scope of

¹⁰ The terminology is, of course, indebted to Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture” in Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 3-30.

¹¹ Mark Day, *The Philosophy of History: An Introduction* (London; New York: Continuum, 2008), p. 42.

material covered while ensuring unity; and maximize precision while ensuring clarity.”¹² One wonders, however, what the point is of identifying such “universal” intellectual virtues – those required for all historians in all historiographical situations – when the differences between our two historians, in so far as their intellectual virtues are concerned, appear not to lie in the kind of virtues they have to practice, but rather in the manner or degree in which they need to practice them. Moreover, what is the point of presenting precision and consilience as most essential without specifying their relative position in hierarchies of intellectual virtues? It cannot be assumed that these hierarchies are always, in all situations, headed by accuracy and fairness. Whereas the horticultural historian may need to prioritize the former over the latter, the reverse may be true for the Ranke biographer.

Based on the foregoing, one might argue that what historians universally need is not a virtue, but rather a “meta-virtue.” What historians in all historiographical situations need is a certain amount of *phronesis* in order to grasp the demands of the situation. *Phronesis*, or the tact to invoke the right word at the right time and place, is what historians need when they have to establish hierarchies of intellectual virtues that are fine-tuned to the situation. Precisely to the extent that different historiographical situations make different demands, historians need the Aristotelian meta-virtue of *phronesis* in order to discern what it takes, in each of these situations, to make a contribution to a better understanding of the past.¹³

III

Imagine now that the experimental population not only consists of the two scholars just mentioned – the Ranke biographer and the historian immersed in Flemish business accounts – but also includes historians from other periods and regions, such as Saint Gregory of Tours, the Gallo-Roman bishop and historian known for his *Historia francorum*, and Sima Qian, the so-called “father of Chinese historiography,”

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 24 (italics in original).

¹³ On *phronesis* in Aristotle, see Jessica Moss, “‘Virtues Make the Goal Right’: Virtue and *Phronesis* in Aristotle’s Ethics,” *Phronesis*, 56 (2011), 204-261. On tact as “a special sensitivity and sensitiveness to situations and how to behave in them, for which knowledge from general principles does not suffice,” see also Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd ed. (New York: Continuum, 1998), p. 16.

whose *Shiji* or *Records of the Grand Historian* appeared around 90 BC.¹⁴ To what extent would this increase of the population under investigation affect the conclusions just reached?

Scholars of historiography may be eager to point out that these historians were committed to forms of historical inquiry that are hardly comparable to those practiced in modern academia. Speaking about intellectual virtue, they might argue that ancient and medieval historians, each in their own way, were committed to ideals of scholarly selfhood and notions of intellectual virtuousness that few historians would nowadays accept. For this reason, they might suggest that what counts as intellectually virtuous behavior changes over time and place. No modern scholar, after all, still accepts Sima Qian's conviction that the fortunes and misfortunes of people are best explained under reference to the Confucian notion of a cosmic order (*dao*), which requires historians to possess the ability to discern whether or not people live in accordance with the *dao*.¹⁵ Likewise, it would be hard to find a modern defender of Gregory's view that faithful adherence to what the Bible teaches in matters of history is a virtue that contributes to a better understanding of the past.¹⁶ So, empirically speaking, what counts as intellectually virtuous behavior is not etched in stone: different traditions have different perceptions of this.

The pressing question then is to what extent Sima Qian and Gregory were *justified* in employing virtues, or sets of intellectual virtues, that are different from those of our Ranke biographer and economic historian. I call this a pressing question because it seems to place us in the awkward dilemma of having to choose between (1) the view that different standards of intellectual virtuousness can legitimately exist alongside each other – a view that is sometimes implicitly adopted by historians of historiography – and (2) the claim that Sima Qian and Gregory do not qualify as intellectually virtuous historians because they do not meet our standard of intellectual

¹⁴ When I classify them as “historians,” I do not intend to attribute to these persons any other common qualities than that they studied the past. For a similar reason, a recent global survey of historical thought and practice identifies historians, in the broadest possible sense, with persons “who have recorded and/or represented the past either out of personal interest or with some wider social or political purpose in mind.” These include story-tellers in sub-Saharan African communities and those pre-Columbian Andean peoples who used the *quipu* as a recording device for communal memories. See Daniel Woolf, *A Global History of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 5.

