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HISTORY AND MORAL INQUIRY

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George Cotkin, *Morality's Muddy Waters: Ethical Quandaries in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010)
Joseph Kip Kosek, *Acts of Conscience: Christian Nonviolence and Modern American Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009)

Moral inquiry is too important to be left to philosophers alone, as even some philosophers have acknowledged. John Dewey, for example, argued that artists had at least as important a role to play as philosophers in the moral life of a culture because art was "the means of keeping alive the sense of purposes that outrun evidence." Imagination, not philosophical dialectic, was "the chief instrument of the good." Richard Rorty likewise contended that the empathy essential to moral imagination if the suffering stranger was to be seen as "one of us" was better served by the narrative arts than by more abstract disciplines. "This is a task," he said, "not for theory but for genres such as ethnography, the journalist's report, the comic book, the docudrama, and, especially, the novel."[1]

And, Rorty might have—should have—added, the historical narrative. If, as anthropologist Karen Brown has said, moral inquiry requires "a significant collection of rigorous, dense [stories] that give sustained attention to morality as a key component of culture," then historians should play an essential role in it.[2]

[1] John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934), in *idem*, *Later Works*, vol. 10 (Carbondale, 1989), 350; Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, 1989), xvi. Rorty's case for the novel is impressively made at length in Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley, 1988); and Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York, 1990). George Cotkin says (at ix) that the genesis of his book under review here lay with a viewing of the powerful film *Hotel Rwanda* (2005).

[2] Karen McCarthy Brown, "The Moral Force Field of Haitian Vodou" in Richard Wightman Fox and Robert B. Westbrook, eds., *In Face of the Facts: Moral Inquiry in American*

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Indeed, it seems to me that the pivotal place of the narrative arts in the moral life of a culture helps account, in part, for the relatively robust place that the work of historians, unlike that of those in many other disciplines embedded in the academy, continues to have in the wider culture of modernity. It also helps explain why the discipline of history is relatively loosely embedded in the academy, why some of the most telling contributions by historians to moral inquiry are made by journalists, filmmakers, and other nonacademic practitioners of the historian's craft. Moral inquiry is not only too important to be left to philosophers, it is also too important to be left to insulated professionals.

* * *

Historians have long played this role, of course. Many of us when deciding where to focus our energies are drawn to those figures in the past whose actions raise ethical questions and events that challenge the moral imagination. As are our readers. For example, it is for this reason, I think, that so many American presidents of the last century and a half have spent a good chunk of their time reading the work of historians about the travails of one of their predecessors, Abraham Lincoln.[3]

It is probably fair to say that historians, at least of late, have not pursued moral inquiry as self-consciously as we might have. Affected no less than other social scientists of the last half-century by admonitions to avoid mixing facts and values, most historians, especially those imbued with the ethos of academic professionalism, have approached explicit moral inquiry gingerly, rightly wary of accusations of moralizing and anachronism.[4] I suspect that many historians would squirm if asked to affirm the practice of moral discourse in their scholarship. Nonetheless, if it is possible to write history without resort to the thinner evaluative terms of ethical discourse—"good," "bad," "right," "wrong," and "ought"—it is virtually impossible to do so without resort to its thicker, simultaneously descriptive and evaluative vocabulary—"cruel," "humiliating,"

Scholarship (Cambridge, 1998), 186. Much of what I say here echoes the introduction to this volume by Richard Fox and myself.

3 George W. Bush, for example, claims while in office to have read fourteen books about Lincoln. Two of the best recent books about Lincoln, both by William Lee Miller, are explicitly cast as moral inquiry: *Lincoln's Virtues: An Ethical Biography* (New York, 2002); and *President Lincoln: The Duty of a Statesman* (New York, 2008).

4 Of course, as my use of the term "ethos" suggests, academic professionalism itself incorporates moral commitments, most importantly to the virtues essential to scientific inquiry itself.

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"courageous," "dignified," "graceful," and so forth.[5] And no historian of any distinction has tried.

In sum, it is difficult to read much history without encountering a book that, whether self-consciously or not, makes a contribution to moral inquiry. Consider, for example, *Acts of Conscience*, a fine recent study by a talented young historian, Joseph Kip Kosek, of the course of American Christian nonviolent theory and activism in the years between World War I and the War in Vietnam. His account centers on arguably the most significant organization of Christian pacifists, the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR). Kosek skillfully traces the changing contours of pacifist thought and activism and locates them firmly within the context of the world historical events—World War I, the Depression, World War II, and the Civil Rights movement—that shaped them. Deeply researched in manuscript sources as well as published materials, the book offers fresh and telling portraits of such familiar figures as A. J. Muste and Bayard Rustin, as well as such less-well-known pacifists as Sherwood Eddy and Kirby Page. Kosek's treatment of Richard Gregg, an exceptionally important figure in the history of nonviolent thinking, is particularly important, for he restores Gregg and his book, *The Power of Non-violence* (1934), to the pivotal role in modern American radicalism that both deserve.

Throughout his narrative, Kosek weaves a sustained reflection on the tensions within the moral philosophy of nonviolence. He brings out the conflicts between those committed to a principled (and religiously grounded) nonviolence and those who appreciated its strategic and tactical virtues but lent it no absolute commitment. He explores, in particular, the ethical ambiguities introduced into pacifism by those (like Gregg) who regarded nonviolent protest less as an act of witness than as one of admittedly coercive politics. And, in perhaps the most eye-opening argument of the book, Kosek demonstrates that from very early on leaders of the FOR were alert to the possibilities of nonviolent protest as a media spectacle directed at potentially sympathetic audiences of bystanders. "Unlike antimodern pacifists such as the Amish," he observes, "Muste and his associates turned nonviolence into a theatrical 'act,' a calculated performance attuned to the sympathies of audiences, especially those created by new forms of mass media" (2).

