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Jon A. Levisohn

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Historical Thinking – and Its Alleged Unnaturalness

JON A. LEVISOHN

Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies, Brandeis University

Abstract

No articulation of ‘historical thinking’ has been as influential as Sam Wineburg’s position, according to which historical thinking is, fundamentally, the recognition of the ways in which the past is different than the present. Wineburg argues, further, that achieving that state is ‘unnatural.’ This paper critiques both of these claims, arguing instead that we should replace a generic conception of historical thinking with one that is much more rooted in the specific practice of the discipline. It is surely necessary for students to learn this practice, but it is not unnatural. Instead, learning to think historically is learning to speak the language of the discipline that we call ‘history.’

Keywords: historical thinking, Sam Wineburg, subject-specificity

Introduction

In recent years, the development of ‘historical thinking’ has emerged as a primary goal of history education. O. L. Davis, Jr., wrote in 2001 that ‘scholarly interest in historical thinking, almost absent a decade ago, increases every year’ (Davis, 2001, pp. 10–11). More recently, Joel Sipress and David Voelker wrote that ‘it is *historical thinking* itself, rather than a particular body of historical knowledge, that should be the emphasis of history education’ (Sipress & Voelker, 2009, p. 25). Formulations like this one have become quite common.

What is historical thinking? Some scholars (Andrews & Burke, 2007; Lacy, 2013; Lévesque, 2008; Seixas, 1996) enumerate a set of historiographical concepts. However, each scholar’s set is distinct from that of the others, and it is unclear how we should or could defend the claim that certain concepts are constitutive of historical thinking rather than others. Wineburg (1991, 1992, 2001a, 2003, 2007, 2008) adopts a different approach. For him, historical thinking is—primarily, although not exclusively, as we shall see—the capacity to recognize the ways in which the past is different than the present. He calls this a ‘fundamental historical understanding’ (2001a, p. 109). Moreover, Wineburg claims that this capacity is ‘unnatural,’ that it does not come naturally to human beings. At the same time, he claims that the study of history

has the potential to ‘humanize’ us (e.g. 2001a, p. 5); when we do think historically, we become more fully human. In what follows, I will examine these widely cited claims in order to achieve some clarity about the nature of historical thinking.

Wineburg’s Argument for Unnaturalism

When Wineburg claims that the study of history has the potential to ‘humanize’ us, he is not proposing some vague salutary effect of the humanities on our souls, of the sort famously derided by Stanley Fish (2008). Instead, Wineburg endorses the formulation of Louis O. Mink: history is a ‘standing invitation to discover and enter into modes of seeing different from your own’ (Mink, 1987, p. 103; cited in Wineburg, 2001a; p. 209). History sensitizes us to the ways the past is different from the present, and that sensitivity then carries over to our dealings with other people. Learning that others are not like us is what he means by history ‘humanizing’ us (Wineburg, 2001a, p. 5). ‘Historical thinking ... is essential in teaching people how to understand others different from themselves’ (p. 110). We all begin from a natural assumption that others believe and behave as we do. Studying history disrupts those natural assumptions. That is why historical thinking is ‘unnatural,’ and why it is so important.

Grounded in painstaking research on how novices and experts encounter historical texts, Wineburg’s formulation is particularly compelling to history educators who face rhetorical assaults from those who presume that the purpose of history education is the transmission of information, or alternatively the efficient production of little patriots. Instead, Wineburg helps these educators to focus on the dispositions or character traits—both moral and intellectual—that serve as the ultimate goal of history education. ‘The study of history,’ these educators might retort to their critics, ‘is nothing less than the business of producing human beings.’

But I believe that Wineburg overstates his case. Notice, first, an oddity about the argument that the study of history ‘allows us to take membership in the entire human race’ (2001a, p. 7). History calls us back to our innate humanity; seeing the differences in the past, and seeing the differences in the people around us in the present, represents who we are at our best. And yet, according to the argument, this kind of thinking requires an educational effort that enables us to *overcome* our natural inclinations. ‘Historical thinking,’ he writes,

is neither a natural process nor something that springs automatically from psychological development. Its achievement ... actually goes against the grain of how we ordinarily think. (p. 7)

Later on, he claims that ‘presentism,’ the propensity to assume that the past is like the present, ‘is ... our psychological condition at rest, a way of thinking that requires little effort and comes quite naturally’ (p. 19; see also Wineburg, 2007; p. 7). ‘We are psychologically conditioned to see unity between past and present’ (Wineburg, 2008, p. 36). So presentism is natural, and historical thinking is unnatural. Simply put, therefore, it is unnatural for us to ‘take membership in the ... human race,’ as he put it above. Apparently, it is unnatural for humans to be human.

To be clear, there is no logical inconsistency here. One could argue that it is unnatural for humans to be human because we are born with negative traits that must be overcome if we are to achieve our full ethical potential. So Wineburg might say that it is unnatural for humans to become *fully* human. The point, however, is that the rhetoric of ‘humanizing’ stands in tension with the rhetoric of ‘unnaturalness.’ This tension is a kind of red flag, demanding that we pay closer attention to the particulars of his argument—to which I will now turn.