¹⁵ F.-H. Mutschler, “Sima Qian and His Western Colleagues: On Possible Categories of Description”, *History and Theory*, 46 (2007), 197.

¹⁶ Adriaan H. B. Beukelaar, *Historiography and Episcopal Authority in Sixth-Century Gaul: The Histories of Gregory of Tours Interpreted in their Historical Context* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994), pp. 52-54.

virtuousness. The first view would be hard to reconcile with my argument that only hierarchies of intellectual virtues can justifiably differ from one situation to another. Moreover, it seems to embrace a relativism with regard to intellectual virtuousness that is unlikely to stand critical scrutiny.¹⁷ The second view looks hardly more attractive, though. It seems to exclude that what motivates historical inquiry in the first place, namely, the possibility that we may learn from those who lived before us, that we may enrich ourselves with their insights, and overcome some of our flaws and limitations. In other words, does not the second view assume *a priori* that we have a better understanding of what intellectual virtuousness is than Sima Qian or Gregory had? But why, then, would we care about their views of virtuousness? Yet, if we suspend our judgment and open ourselves to what historians call the “foreignness” or “strangeness” of the past, how could we do so without tacitly adopting a relativist stance similar to the view expounded under (1)?

In order to escape this dilemma, I should like to introduce a further conceptual category. Whereas the two historians discussed in the previous sections merely worked in different historiographical situations and, consequently, employed different hierarchies of intellectual virtues, the more heterogeneous group of historians that now demands our attention also confronts us with different *hierarchies of intellectual goods*. Intellectual goods are the aims of intellectual inquiry or, in the context of this paper, the goods that historical research is supposed to deliver.¹⁸ One obvious example of such a good is historical understanding, which might be defined loosely as insight into past state of affairs. Historians whose primary aim is historical understanding try to increase their ability to speak reliably about past state of affairs. They are not primarily focused on moral judgment, aesthetic pleasure, or social recognition, but on grasping how the world looked like in former days.¹⁹

Understanding, however, is not the only good that historical inquiry may aim at. This becomes apparent if we consult Sima Qian’s *Shiji* – arguably the most

¹⁷ Mark Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 106-124.

¹⁸ Roberts and Wood, *Intellectual Virtues* (see above, n. 2), pp. 32-58.

¹⁹ For convenience’s sake, I take understanding as an overarching category for *verstehen* and *erklären* – terms in which historians and philosophers of history have traditionally framed their views of what historical inquiry is aimed at. See Guiseppina O’Oro, “Historiographic Understanding,” in Aviezer Tucker (ed.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of History and Historiography* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 142-151. I will not here try to settle the question how understanding relates to knowledge, but note that the former is usually considered to presuppose and/or expand on the latter. See, e.g., Kvanvig, *Value of Knowledge* (see above, n. 2), pp. 185-203 and Riggs, “Understanding Virtue” (see above, n. 2), pp. 203-226.

influential historical study that has ever been written.²⁰ If we take the author to his word, his most important aim was to show by historical means the rightfulness of the Confucian *dao*. As a specialist in the field of Chinese historiography explains, Sima Qian made a sustained “attempt to organize the tradition into a clean Confucian unity” so as to illustrate that “the way of heaven” is always right and just.²¹ Given that not all historical events and situations discussed in the *Shiji* neatly corresponded to what Confucianism traditionally understood the way of heaven to be, there is a tendency in the *Shiji* to turn towards “theodicy,” or explication of why the way of heaven is never unjust. The good, then, that Sima Qian pursued along this line was neither an understanding of the past through Confucian lenses nor an understanding of the *dao* as such, but rather a *justification* of the way of heaven vis-à-vis the apparent incomprehensibilities of human history. Besides, the Han historian aimed for what one may describe as a *preservation* of the past. He recorded past events, on a then-unprecedented scale, “in order to prevent the past from slipping into darkness forever.”²² This urge to record was not only aimed at understanding the past, but also, and perhaps more importantly, at fulfillment of the Confucian demand to honor one’s ancestors by not allowing their names to sink into oblivion. Thirdly, the *Shiji* intended to serve a *didactic* goal by treating historical persons and situations as moral examples – even though, as Stephen W. Durrant argues, this aim was sometimes mitigated by the author’s insatiable appetite for well-wrought stories, which let him create “a kaleidoscope of characters who are not easily classified and turned into unequivocal examples.”²³