I suspect that Kosek is deeply read in the moral philosophy of nonviolence. Yet if so, he wears this learning lightly and leaves it to his subjects (and their critics) to shape the terms of the controversies he narrates. He makes no secret of his sympathies for nonviolence and pacifism, but his ethical aim is not to defend

[5] Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA, 1985), 129–30; Elizabeth Anderson, "Pragmatism, Science, and Moral Inquiry," in Fox and Westbrook, *In Face of the Facts*, 18.

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such views but to win them a fair hearing by amplifying voices that have been muted, even by historians of the American left. As he says,

> The problem of the twentieth century, the pacifists contended, was the problem of violence . . . It was, above all, the fact of human beings killing one another with extraordinary ferocity and effectiveness . . . More men and women lost their lives in World War II—the "good war"—than in any other disaster thus far produced by human beings. We should take radical Christian pacifists seriously not because they were always right, but because they force us, as they forced their contemporaries, to confront these terrible truths. (5)

In many respects, the centerpiece of Kosek's book as moral inquiry is the extended forty-year dialogue he recounts and reconstructs between his principals, particularly Muste, and Reinhold Niebuhr (a FOR apostate). A vigorous supporter of American intervention in World War I, Niebuhr categorically renounced war in the wake of the peace. In the 1920s he was an active member of the FOR, and served as its chair in 1931 and 1932. But that year brought the publication of *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. Although, as Kosek shows, many of the arguments in this bombshell book reflected views that Niebuhr shared with his FOR colleagues, he also delivered a sharp challenge to the attempt of Gregg and others at one and the same time to sustain an absolute commitment to nonviolence and to develop nonviolence into a practical political strategy. Politics, Niebuhr argued, was about the exercise of coercive power, and while nonviolence could (as Gandhi showed) be developed into an effective means of coercing change, the choice of political means was wholly a matter of strategy and tactics, not ethics. Violence itself was not "intrinsically immoral"; and as means, violence and nonviolence were not stark moral opposites but points on the same continuum of force. Niebuhr famously anticipated the civil rights movement by suggesting that nonviolent resistance was the best strategy for African Americans to deploy against white racism, but for him this was a purely practical recommendation. "If a season of violence can establish a just social system and can create the possibilities of its preservation," he insisted, "there is no purely ethical ground upon which violence and revolution can be ruled out" (Kosek, 138). Niebuhr left the FOR in 1933, and shortly thereafter he critically reviewed Gregg's *Power of Non-violence*. "Since [Gregg's] defense of non-violence is consistently pragmatic," he wrote, "it prompts the question whether it is possible to condemn violence so absolutely within the framework of a pragmatic position" (110–11).

For their part, Niebuhr's critics in the FOR worried that his dismissal of an absolute moral commitment to nonviolence offered little prospect of resistance to a political world in which violence was for most the means of first resort. Moreover, they charged that Niebuhr was altogether too cavalier about the volatility of violence as a political means, the manner in which it easily escaped the control of those with even the best intentions and wreaked havoc on justice.

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In 1948 Muste went so far as to charge that he could discern little difference between Niebuhr and John Foster Dulles (10).

Kosek is so scrupulous and evenhanded in his reconstruction of these debates that even those like myself who come away from his account believing that Niebuhr had the better of many of them will be grateful for the reminder of the force of the arguments of his opponents, which Niebuhr himself was all too often tempted to caricature. In this fashion, Kosek might well refine the moral compass of his readers without insisting that they share his own, and he does so by means less of explicit argument than of skillful narration of a fraught, now distant, moral struggle.

* * *

Is there anything to be gained by making moral inquiry by historians even more self-conscious than that of able but largely implicit practitioners such as Kosek? George Cotkin thinks so. In *Morality's Muddy Waters* he ventures to persuade us to conjoin ourselves to philosophers "in explicit dialogue with one other" (3). He acknowledges that such historians as David Brion Davis are among the most distinguished moralists *manqué* of the late twentieth century, but he urges a more explicit interdisciplinary (or, at least, bidisciplinary) conversation than even the most accomplished moral inquirers among historians have usually initiated.[6]

Here Cotkin revises himself. In an earlier article, presaging his book, he posited a "moral turn" in the work of historians since the 1980s, a claim that is convincingly challenged (more or less politely) by all of the commentators (Neil Jumonville, James Livingston, Michael O'Brien, and Lewis Perry) in the journal symposium of which it was a part. As they contended, Cotkin both slighted the extent to which historians have long contributed to moral inquiry and exaggerated the degree to which the last thirty years have witnessed any significant explicit, interdisciplinary conversations between historians and philosophers. Such shortcomings are absent from his book, which can best be read as a plea and prospectus for more robust conversations of this sort.[7]

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6 For an example of Davis's important contributions to moral inquiry see, perhaps especially, David Brion Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* (Oxford, 1984). As Cotkin has observed, the impressive Festschrift for Davis, edited by Karen Halttunen and Lewis Perry, is tellingly entitled *Moral Problems in American Life* (Ithaca, 1998), and yet none of its contributors engage in much of a dialogue with contemporary moral philosophy. Cotkin, "History's Moral Turn," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69 (2008), 301.

7 For Cotkin's generally conciliatory reply to his critics see his "A Conversation about Morals and History," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 69 (2008), 493–8.

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Historians' participation in moral inquiry, Cotkin complains, is too often "under-theorized, inexplicit, and anchored in certitude about what was or ought to be."[8] This is unfortunate because, he believes, we have something invaluable to contribute to this dialogue. "To the degree that history is beholden to context, to appreciation for complexity and contingency, to paradox and irony," he says, "it partakes vigorously in the conversation about morals our culture desperately needs" (2). Unfortunately, he contends, historians have failed not only to learn from philosophers but also to attend adequately to moral complexity, to "moral muddiness." His book thus "attempts to wed history and moral philosophy as a way to consider well-known events and controversies in a new light" (3).

