

ETHICAL JUDGMENTS ABOUT THE DIFFICULT PAST

Lindsay Gibson investigated history teachers' beliefs concerning the status of ethical judgments when teaching history, specifically the relationship between how teachers taught ethical issues, questions, and judgments concerning the Japanese Canadian Internment (JCI) and their students' written responses, discovering "a large gap between what they believed about ethical judgments and how they actually approached them in the classroom, which impacted how students responded to JCI," what Gibson terms a "knowing-doing" that "has important implications for teaching students about difficult events in history."¹ He starts by noting that historians, historiographers, philosophers, and history educators have used "moral judgment" more often than "ethical judgment" judging when past actions, but Gibson considers the latter term more expansive, incorporating morality but also "the study of values and their justifications, but also to morality, which includes the actual values and rules of conduct humans live by."²

Then Gibson reminds us that "moral and ethical judgments have been an important aspect of K-12 school history since it was first introduced as a compulsory subject in public schooling at the end of the nineteenth century,"³ a statement at odds with my very limited individual experience, that in 1950s America, when and where my history teachers studiously avoided making judgments. But then Gibson seems more focused on a century or so ago, when, he continues, "moral training was recognized as one of the most important purposes for learning history," as "it was believed that history could educate immigrants and the newly enfranchised population in acceptable social and political values, which would contribute to the formation of moral citizens."⁴ Along with the lecture, such didacticism has disappeared, at least rhetorically, evident when Gibson tells us: "Rather than dictate the ethical values that students should accept, in a historical thinking approach students would be invited to make judgments about ethical dilemmas from the past and decide how these events should be responded to in the present."⁵ Against contradicting my own (extremely limited) experience, Gibson describes "moral responses" as are "inescapable part of our encounter with the past and form a major component of history education in schools," yet "few history or social studies curricula in Canada include ethical judgments as an important disciplinary or procedural concept."⁶

Turns out there have been a few – Gibson cites several, including studies by Peter Seixas⁷ – but, overall, Gibson judges that "ethical judgments have garnered little attention as a research subject despite the increase in history education research in the past three decades."⁸ Gibson also judges that "few studies have investigated teachers' or students' approaches to ethical judgments when teaching and learning history."⁹ And when students make ethical judgements, they have been found to be "often presentist," meaning that "empathy with the historical 'Other' did not take place."¹⁰

Moreover, “students rarely distinguished history-based arguments from anachronistic statements.”¹¹ Another study found that “students’ ethical responses swung between two ahistorical poles, presentism and postmodernist skepticism.”¹² At first I wondered what distinguishes “postmodernist skepticism” from “skepticism” historically and philosophically,¹³ but Gibson explains: “In presentist responses, students imposed contemporary ethical norms on the past, while postmodernist skeptical responses dismissed the possibility of ethical judgments altogether because they were too closely tied to a person’s psychology, values, and historical context,”¹⁴ a seemingly self-contradictory stance since it would dismiss the possibility of “judgements” altogether, including that one. Rather expressing skepticism toward these ideas, Gibson’s aim is to situate his own research alongside these ideas, again informing us that it “addresses an important and unexplored gap in history education research,” as “it analyzes the relationship between history teachers’ beliefs about ethical judgments, the ways teachers approach ethical issues, questions, and judgments when teaching about a difficult event in Canadian history, and the impact teachers’ approaches have on students’ written responses.”¹⁵ What seemed might be a mammoth empirical study turns out to be a much more manageable “qualitative” study.

The “difficult event” on which Gibson focuses is the World-War II Japanese Canadian Internment, not only a topic but a lived experience for the great Canadian curriculum theorist Tetsuo Aoki.¹⁶ While the Internment – Gibson prefers an acronym (JCI) – occurred during World War II, Gibson starts by situating the event in “a longer history of anti-Asian racism and discrimination in Canada that had already manifested itself in discriminatory immigration laws, restriction of individual rights, and violent episodes like the 1907 Anti-Asian Riots in Vancouver,”¹⁷ riots targeting Chinese as well as Japanese residents.¹⁸ The Japanese Canadian Internment followed the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor; the Canadian government used powers conferred from War Measures Act to “forcibly remove more than 22,000 people of Japanese ancestry from a 100-mile-wide protected area along the British Columbia (B.C.) coast.”¹⁹ It took until 1988 for the Canadian government to issue an official apology and compensation.²⁰ Gibson tells us that: “Although historians unanimously agree that the dispossession, dispersal, and deportation of Japanese Canadians were unjust, there was some debate in the late 1980s about whether the Canadian government’s 1942 decision to remove Japanese Canadians from the B.C. coast was justified.”²¹