Similar observations could be made about the *Historia francorum*, or *History of the Franks*, that Gregory of Tours wrote in the late sixth century. Which intellectual goods did Gregory hope to acquire? Apart from historical understanding, he clearly hoped to attain a sort of temporal orientation, that is, a sense of where humanity was on the time line between Creation and Judgment Day. Almost every chapter of his book engages in counting the number of years that have passed since Adam and Eve, so that the reader will know how many years there are left before the 6,000 years that God has allotted to human history are finished. Although, of course, such an

²⁰ Woolf, *Global History of History* (see above, n. 14), p. 63.

²¹ Stephen W. Durrant, *The Cloudy Mirror: Tension and Conflict in the Writings of Sima Qian* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 27.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²³ Mutschler, “Sima Qian” (see above, n. 15), 199-200; Durrant, *Cloudy Mirror* (see above, n. 21), p. 143.

orientation required elements of understanding, Gregory, the bishop, claimed to provide his calculations with a more pastoral goal in mind (“for the sake of those who are losing hope as they see the end of the world coming nearer and nearer”).²⁴ For him, then, temporal orientation was not in the first place a matter of historical understanding, but of religious assurance. Also, like Sima Qian, Gregory assigned considerable worth to the didactic function of history writing. “I have had to devote much of my space to the quarrels between the wicked and the righteous,” he stated, or rather understated, as the pages following this declaration loudly trumpet how eternal punishment awaits the wicked, while those following Christ shall reign in glory.²⁵ Instruction of his audience clearly ranked high on Gregory’s list of intellectual goods.²⁶

IV

As these examples show, intellectual goods often come in the plural. This is not only true of historians in now long-gone ages. The Ranke scholar, for instance, may not only want to acquire a finely textured understanding of Ranke’s life and work. She may also wish to learn from Ranke how to be a good historian. In the spirit of Jacob Burckhardt’s celebrated remark that historical inquiry is “to make us not shrewder (for next time) but wiser (for ever),”²⁷ she may want to improve herself through sustained engagement with such a great and complicated figure as Ranke. Or, in a rather different spirit, she may want to pass some sort of judgment on the relative worth of Ranke’s achievement. She may hold it up as an example of intellectually virtuous scholarship or dissociate herself from the Eurocentric assumptions that underlie so much of Ranke’s work.

I can think of no reason for any of these intellectual goods to be dismissed out of hand as illegitimate for historians to pursue. Whoever confines historical inquiry to a quest for historical understanding, or dismisses the desire of historians to evaluate,

²⁴ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974), p. 67.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

²⁶ On such intellectual goods in medieval historiography more generally: Franz-Josef Schmale, *Funktion und Formen mittelalterlicher Geschichtsschreibung: Eine Einführung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1985), esp. pp. 143-164.

²⁷ Quoted in Lionel Gossman, *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt: A Study in Unseasonable Ideas* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 272.

judge, and learn from the past, *ipso facto* rejects much of what thrives historical research. I am therefore prepared to accept that there is a variety of intellectual goods (not to mention non-intellectual goods, such as personal recognition, career advancement, and monetary profit).²⁸ I am prepared to defend that historians can legitimately pursue any of these intellectual and non-intellectual goods. However, I reject the idea that all these goods are equally significant. I deny that historians whose work aspires to serious scholarship are free to prioritize among these goods (to place instruction above understanding, for example). Accordingly, I disagree with the relativist claim that the *Shiji* and the *Historia francorum* are equally acceptable as works of historical scholarship as a modern-day Ranke biography or reconstruction of Belgian national accounts.