Cotkin opens, disappointingly, with a chapter on Hannah Arendt's conceptions of evil that neither adds much to the considerable literature on this subject nor furthers his announced agenda much. This is not to say, by any means, that Arendt's controversial reflections on evil, both "radical" and "banal," might not prove instructive for historians engaged in moral inquiry, but Cotkin's chapter is less an effort to test their efficacy in fresh contexts than to revisit their genealogy and critically engage Arendt's own deployment of them. This sort of intellectual history of the moral inquiry of earlier thinkers can no doubt be useful to historians who would themselves engage in moral inquiry of their own, but it is not the same thing.

It may be, even though he does not say so explicitly, that Cotkin intended this chapter to serve as a prologue to the case studies that follow, conceiving of these studies as efforts to put Arendt's concepts of "radical" and "banal" evil further to work, to deploy them in fresh contexts. But even though he sometimes alludes to them again in the pages that follow, they cannot be said to structure in any systematic way any of his case studies.

I do not mean to suggest either that the history that Arendt put at the center of her moral imagination does not bear revisiting or that such revisiting can avoid wrestling with her arguments. Nazi perpetrators of the Holocaust, such as Adolf Eichmann, imposed themselves insistently on ethical reflection after Auschwitz, and we are far from completing our journey to this heart of darkness.[9] Yet

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[8] Cotkin, "History's Moral Turn," 296.

[9] Witness, for example, the controversy and rich debate stirred up by Jonathan Littell's novel, *The Kindly Ones*, whose protagonist is an SS officer and perpetrator. See especially Ruth Franklin, "Night and Cog," *New Republic*, 1 April 2009, 38–43; Daniel Mendelsohn, "Transgression," *New York Review of Books*, 26 March 2009, 18–21; and Samuel Moyn, "A Nazi Zelig," *Nation*, 23 March 2009, 31–4. Franklin attacks the novel for being "maddeningly incoherent" on the moral questions it raises, though one could argue, as others have, that it captures the "muddiness" and inconclusiveness of moral judgment that Cotkin embraces. As James R. Martin puts it in a fine paper on the book ("Holocaust Historiography and *The Kindly Ones*," paper presented at the German Studies Conference,

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Eichmann figures in Cotkin's chapter largely at one remove; Eichmann himself is subordinated to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

Cotkin really gets down to the business of making his argument for interdisciplinary inquiry and an alertness to moral muddiness in its practice with five case studies of important "ethical quandaries" and controversies prominent in American life since 1940. These include the bombing of civilian populations in World War II that culminated in the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the My Lai massacre in Vietnam; the moral implications of racial passing in John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me* (1961); late twentieth-century debates over capital punishment; and the support of the War in Iraq by such liberal hawks as Kanan Makiya, Christopher Hitchens, and Paul Berman.

The appeal of Cotkin's proposed interdisciplinary project for historians will largely rest on these case studies, because he implicitly invites us to ask whether or not they effectively wed history and moral philosophy and whether or not in doing so they shed new light on well-known events and controversies—whether, that is, they exemplify an innovative and attractive way to do history that others will be eager to adopt.

Anyone drawn to the study of any of these cases will want to engage Cotkin's treatment of them. But I want to examine Cotkin's case studies here less for their particulars than to point up some of the general considerations they raise for historians engaged in self-conscious, interdisciplinary moral inquiry.

* * *

As I say, historians can contribute to moral inquiry, sometimes quite unselfconsciously, simply by making use of their own moral imaginations, forged in the common experience of living a human life. And, as in Kosek's case, they sometimes also find themselves with subjects who have elaborated a rich moral vocabulary of their own that the historian can use to tell the story effectively. But philosophers can also provide historians with useful conceptual resources that they can use to illuminate their narratives from the outside, so to speak. We might stipulate that the mark of historians committed to self-conscious, interdisciplinary inquiry is that they, like Cotkin, make use in this fashion of the tools that philosophers have on offer.

Oakland, 10 Oct. 2010), *The Kindly Ones* "demands that we reflect upon the limits of inquiry, both scholarly and artistic, into that which continually exceeds explanation." Littell certainly delivers the complexly evil Eichmann whom Cotkin sketches contra Arendt (23–32). See *The Kindly Ones* (New York, 2009), 145–8, 555–70, 645, 654–7, 679, 749, 763–9, 774–800, 834.

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This borrowing is, to be sure, a two-way street. Moral philosophers may also go in search of a historical narrative or anthropological investigation that illuminates a conceptual issue with which they are wrestling, relying heavily when they do on historians or anthropologists who have gone before them.[10] (I probably have put things too mechanically here. I suspect that much of the best philosophically informed history and historically informed philosophy is the product of a serendipitous firing of synapses in the midst of promiscuous reading by scholars with wide intellectual tastes.)

Ultimately, what makes this a genuinely cooperative interdisciplinary project of moral inquiry is not simply that philosophers provide historians with conceptual resources and historians lend philosophers their stories. Rather the interdisciplinary mix ideally makes for ethical insight that would not otherwise occur without it.

Cotkin attributes to historians a particular debt "to appreciation for complexity and contingency, to paradox and irony," which for him makes them especially valuable contributors to moral inquiry. But valuable though this appreciation is, I doubt it is more commonplace among historians than among others, including philosophers. Rorty's best-known book, for example, was *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*.