Derek’s Difficulties

In his research, Wineburg asks Derek, an unusually bright and knowledgeable 17-year-old (Wineburg, 2001a, p. 7 and p. 68), to examine a series of primary documents about the Battle of Lexington Green in Massachusetts in 1775 and to ‘think aloud’ as he does so. Derek studies the evidence closely, astutely concluding that ‘the engagement might have been more one-sided than the term “battle” suggests’ (p. 8). So far, so good; Derek is undeterred by something unfamiliar in the evidence, and integrates that evidence into a newly formulated understanding of the historical event. When he turns to the next task, however, his historical sensitivity seems to evaporate. Asked to select a picture that best represents the event, he rejects the picture of the colonists in disarray that accords with his prior conclusion about the one-sidedness of the battle. Instead, Derek chooses a picture in which the colonists, known as Minutemen, are ‘hiding behind walls, reloading their muskets, and taking aim at the Redcoats’—in other words, a picture that stands in direct tension with his own reading of the evidence.

Why? Derek believes that the colonists *must* have acted in the way depicted in the second picture. ‘They’re thinking they got to hide behind something,’ Derek explains, ‘get at a place where they can’t be shot.’ It could not be otherwise. ‘Their mentalities would be ludicrous if they were going to stand, like, here in [the depiction showing the Minutemen in disarray,] ready to be shot’ (Wineburg, 2001a, p. 8). All the documentary evidence that Derek has seen and interpreted earlier is now apparently irrelevant; he cannot believe that anyone would choose to fight a battle in the way that, according to our best historical evidence, it actually was fought. Instead, Wineburg observes, Derek is guided by ‘a set of assumptions about how normal people behave’ (p. 9).

Wineburg therefore draws a pessimistic conclusion:

His existing beliefs shaped the information he encountered so that the new conformed to the shape of the already known. Derek read these documents but he learned little from them. (p. 9)

Derek thus becomes the poster child for the unnaturalness of historical thinking: we are so locked in the grip of our present conceptions, it seems, that it takes enormous effort and training to break free of them, to see the differences in the historical past. Without that effort and training, we almost inevitably fall back on what we believe.

Perhaps, however, instead of seeing this example as a unified case in which Derek’s preconceptions run roughshod over the contrary evidence, we might rather think

about the two halves of the exercise distinctly. In the first half, Derek is sensitive to the evidence, even though it stands in tension with his familiar understanding of a ‘battle.’ In the second half, Derek rejects the evidence, in favor of a more familiar picture of battlefield tactics. Breaking the example down in this way makes it clear that Derek is not caught in a simple-minded presentism, and calls our attention to a different question: precisely why does Derek draw the conclusions that he does in each case? What enabled his historical thinking in the first task, and what was so hard about thinking about like an historian in the second task?

We cannot ask Derek, of course, but we can generate some possibilities. Perhaps Derek reads texts differently than he ‘reads’ pictures. Perhaps the forced choice of the picture constrains the exploratory nature of a more discursive interpretation in the first half. Alternatively, and more importantly for our purposes, we might explain the discrepancy by acknowledging that Derek’s prior knowledge is also a kind of evidence that he must integrate in making sense of whatever else he encounters.

How does he do this? In the first half of the exercise, Derek employs this prior conception: *‘battles’ are fought between two roughly equal sides*. But in the face of contrary evidence, he concludes that ‘the engagement might have been more one-sided than the term “battle” suggests’ (Wineburg, 2001a, p. 8). The term ‘battle’ suggests equality of combatants, but it has enough flexibility that this prior assumption will not stand in the way of a reassessment. We can easily imagine Derek saying something like this: ‘It’s called the “Battle of Lexington,” so I assumed that the sides were equal. But now that I think about it, sometime battles are fought between armies of different sizes, so I guess it’s not really a problem to call this a “battle.”’ Consider, by way of contrast, a hypothetical student researching another event from the period, the Boston Massacre. If that student were to encounter documents suggesting that the British soldiers acted in self-defense, that they were defended in court by none other than the revolutionary John Adams, and that they were (almost all) acquitted of the charge of murder by a jury of Bostonian civilians—as in fact happened—the emotional and historical weight of the term ‘massacre’ might well provoke some dissonance.

Turning to the second half of the exercise, Derek draws on a different prior conception: *people pursue strategies of rational self-preservation, even in battle*. Otherwise, as he says, ‘their mentalities would be ludicrous.’ This conception guides his selection of the picture, even in the face of the documentary evidence to the contrary. This is not ‘presentism,’ but rather an epistemic predicament to which we should be sympathetic. Should Derek trust his own reading of some documents shown to him, or should he trust his deep-seated intuition about human psychology? In the face of a possible interpretation that seems ‘ludicrous,’ he chooses the reasonable option.