The key to this position lies in the assumption that there are *hierarchies of intellectual goods*, just as there are hierarchies of intellectual virtues. Understanding, instruction, and judgment all qualify as intellectual goods, but do not serve as equally important aims of historical scholarship. One can imagine, by way of example, that the Ranke scholar prioritizes instruction (what can she learn from Ranke?) over judgment (why would take issue with him?), but consciously subordinates both of these aims to what she, correctly, perceives as the most important good of historical scholarship: understanding the past. Other historians, working on themes that tend to raise moral objections (slavery, genocide, etc.), may be stronger inclined to judge than to learn from the past they examine, but also subordinate both of these goals to the good of historical understanding. By contrast, what makes Sima Qian and Gregory of Tours appear as “unprofessional” historians in modern eyes is that they seem to privilege such goods as learning and judgment over understanding. It is not merely that they insufficiently practice such virtues as caution and accuracy – virtues that account for much of the “critical” attitude in which modern historiography often takes pride – but that they let learning and judgment take priority over understanding. Although historical understanding unmistakably also ranks among the goods they

²⁸ Such non-intellectual goods are vivid examples of what Alasdair MacIntyre calls “external goods,” or derivatives of a practice whose *raison d’être* is defined by an “internal good.” However, my category of “intellectual goods” is slightly broader than that of MacIntyre’s “internal goods.” Although I agree with MacIntyre that a human practice (historical scholarship in this case) is usually constituted by only a single intellectual good (historical understanding in this case), this does not imply, in my view, that all other goods classify as “external.” I should like to think that a desire to learn from the past is less external (even if not central) to the practice of historical scholarship than, for example, career advancement or monetary profit. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London 1981).

seek to acquire, understanding does not appear to have the prominent place it enjoys in our two previous cases. Of course, what distinguishes our modern-day historians from their ancient and medieval colleagues is not that the former, unlike the latter, apply themselves exclusively to understanding the past. Such a claim would overlook the degree to which modern-day historians are also, consciously or not, involved in evaluation and judgment of the past under investigation.²⁹ The crucial point is rather that understanding has a number one priority in their hierarchies of intellectual goods.

Although such priorities can never be enforced, I do think that hierarchies of intellectual goods must be headed by the good of understanding for historical inquiry to be recognizable as *scholarly research*. Historical understanding is constitutive of historical scholarship. For this reason, understanding must be assigned priority over all other possible intellectual (as well as non-intellectual) goods for historical inquiry to qualify as scholarship. This implies that other goods can be legitimately pursued only in so far as they do not harm the historian's search for understanding. Whenever intellectual goods threaten to collide with each other – for example, when the purpose of providing moral clarity appears incompatible with the aim of understanding a world in which black and white were tightly entwined – the latter has to take precedence. Historians who opt for different solutions to such a conflict may legitimately do so, but at the cost of no longer being engaged in scholarly work. This same demarcation criterion allows historians to deny the *Shiji* and the *Historia francorum* the status of historical scholarship. Precisely in so far as these works subordinate historical understanding to the pursuit of other intellectual goods, they cannot legitimately claim to be specimen of scholarly work.

Please note, however, that this does not imply that historians prioritizing other goods than understanding are engaged in *illegitimate* work. I have no wish to challenge the legitimacy of historical work modeled after Sima Qian's or Gregory's example. Although such work would not qualify as a contribution to historical scholarship, it may aspire to, for instance, literary worth. Just as the *Shiji* can nowadays be read profitably as a literary classic,³⁰ such work may virtuously engage

²⁹ Mark Day helpfully distinguishes between a number of "relations with the past" (epistemic, preservative, dialogic, and practical). Although one may disagree with Day about the number and the nature of these relationships, he identifies an important point in asserting that "the critical epistemic relationship with the past is bound up in other relations with the past." Day, *Philosophy of History* (see above, n. 11), p. 9.

³⁰ Durrant, *Cloudy Mirror* (see above, n. 21), p. 117. "We so frequently return to *Records of the Historian*, as we return to other of the world's great classics, because this text is as difficult and

in a pursuit of other intellectual goods than understanding. In fact, such a great historical novel as Graham Swift's *Waterland* is a first-rate intellectual achievement precisely because, not unlike the *Shiji*, it dares to subordinate historical understanding (as defined above) to a pondering about such things as the nature of traditions and the extent to which human beings can free themselves from inherited beliefs and practices. Someone seeking to understand the history of the Fens – the eastern English region where Swift locates his narrative – is better advised to turn to a scholarly monograph, but a reader in pursuit of, for example, insight into human character can do worse than spend some evenings with *Waterland*.³¹ Accordingly, the precedence of historical understanding over other intellectual goods is not absolute; it merely serves as a demarcation criterion between approaches to the past that are scholarly acceptable and those that are not. As such, however, it explains why historians rightly reject the *Shiji* and the *Historia francorum* as serious contributions to historical scholarship.