One thing, though, that history and the other narrative arts do have to offer moral inquiry, which philosophers have seldom provided, is an insistence that the experience of acting on one's moral convictions affords evidence relevant to the justification of those convictions. As Elizabeth Anderson says,

> empirically grounded knowledge and forms of understanding bear upon the justification of ethical principles themselves. The most important source of empirical knowledge relevant to ethical justification comes from our experiences in living out the lives our ethical principles prescribe for us. We might find life in accordance with the principles we *think* are valid to be deeply unsatisfactory, to pose problems that are intolerable and irresolvable in terms of those very principles. Or we might find lives lived in accordance with fundamentally different principles to be profoundly attractive or appealing. This is different from having the armchair intuition that one approves of such lives

because evidence (which is, of course, defeasible) "is gathered not from armchair reflection, which takes place from an observer's point of view, but from living the lives themselves from the point of view of agents." Any moral inquiry in which historians are likely to participate is one that "sticks closely to the facts of particular social practices and the experiences of those participating in them,

[10] For a remarkable example, see Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge, MA, 2006).

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that lies closer to social criticism than to metaphysical speculation or armchair moralizing."[11]

Kosek provides a good example of the impact of lived experience on moral principles in his discussion of the response of FOR activists to World War II in Europe. He titles this chapter "Tragic Choices." Tragic choices are those in which, whatever one does, one cannot avoid forgoing some desired good or enacting some undesired evil. They are instances in which, as Williams James put it, one must "butcher the ideal."[12] Two individuals committed to the same principles might decide to butcher their ideals in different ways; hence tragic situations are often those which divide groups like the FOR.

The struggle against Nazism was such a tragic divide for the FOR. Kosek shows how, in this instance, their effort to forge a nonviolent politics that would open a path between politically ineffectual individual moral witness and politically effectual but violent coercion ran up against a situation in which it came a cropper. Absent a conceivably effective nonviolent means of resisting Hitler, they were forced to choose between a withdrawal into the sort of apolitical religious witness of the traditional pacifism they were trying to supplant, on the one hand, and, on the other, support for a horribly violent war as the only means sufficient to defeat the Nazis. Gandhi urged European Jews to undertake nonviolent resistance, but, as one American Jewish leader pointedly observed, a "Jewish Gandhi in Germany" would last "about five minutes" (Kosek, 160–61). This situation, irresolvable in terms of their principles in any other than tragic fashion, split the organization. Some opted for war, some opted for retreat from politics into witness, most hemmed and hawed on the sidelines. Niebuhr had them over a barrel.

Among Cotkin's cases, his thorough handling of the My Lai massacre perhaps best illustrates the manner in which a historian's depiction of lived moral experience can affect abstract theory. As Cotkin shows, anyone interested in figuring out why Lieutenant William Calley and his troops went on a murderous rampage, slaughtering hundreds of Vietnamese women, children, and old men, will necessarily have resort to contextual, historical explanations. In this case, as Cotkin shows, such a resort is largely unavailing because none of the contextual factors, near and far, apply strictly to Calley and his men and not to other grunts (including the minority of those at My Lai who did not participate in the crime), who faced similar situations and did not murder civilians. Cotkin admits that

[11] Anderson, "Pragmatism, Science, and Moral Inquiry," 16–17, original emphasis. This essay should be required reading for any historian engaged in moral inquiry. See also *idem*, "John Stuart Mill and Experiments in Living," *Ethics* 102 (1991), 4–26.

[12] William James, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" (1891), in *idem*, *The Will to Believe* (Cambridge, MA, 1979), 154–5.

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explanatory inquiry is inconclusive in this case, and that My Lai remains, in important respects, a mystery.

On the other hand, Cotkin is able to wrest some telling conclusions about moral theory from his investigation of My Lai. He exposes the shortcomings of a strictly rule-based code of conduct such as that provided by the Pentagon to its soldiers as a guide to lived experience. Apt though this code was to the situation at My Lai, in which it clearly enjoined the protection of civilian lives, it failed to take into account the difficult circumstances in which soldiers were called upon to apply these rules. "Army officials," Cotkin observes, "were good Kantians, functioning in a moral universe where moral imperatives were obvious and easily followed . . . They presumed that prescriptive moral rules, if understood by the individual, would guide action under trying circumstances" (90–91). They failed to consider fully the manner in which soldiers were torn between the competing imperatives dictated by these rules and those instructing them to follow orders unquestioningly ("A captain trumped a Kant," 92).

Moreover, the American Army trained soldiers in a way in which the latter imperative was backed by thorough indoctrination and the former was bolstered with little, if any, pedagogy. Cotkin incisively points up the way in which My Lai demonstrated that a rule-based morality required the support of ethical virtues if it was to be effective under difficult circumstances. "No effort was expended on the part of the army to instill these rules with the discipline and courage required to countermand another imperative: obey orders" (91). A good deal of moral instruction, he concludes, lies "in cultivation and education of the virtues," more perhaps than in the articulation of clear rules of conduct (107).

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Two of Cotkin's remaining five cases—bombing civilians in World War II and intervention in Iraq—also involve the morality of war. War is one of the realms of experience best suited to historians venturing to get their feet wet in explicit moral inquiry because there is a rich and venerable body of ethical argument, just-war theory, on which to draw.[13]

[13] In particular, they can begin with one of the most significant books of contemporary moral philosophy, Michael Walzer's *Just and Unjust Wars* (New York, 1977). Walzer's book is subtitled "A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations," and hence is readymade in both substance and approach for historians eager to reverse the emphasis and provide historical interpretations informed by moral philosophy. The book is now in its fourth edition (2006). On its significance see, for example, the twentieth-anniversary symposium in *Ethics and International Affairs* (1997), 1–104. This journal, published by the Carnegie

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Of course, to adopt just-war theory as one's frame of reference is to take a philosophical and moral stance between absolute pacifism (of the sort advanced by some of Kosek's subjects), which regards war as such—however begun and however fought—as unjust, and a hard-boiled "realism," which holds simply that war is hell and justice has nothing to do with it. Writing from either perspective would leave the historian of war with little to say, and even less to say that might be complex, about the moral particulars of any given war. Indeed, as Kosek shows (159), once a war has begun pacifists are sorely tempted to resort, however incoherently, to just-war theory in order to have something incisive to say about the manner in which it is being waged.