Gibson selected “sixteen eleventh- grade social studies teachers from the fifth-largest public school district in a western Canadian province” to participate “a survey that asked their beliefs about ethical judgments in the discipline of history and history teaching and learning, the factors that influenced their beliefs, and the classroom practices they regularly employed.”²² Then he conducted “case studies ... with four eleventh-grade social studies teachers as they taught about JCI in order to understand the different ways teachers brought ethical issues, questions, and judgments to their history teaching, and the impact these approaches had on students’ written

responses.”²³ From these Gibson “identified eight characteristics of reasoned ethical judgments, and used these characteristics to categorize teachers’ survey responses about their classroom practice and approaches to ethical judgments, their goals for teaching history, and their attitudes toward ethical judgments as sophisticated (S) or less sophisticated (LS).”²⁴ Gibson also “observed four grade 11 social studies teachers’ lessons about JCI.... In order to determine how ethical judgments were present in the five activities, I utilized a type of content analysis known as conceptual analysis. (...) In order to determine how students in the four classes approached ethical judgments, I collected completed written assignments from 95 students.”²⁵

Gibson found that many of the sixteen teachers he surveyed “believed [that] ethical judgments are unavoidable when historians write, research, and teach history; are part of all aspects of historians’ investigations; that several reasoned ethical judgments can be made about the same event or person; that ethical judgments can be made despite differences between the past and the present; and that it is important to teach students how to identify implicit and explicit ethical judgments in historical accounts.”²⁶ He found that “nine of the sixteen teachers held the contradictory belief that history teachers should not make ethical judgments because they need to be as objective as possible. (...) Teachers’ beliefs about ethical judgments might have been influenced by the positivist philosophical tradition in history,”²⁷ a tradition Gibson risks re-enacting with this social-science-style research strategy employed here. “Among the samples I studied,” Gibson summarizes, “the majority of teachers had sophisticated views about the place of ethical judgments in the discipline of history and history education,” believing that “it is important for students to be taught how to make ethical judgments, and that they should be invited to make ethical judgments.”²⁸ Gibson also reports that “when it comes to their classroom practice, the teachers were unaware of the various ways ethical judgments were present in the activities and resources introduced in the classroom and the extent to which they brought their own ethical judgments into the classroom.”²⁹

Apparently practice makes perfect, as Gibson advice seems to reiterate that ancient axiom when writing: “If we want students to improve their ability to make sophisticated judgments about difficult ethical issues in the past, present, and future, we need to regularly invite them to make ethical judgments, and explicitly teach them how to do so.”³⁰ Stepping squarely into the historiographic controversy concerning the role of narrative in history, Gibson writes: “An essential building block for teaching students how to make sophisticated ethical judgments is helping them understand the constructed and interpretive nature of historical accounts,” adding: “Without a basic epistemological understanding of the nature of historical accounts, students cannot explain why historical interpretations and accounts differ, and why historians arrive at different yet equally plausible ethical judgments.”³¹ Gibson accords the “epistemological” problem priority, telling us that: “Taking historical perspectives includes the ability to identify the difference between beliefs, values, and motivations

in the past and present, to consider historical context when explaining the perspectives of historical actors, to make plausible evidence-based inferences about the beliefs, values, and motivations of historical actors, and to distinguish a variety of perspectives among the actors participating in historical events.”³² Each of the topics merits a seminar - in graduate school, not K-12 schools. Perhaps he places this impossible pedagogical challenge before us because presentism is such a problem – I go so far as to term it a cultural crisis³³ - that undermines the study of history: “Presentist questions invite students to impose contemporary perspectives on the past without considering the context and worldviews that existed at the time the event occurred.”³⁴ Yet the present can’t be expunged when making ethical judgments about the past, as those who suffered the Internment are themselves past, even while memories remain, and not only in textbooks but in the bodies of the descendants of those forcibly removed from their homes. Even “in cases where there is no debate about the ethical rightness or wrongness of a historical event or decision, there are other types of explicit questions teachers can ask. Asking who is responsible for injustices, contributions, or sacrifices in the past, and deciding whether society should be responsible for remembering or responding to these, invites students to make explicit ethical judgments.”³⁵