Finally, I should like to point out that it is not possible to specify *a priori* which goods have to rank number two, three or four in the historian's hierarchy of intellectual goods, or the grounds on which such rankings can be justified. Historians engaged in scholarly research can only be expected to prioritize understanding over alternative goods, in such a way that the pursuit of understanding is not hampered by the pursuit of other intellectual goods. Fortunately, however, the latter claim is strong enough to allow historians to dissociate themselves from Sima Qian, Gregory of Tours, or any other historian who prioritizes, for example, instruction or judgment over understanding. It is strong enough to challenge the relativist idea that ancient or medieval historical writing is just as good as modern historical scholarship. It undermines such relativism by privileging historical understanding over other intellectual goods. However different hierarchies of intellectual goods may be, characteristic of historical scholarship is that understanding takes precedence over alternative goods and that it is pursued unhampered by the desire to learn from the past or the wish to judge the relative merits of those who came before us.

V

confusing as life itself. The clouds in Sima Qian's mirror are the patterns of a full and intricate human being and are, thereby, the clouds that in one way or another trouble us all" (*ibid.*, p. 147).

³¹ Graham Swift, *Waterland* (London: William Heinemann, 1983). Thanks to Madeleine Kasten for urging me to read this wonderful novel.

Both of the hierarchies discussed in this article – hierarchies of intellectual virtues and hierarchies of intellectual goods – serve the purpose of reconciling a historicist sensitivity to how intellectually virtuous behavior is shaped by its historical contexts with a non-relativist account of historical scholarship. The first hierarchy does so, on the one hand, by rejecting a one-size-fits-all model of historical virtuousness in favor of a model that allows for significant varieties between the relative weight that historians must assign to each of their intellectual virtues in order to contribute to a better understanding of the past. On the other hand, it relates such differences, not to the historians’ personal interests or preferences, but to their historiographical situations, so that hierarchies of intellectual virtues are not arbitrary, but a function of the demands that the situation makes upon the historian. Likewise, the second hierarchy allows for the pursuit of various intellectual goods – including those favored by historians working in traditions that are nowadays difficult to recognize as historical scholarship – but banishes the specter of relativism by treating understanding as an intellectual good that deserves priority over alternative goods for being constitutive of scholarly research.

Accordingly, the position advocated in this paper is not a *strongly historicist* one. Strongly historicist is the claim the historical inquiry “is totally and necessarily determined by the finite actuality of historical circumstance.” Operating from the assumption of “reason’s total and inevitable parochiality,” strong historicism excludes the possibility of defining historical scholarship in situationally transcendent terms.³² Although my position is sympathetic to the historicizing impulse that runs through much of recent work in the history of historiography, it rejects such strong historicism by adopting a non-relativist account of historical scholarship. Non-relativist is both my claim that historical understanding is constitutive of historical scholarship and its implication that the good of understanding deserves to be prioritized over other goods (in the realm of scholarship at least).

My position, then, is better described as *weakly historicist*. Weak historicism is historicist in so far as it rejects “thin” or situationally unspecific accounts of intellectually virtuous behavior under reference to the different intellectual demands that historians in different historiographical situations face. Besides, it is historicist in so far as it accepts, as a matter of fact, that historians often pursue other goods besides

³² Carl Page, *Philosophical Historicism and the Betrayal of First Philosophy* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), pp. xi, 3.

historical understanding and, in a normative mode, allows them do so. Yet, because this weak historicism subscribes to the robust claim that historical understanding must have a number one priority for any historian aspiring to be engaged in scholarly work, it does not carry any of the relativist implications that strong historicism has. Weak historicism, in short, takes an uncompromising stance on what qualifies as historical scholarship, while generously granting that intellectually virtuous behavior is shaped by historical contexts. Would it be too presumptuous to think that, for this reason, historians of historiography interested in thick descriptions of intellectually virtuous behavior and philosophers of history eager to avoid the specter of relativism are most likely to find each other in, roughly, such a weak historicism?³³

³³ I am indebted to Mark Bevir and Allen R. Dunn for helpful comments on a draft of this paper.