Two of Cotkin's cases (My Lai and bombing) involve matters of *jus in bello*, the justice of the way in which a war is waged, and center on one of the key concerns of just-war theory: noncombatant immunity from attack. The third (Iraq) is a question of *jus ad bellum*, the justice of launching a war, in this case one of humanitarian intervention.

Just-war theory is not an entirely settled body of maxims that historians can just pick up and apply. It is, like most moral philosophy, contested terrain. Sometimes, when confronted by strenuous debate among moral philosophers, the wise thing for historians unsure of their footing to do is not to opt for one position or another in that contest but to incorporate the debate into one's account. Sometimes all we might reasonably ask of moral inquiry is a clearer, better set of questions to work with than those with which we began. The historian can enrich a story with competing moral theories but offer no conclusive judgments beyond a plea to consider matters in their full complexity, alert to the fact that not only practical but also theoretical commitments are at stake.

This is what Cotkin does nicely in his case study of debates over the death penalty since the 1970s. He evenhandedly explicates the arguments of both proponents and opponents of the death penalty and effectively situates them in the wider cultural history of the period without taking sides. "People of conscience," he concludes, "can disagree about the morality of the death penalty" (165). But if Cotkin leaves his readers with few answers in this case, he does afford them a clearer sense of where the crucial questions—about deterrence, about retribution, about "just deserts" for criminals and their victims—lie. No small accomplishment.

But in applying just-war theory to the cases of the American bombing of civilians in World War II and liberal support of American intervention in Iraq on humanitarian grounds (as well as My Lai), Cotkin does not hesitate to advance a firm moral judgment. He contends that the intentional Allied bombing of

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Council on Ethics and International Affairs, is indispensable for any historian investigating moral questions involving international politics.

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civilians in World War II was (mostly) unjust and that the War in Iraq failed to meet the criteria of a just humanitarian military intervention. Such frank pronouncements will, no doubt, make some historians uneasy. Not me, and not because I agree (mostly) with them. I see no reason why historians should not render such judgments if they believe the weight of an argument falls on one side or the other.

But I do think that it is incumbent upon historians who self-consciously engage in moral inquiry and make such judgments to lay out clearly for their readers the logic, evidence, and underlying ethical principles guiding them, as well as the logic, evidence, and principles informing competing arguments—and thereby invite informed disagreement with their conclusions. In these two cases, Cotkin comes up a bit short in ways that are generally instructive.

As Cotkin says, one of the fundamental maxims of just-war theory, which has long been settled, is that unarmed, civilian noncombatants are immune from intentional attack, and that due care must be taken to protect them from unintentional harm ("collateral damage") resulting from attacks on military targets. It is this principle that British and American air forces (among others) in World War II often violated, culminating in the conventional bombing of Dresden, the firebombing of Tokyo, and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. One cannot appeal to "military necessity" to justify the intentional bombing of civilians, nor can one subject such bombing to strict cost–benefit, utilitarian calculations. As Michael Walzer says, "we draw a circle of rights around civilians."[14]

This circle of rights collapsed on all fronts in World War II, and nothing about the manner in which the Allies waged their just war against the Axis powers was more unjust than their intentional bombing of cities and their killing of hundreds of thousands of civilians. Cotkin does not dispute this conclusion, but neither does he defend it as vigorously as one might hope. He describes the arguments of generals at the time and historians since who have chalked up the slaughter of civilians to military necessity, but he does not explicitly contest these arguments or convey their implications. He lays out philosopher Robert Nozick's argument that "there is no firm division between innocent civilians exempt from attack and guilty soldiers warranting attack" (52), but he does not confront it, despite the ready response offered to it by such just-war theorists as Walzer.[15]

On the other hand, Cotkin seems to embrace the one exception that Walzer made to noncombatant immunity, his argument that in the case of "supreme emergency," such as that faced by Great Britain early in the war when bombing German cities seemed to Churchill and others the only military action it had

[14] Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 151.

[15] Ibid., 138–59.

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available, the intentional bombing of German civilians was permissible, if not just. When faced with the imminent destruction of their political community by a monstrous enemy like the Nazis, Walzer argues, political leaders may resort (with "dirty hands") to waging war unjustly. But no argument Walzer makes in *Just and Unjust Wars* has proved more controversial.[16] Cotkin does not review this controversy, or indicate why he thinks that Walzer has the better of the debate. My point here is not to agree or disagree with Cotkin (or Walzer) on this particular matter, but to observe that Cotkin's admirable aversion to dogmatism and simplicity sometimes seems to lead him to shy from illuminating argument.

Historians are, I imagine, particularly sensitive to anachronistic moral judgments. One of the most distressing kinds of hectoring moralism is that which evaluates the action of figures from the past by criteria foreign to them and by which they cannot therefore be expected to have abided. We are consequently always on the lookout for contemporaries of our subjects who share our judgments in order that we might advance them ourselves with greater confidence that we have dodged anachronism. In the case of the bombing of civilians, the injustice of intentionally attacking noncombatants was well established in 1939. Yet Cotkin might have better driven this point home by considering, as he does not, the (admittedly dissenting) criticism directed at "area bombing" in World War II by some Americans. Of particular interest and importance, I would say, were the indictments of the practice by Catholics, who drew on the long investment of their faith in just-war theory to offer some of the most penetrating attacks on the wartime collapse of the circle of civilian rights.[17]

In the case of the War in Iraq in 2003, Cotkin offers up a sympathetic account of the argument by liberal hawks for backing the American invasion and occupation on humanitarian grounds—to rescue the Iraqi people from the monstrous Saddam Hussein. For most of the chapter, one has every reason to believe that Cotkin is going to come down on the side of Makiya, Hitchens, and Berman, only to have him reverse course at the very end and argue that their case was compromised by "bad timing." That is, justified though a humanitarian intervention in Iraq might have been in the late 1980s and early 1990s when Saddam was gassing Kurds, there was in 2003 no ongoing human rights emergency of sufficient horror to justify military invasion—as some important human rights

[16] See, for example, Joseph Boyle, "*Just and Unjust Wars*: Casuistry and the Boundaries of the Moral World," *Ethics and International Affairs* 11 (1997), 83–98.