Making ethical judgements about the past seems another sticky wicket: necessary, even inevitable, but problematic. In retrospect the Japanese Canadian Internment could be called an overreaction (at best), outright racism at worst. It’s true that at the time security concerns could not be entirely or readily dismissed, especially in the aftermath of the Pearl Harbor attack, in the shadow of Nazi victories in Europe. Still, the process of removal – questionable from even national security points of view - was excessive, even sadistic.³⁶ Aoki’s teacher – Mr. McNab (see endnote #19) - seemed to realize that, helpless as he was to intervene; all he could do was watch – a “watchfulness,” Aoki realized in retrospect, that was “filled with a teacher’s hope that wherever his students may be, wherever they may wander on this earth away from his presence, they are well and no harm will visit them.”³⁷ “Teachers know that pupils come to them clothed in a bond of parental trust,” Aoki adds, “and parents know that they, in entrusting their children to teachers, can count on the watchful eyes of teachers.”³⁸

My concern with an emphasis on making ethical judgements about the past, difficult or not, has to do with what one could call collateral damage, namely the smugness that could accumulate over time, a self-righteous sense that we, living in the present, are the most knowledgeable human beings who ever lived, that we alone are quite capable of knowing right from wrong. Surely such smugness – arrogance - cements presentism. Perhaps “understanding” not “judgment” ought to come first when, ought to be the emphasis of, studying history: watchfulness, witnessing, compassion ... then, if necessary, judgment.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Gibson 2019, 81.

² 2019, 82.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid. Regarding the "historical thinking approach," see RB#89.

⁶ 2019, 83.

⁷ <https://edcp.educ.ubc.ca/faculty-spotlight-peter-seixas/> A former UBC colleague, I've read Seixas' 2004 collection, plus his 2011 chapter, both referenced above. See the index for additional references to Seixas and his scholarship.

⁸ 2019, 83.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/skepticism>

¹⁴ 2019, 84.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ See Baergen 2020; Pinar and Irwin 2005.

¹⁷ 2019, 84.

¹⁸ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/white-riot-1907-anti-asian-violence-vancouver-1.6804950>

¹⁹ “It was a cloudy day in early April, 1942,” Aoki (2005 [1992], 193) remembers. “I was 13 then, going on 14, in Grade 7 at Fanny Bay School, a two-room school about 40 miles from Nanaimo in BC. It was a bewildering day for many of us. Our Japanese Language School had been ordered closed by the Ministry of Education. My father had already been sent to a road camp near Blue River in the far-off wilds of the Rockies. Aoki (2005 [1992], 194-195) continues: “I cannot really recall my other teachers in all the years of my schooling, which began in Fanny Bay. But Mr. McNab, I remember.... Recently, we returned to the Coast.... Coming home, I wondered if by chance I could make contact with Mr. McNab, of whom I had heard not a thing over more than four decades. Through the BCTF offices we learned that William McNab, a retired teacher, lived in North Vancouver. I felt a stirring in my heart. I phoned him.... He kindly visited us. I experience a deep inward joy of thanks when my hand grasped the hand of the man [who] silently watched over us as we left his school that April 44 years ago. I felt he did not know that over all those years the memory of his watching stayed vividly with me. For me, the singular moment reflected his being as teacher....

I felt blessed being allowed after 44 years to be in the presence of a teacher whose quiet but thoughtful gesture had touched me deeply. Today I feel doubly blessed being allowed to relive the fullness of the moment in the regained presence of Mr. McNab.”

²⁰ 2019, 85. <https://www.cbc.ca/archives/government-apologizes-to-japanese-canadians-in-1988-1.4680546>

²¹ Ibid.

²² 2019, 86.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ 2018, 87. Why acronyms are needed here escapes me.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ 2019, 88.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ 2019, 99.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid. None of these terms is free from historiographic controversy of course. Traverso (2023, 78) seems to cut a middle course: “Like the novelist, the historian creates a narrative fabric, but he does not invent anything, insofar as his story is not freed from reality. Consider Carr’s (2014, 113) comment: “In history or other cases of truth-telling stories (biographies, anecdotes, court testimony, etc.), narrative is thought of as an expression of or means to knowledge of the past.” For Carr (2014, 114), “Narrative structures transform natural time into human time.”

³² 2019, 100.

³³ Pinar 2023, xiii.

³⁴ 2019, 100.

³⁵ 2019, 101.

³⁶ <https://japanesecanadiansbc.weebly.com/was-it-justified.html>

³⁷ 2005 (1992), 195.

³⁸ Ibid.