[17] See especially John C. Ford, SJ, "The Morality of Obliteration Bombing," *Theological Studies* 5 (1944), 261–309. John McGreevy has a fine portrait of Ford in *Catholicism and American Freedom* (New York, 2003), 216–49.

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advocates acknowledged.[18] Ironically, the human rights disaster in Iraq that was extreme and ongoing in 2003 was that fostered by the economic sanctions imposed on the country in the wake of the Gulf War. Responsibility for this crisis lay principally not with Saddam Hussein but with the American government. This calamity was not much of a concern to the liberal hawks, and Cotkin does not address it.[19]

But Cotkin's criticism of the liberal hawks rests on a (much less-settled) aspect of just-war theory. In order to protect communal autonomy, prevent the use of humanitarian cover stories for wars of aggression, and forestall the likely threat to human rights of wars however just, humanitarian intervention has been hedged about by most just-war theorists with provisos about the extremity of the disaster (actual or imminent genocide or comparable slaughter) and limits on the scope of the intervention (to end the disaster and get out).[20] Because Cotkin does not fully explicate this dimension of just war theory, his own judgment may strike readers as itself "under-theorized" and even arbitrary. Here again, my brief is for fuller, unhurried moral argument.

* * *

Another thing that historians bring to the table of interdisciplinary moral inquiry along with an attentiveness to lived ethical experience is an abiding interest in conceptual change. We are perhaps particularly well placed to identify important shifts in the moral vocabulary of a culture and to try to explain them. Here, I think, Cotkin misses an opportunity that these same two cases present to exemplify this skill.

Nearly everyone who writes about strategic bombing in World War II notes the striking irony that in September 1939 Franklin Roosevelt delivered a passionate plea to all the belligerent nations to refrain from bombing civilians. Describing the practice as a "form of inhuman barbarism" that "sickened the hearts of every civilized man and woman, and . . . profoundly shocked the conscience of humanity," FDR urged both sides in the conflict to declare that they would "in no event, and under no circumstances, undertake the bombardment of civilian

[18] Cotkin cites the report of Human Rights Watch on Saddam Hussein's violations of human rights in the early 1990s, but not the later report by the same organization criticizing those who claimed that Iraq was justly subject to a human rights military intervention in 2003. See Kenneth Roth, *War in Iraq: Not a Humanitarian Intervention* (New York, 2004).

[19] See Joy Gordon, *Invisible War: The United States and the Iraq Sanctions* (Cambridge, MA, 2010). Gordon's book is another good example of a philosopher turning to history in the service of moral inquiry.

[20] See Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 101–8.

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populations or of unfortified cities" (37–8). Yet by the end of the war American bomber pilots were intentionally targeting civilian populations, culminating in the horrendous firebombing of Tokyo in March 1945 and the dropping of the atomic bombs in August. Obviously, the moral compass of American policymakers changed over a brief six-year period, which calls for an explanation.

As Cotkin says, the historians who have examined this question most closely have argued that American policymakers underwent a "moral slide."[21] That is,

> Small steps—initial mistakes in bombing or small-scale killing of civilians—escalate until the lines blur between aiming at industrial and military targets and the intentional bombing of civilians. Over time, military and civilian officials become hardened to destruction, or it becomes so commonplace that initial qualms are forgotten. (48–9)

Cotkin rejects the moral-slide argument, contending that, no less than the British, American officials were openly committed to total, unrestrained warfare from the outset. "British and American bombing in Europe was uninformed largely by moral concerns about intentional harm being inflicted on civilians" (48). The "customs of war," he implies, simply and inexplicably changed overnight.

But I believe that the evidence suggests otherwise. One can find, in the case of the Pacific war, open avowals of total war on populations, even expressions of genocidal exterminationism that would satisfy a Nazi.[22] But such views were a distinctly minority position. Until late in the war in Europe, the United States insisted on distinguishing its daytime, "precision" bombing from British nighttime area bombing. The firebombing of Japanese cities in 1945 was undoubtedly indiscriminate, but even then American officials were reluctant to admit that they had crossed an important line into the intentional killing of civilians. Even the most bloody-minded, like General Curtis LeMay, attempted to justify civilian casualties in these raids as collateral damage. LeMay said that the "whole purpose of strategic warfare is to destroy the enemy's potential to wage war," and since in Japan such potential was located in cities such as Tokyo, it would mean killing "a lot of women and kids when we burned a city . . . It had to be erased. If we didn't obliterate it, we would dwell subservient to it. Just as simple as that" (Cotkin, 52). In other words, LeMay offered an unadorned utilitarian argument from military necessity with no protective circle of civilian rights or even any of the usual provisos limiting acceptable collateral damage—but not an

[21] Ronald Schaffer, *Wings of Judgment: American Bombing in World War II* (New York, 1985).

[22] For example, the head of the War Manpower Commission, Paul McNutt, publicly declared his support for "the extermination of the Japanese in toto." Quoted in Sahr Conway-Lanz, *Collateral Damage: Americans, Noncombatant Immunity, and Atrocity after World War II* (New York, 2006), 14.

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argument for intentional terror bombing that directly targeted civilian morale of the sort the British often made. Of course—and this is an important part of the evasive "moral slide"—when one adopts weapons as imprecise as firebombing and targets entire cities, the distinction between intended targets and collateral damage is effaced.

One might think that the atomic bombs—weapons of mass destruction exploded in midair over the center of two densely populated cities—would have put paid to these evasions. But they did not. The report of the Interim Committee recommending the use of the atomic bomb euphemistically called for "dual use" targets, combining military or industrial installations, "surrounded or adjacent to homes or other buildings most susceptible to damage" (61). And Harry Truman confided to his diary at Potsdam that the "target will be a purely military target" (62). Even after the bomb was dropped, he insisted publicly on referring to Hiroshima as a "military base."

Cotkin sees such evasions and euphemisms as simple hypocrisy. Maybe so. But hypocrisy is the tribute that vice pays to virtue. Moreover, since such denials were private as well as public, I am inclined to see in them lame efforts at self-deception at work, a deep uneasiness in the midst of momentous conceptual moral change. Occasionally, the defenses would fall, as when Truman, contemplating the use of a third atomic bomb, remarked to his cabinet, according to Henry Wallace, that "he didn't like the idea of killing, as he said, 'all those kids.'"[23] Truman's regrets (albeit never expressed publicly) indicate that the conceptual change—the moral slide to total war—was never complete, and help explain why avowals of ethical constraints on the intentional bombing of civilians were reinserted into American military policy in the postwar years.[24]

In the case of the "military humanism" of liberal hawks and the War in Iraq, Cotkin's criticism of their "bad timing," though apt, fails to grasp that these left-wing supporters of the war shrugged off such criticism at the time because they were engaged in a determined effort to force a conceptual change that would eliminate the constraints that just-war theory had placed on humanitarian

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[23] John Morton Blum, ed., *The Price of Vision: The Diary of Henry A. Wallace* (Boston, 1973), 474. Cotkin overlooks this bit of evidence. The innocence of kids is difficult to refute, even for those such as Nozick who would blur the line between soldiers and civilians. This is probably why the artifact at the center of the controversy in the 1990s over the commemoration of the end of the war at the Smithsonian Institution was the scarred lunchbox of a child.

[24] See Conway-Lanz, *Collateral Damage*. As Conway-Lanz demonstrates, this is not to say that renewing a commitment to these constraints has forestalled the massive loss of civilian life to American bombing since World War II—since not only have the constraints often been violated but they have also left plenty of room for claims of unintentional and hence morally justified killing of innocents.

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military interventions. Some of them went so far as to argue that the overthrow of an oppressive, undemocratic government ("regime change") is grounds for unilateral humanitarian intervention by the United States. That is, they called for the United States to foster "revolution from without" in other nations whenever prudent on the ground that democratic government is among the human rights that states must guarantee to their citizens or face the prospect of the use of military force against them by other states aiming to secure that right. This argument, which Cotkin neglects, was as radical a departure from international law and just-war theory as the Bush Doctrine, which sought to legitimate "preventive war." The fiasco of the American intervention in Iraq has delivered a blow to this effort at conceptual change, but it is very much ongoing.[25]

* * *

The most imaginative and original of Cotkin's case studies is that of the ethical experiment in racial passing that John Howard Griffin undertook in 1959–60 and described a year later in his bestselling *Black Like Me*. The impact of this experiment on American politics has been underplayed, and in scholarly quarters wedded to identity politics; Griffin's effort to put himself in the shoes of a black man in the South has been widely disparaged as presumptive cultural tourism. But Cotkin makes a strong case for Griffin's act as one of "moral courage, conscience, and ingenuity" (119).

Cotkin draws on the arguments of Rorty and other philosophers who argue that moral empathy is most effective not when it descends from a diffuse concern for humanity at large, but rather when it moves upward and outward from the most intimate social relationships in concentric circles toward more distant "others." He effectively construes Griffin's masquerade as "an imaginative intervention in the moral realm," an attempt to "widen the circle of 'we' to encompass fellow whites and black Americans." Griffin was himself wedded to the sort of universalism that Rorty disdained. "There is no 'other'," he said. "All men face the same fundamental human problems of loving, of suffering, of fulfilling human aspirations and of dying" (133). But the genius of his experiment lay not in demonstrating that "otherness" was unreal, but rather in making it clear

[25] For convenient access to the arguments of these liberal hawks see Thomas Cushman, ed., *A Matter of Principle: Humanitarian Arguments for War in Iraq* (Berkeley, 2005). Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA, 2010), is a provocative study of the challenge begun in the 1970s to state sovereignty by human rights activists and their effort to develop a more expansive charter for intervention. For my own view of the liberal hawks, one decidedly more critical than Cotkin's, see Robert Westbrook, "Bourne over Baghdad," *Raritan* 27 (Summer 2007), 104–17.

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that more often than not its reality rested on contingencies elevated by culture and ideology into supposedly necessary and impassable moral divides. The ease with which Griffin could pass out of the circle of "we" into the realm of "they" simply by changing the color of his skin "did yeoman's work in educating white readers to feel the horror of racism and to recognize the false presumptions and entrenched ideals at its core" (119–20).

The study of the ways in which human beings have constructed, maintained, and extended (or constricted) the empathetic moral "circle of 'we'" is one to which historians have devoted considerable attention, even if we have seldom characterized it as such.[26] Indeed, one might well say that this has been among our major contributions to moral inquiry—one which philosophers, even thoroughgoing ethical historicists such as Rorty, have been slow to engage or exploit.

* * *

Finally, a word or two about "moral luck." This is a concept, most closely identified with philosophers Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel, which Cotkin numbers among the most valuable that philosophers have to offer historians.[27] Moral luck points to the formidable role of contingency in the shaping of ethical situations, and thus fits comfortably into the historian's repertoire. "According to the theory of moral luck," he says, "the individual and his or her place in the world is both embedded and circumstantial" (120). Had not Franklin Roosevelt died in April 1945, Harry Truman would not have found himself in August 1945 with the atomic bomb in his hands. And, "one brilliant conceit behind [John Griffin's] project was to demonstrate how a throw of the racial dice determined identity and the consequences of one's life" (120).

Yet as Williams and, especially, Nagel develop the concept of moral luck, it is a good deal more volatile for moral inquiry than Cotkin seems to realize. As they see it, moral luck poses severe and paradoxical difficulties for any effort to attribute responsibility. That is, it introduces mitigations of responsibility that go beyond those we often allow for such things as "involuntary movement, physical force, or ignorance of the circumstances" and extends to all those factors

[26] See, for example, David Eltis, "Europeans and the Rise and Fall of African Slavery in the Americas: An Interpretation," *American Historical Review* 98 (1993), 1399–1423. The "circle of 'we'" phrase was given currency in academic discourse by David A. Hollinger, "How Wide the Circle of 'We'? American Intellectuals and the Problem of Ethos since World War II," *American Historical Review* 98 (1993), 317–37.

[27] Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge, 1981), 20–39; and Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge, 1979), 24–38.

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beyond the control of an agent. We insist that agents not be held accountable for contingencies beyond their control, yet if we apply this stipulation consistently, "it threatens to erode most of the moral assessments we find it natural to make."[28]

On close examination, Nagel observes, "the natural objects of moral assessment are disturbingly subject to luck." Who we are, our "inclination, capacities, and temperament" ("constitutive luck"), the situations in which we find ourselves, the causes and effects of our actions are all in whole or in part beyond our control. "Everything seems to result from the combined influence of factors, antecedent and posterior to action, that are not within the agent's control. Since he cannot be responsible for them, he cannot be responsible for their results." Consequently, "the area of genuine agency, and therefore of legitimate moral judgment, seems to shrink under this scrutiny to an extensionless point."[29]

Nagel takes a dark view of this conundrum posed by moral luck:

> I believe that in a sense the problem has no solution, because something in the idea of agency is incompatible with actions being events, or people being things. But as the external determinants of what someone has done are gradually exposed, in their effect on consequences, character, and choice itself, it becomes gradually clear that actions are events and people things. Eventually nothing remains which can be ascribed to the responsible self, and we are left with nothing but a portion of the larger sequences of events, which can be deplored or celebrated, but not blamed or praised.

We are, Nagel readily acknowledges, appalled by this conclusion, and we are loath to accept it. We refuse to take this "external" view of ourselves or others, insisting on an "internal" view that restores moral agency and responsibility. "About ourselves we feel pride, shame, guilt, remorse—and agent-regret." Hence we insist that our acts "remain ours and we remain ourselves, despite the persuasiveness of the reasons that seem to argue us out of existence." And yet, "the external view forces itself on us at the same time that we resist it," leaving us "with no one to be."[30]

This troubling external view of actions as events, of individual character as the product of constitutive luck, and of consequences as contingent on forces and factors largely beyond the control of actors is, of course, the stock-in-trade of the historian. In this respect, moral inquiry of the sort we are inclined to practice ironically threatens convictions about agency and responsibility essential to moral life as most of us understand it. Vigorously pursuing our explanatory ambitions, we run the risk of exculpatory implication. We flirt with what filmmaker Claude

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[28] Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, 26.

[29] Ibid., 35.

[30] Ibid., 37–38.

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Lanzmann has called "the obscenity of understanding."[31] Moral inquiry is not itself without moral dilemmas.

* * *

As a sometime fellow practitioner of the sort of history Cotkin calls for, I can only applaud his effort to secure for it a wider purchase in the discipline.[32] In that effort, he is breaking new ground in this book, even as he follows in the footsteps of those who have gone before him.[33] And there is much to be learned about the practice of this difficult enterprise from Cotkin's case studies, not only by appreciating their strengths but also by addressing their shortcomings.

That said, it is probably unreasonable to expect that many historians will answer Cotkin's call to self-conscious, interdisciplinary moral inquiry. Most would probably agree with Tony Judt that history is "a discipline peculiarly impervious to high theoretical speculation: the more Theory intrudes, the farther History recedes."[34] The contributions of historians to moral inquiry are likely to continue to remain, like that of Kosek, "under-theorized," if invaluable. Yet if wedding bells are unlikely often to ring for history and moral philosophy, it would be a good thing for ethical inquiry if the two disciplines could at least find themselves, more often than they have, friends with benefits.

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[31] Claude Lanzmann, "The Obscenity of Understanding: An Evening with Claude Lanzmann," *American Imago* 48 (1991), 478. As this suggests, one thing that stands out about Lanzmann's remarkable Holocaust film *Shoah* is his determined refusal of historical argument or understanding, of "why" questions and answers of the sort that historians always bring to the table. "Not to understand was my iron law during all the eleven years of the production of *Shoah*. I had clung to this refusal of understanding as the only possible ethical and at the same time the only possible operative attitude" (478).

[32] See Robert B. Westbrook, *Why We Fought: Forging American Obligations in World War II* (Washington, 2004), esp. 3–4.

[33] Such as Thomas Haskell, who is to my mind the American historian who has yet proved the most adept at self-conscious, interdisciplinary moral inquiry. See Thomas Haskell, *Objectivity Is Not Neutrality: Explanatory Schemes in History* (Baltimore, 1998). This volume contains Haskell's contributions to the debate in the mid-1980s over capitalism and the origins of humanitarian reform, antislavery in particular, in which he participated with David Brion Davis and John Ashworth. This debate, one of the high-water marks in American historiography of the last half-century, is arguably still the richest exemplification to which one could point of the practice of self-conscious moral inquiry by historians. For the full debate, see Thomas Bender, ed., *The Anti-slavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Problem in Historical Interpretation* (Berkeley, 1992).

[34] Tony Judt, *Postwar* (New York, 2005), 399.

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