In this exercise, Wineburg is an observer of Derek’s thinking, and does not intervene. But what would happen if Derek were to be confronted with his apparently contradictory interpretive choices? In a classroom setting, a teacher might say, ‘Derek, in choosing this picture of the Minutemen hiding, it seems like you’ve changed your mind about what happened. How does that cohere with your interpretation of the documents ten minutes ago?’ We might discover that the student has not recognized the contradiction. Or we might discover that the student has an ingenious (or nutty) way of reconciling his choices. But the point is that the case of Derek may be

characterized as a situation of epistemic instability, not epistemic resolution. Derek does not represent a conclusive case of the rejection of evidence in the face of presentist preconceptions.

Who Is To Say Who Is Right?

At this point, some readers might go further that I have gone, and argue that there are no epistemic grounds to criticize Derek's choice of the picture at all. When faced with a variety of contradictory bits of evidence, Derek offers a reasonable historiographical judgement. Some historians may disagree with his conclusion, but that just means that they construct a different narrative. After all, theorists like Keith Jenkins (1995) argue that, when it comes to matters of historical interpretation, there's no way to know for sure. Who is to say whose interpretation is correct? What gives Wineburg the right to say that Derek's interpretation represents a failure of historical thinking, in fact to take him as a paradigm of that failure? Or to put the point another way: if we are able to reconstruct Derek's analysis as 'reasonable,' as we apparently just did, then what makes it wrong?

To make this argument even stronger, note that Derek holds many preconceptions that Wineburg would want to endorse, rather than criticize. To make sense of the events of 1775, Derek must inevitably call on his prior understandings of concepts such as *independence* and *authority* and *rebellion* and *monarchy*. Indeed, the list seems infinite. Even those preconceptions that seem to mark differences between Derek's world view and that of the colonists rely, in an interesting way, on similarities. For example, Wineburg writes that if Derek were to stick with his assessment of the textual evidence and question his own assumption about the rationality of self-preservation, this 'might lead him to contemplate codes of behavior—duty, honor, dying for a cause—foreign to his world' (2001a, p. 9). But is it really true that these are foreign concepts for Derek? We can believe that Derek has a hard time imagining that he would willingly expose himself to enemy fire. Derek's beliefs about what duty or honor obligates him to do are dramatically different from those of his forebears two centuries earlier. But the concepts themselves are hardly unfamiliar.

We might even say that the concepts are *familiar in their strangeness*: they are familiar to Derek precisely as values that others hold in a way that he does not. Paradoxically, in order to identify substantive value differences, we must first be able to construct some broader understanding of the value in question in order, then, to articulate those differences ('duty means ... but whereas I feel a duty to ... these people clearly feel a duty to ...'). Wineburg is surely correct that serious contemplation of competing value systems is a good and healthy thing, morally and intellectually, but that contemplation relies upon the familiarity of moral terms like 'duty,' of basic psychological dispositions, and of human reactions to the natural world. Familiarity is not the enemy. The very preconceptions that stand in the way of learning something new about the past or about other people are also those that inevitably structure and enable our encounters in the first place.¹

Thus, if we ought to respect our preconceptions unless and until they are proven inaccurate, and if Derek's own analysis is based on reasonable conclusions when

confronted with bits of contradictory evidence, we return to the question: Why is Derek wrong? In fact, more generally, how can anyone be ‘wrong,’ when it comes to historical interpretation or the construction of historical narratives?

But we should not flee to abstraction, because such abstractions provide no guidance for pedagogic decision-making—about which narratives to teach, for example, or about which qualities of historical interpretation to cultivate. Moreover, we should not flee to abstraction because, in this particular case, there are quite specific reasons to reject Derek’s interpretation. Contrary to Derek’s presuppositions about the rationality of self-preservation, we know well that the norms of warfare have evolved over time. ‘What Derek perceived as natural,’ Wineburg notes, referring to the rational choice to hide behind walls for protection, ‘was perceived as bestly by the Puritans when they first encountered this form of combat’ (2001a, p. 9). In some cultures, armies are massed in orderly fashion against each other; in others, warfare is a highly ritualized encounter between representatives of the warring parties; in still others, war is contested by symbolic small-scale raids (p. 9). This knowledge of the historical and cultural diversity of martial norms plays a crucial role in bolstering the confidence with which we, with Wineburg, reject Derek’s interpretation.

Thus, the best answer to ‘Why is Derek wrong?’ is not that he is locked into his presentist preconceptions, and is incapable of learning new things in general. The first half of the exercise suggests that this is not the case. Rather, Derek is wrong because he is insufficiently sensitive to one historical phenomenon in particular, namely the diversity of martial norms across cultures. To borrow the insight of Alexander Nehamas, ‘We often grant a particular reading plausibility by not looking enough at its details’ (Nehamas, 1981, p. 143). Derek does assume that what is familiar to him is universal, as Wineburg says he does—but not about everything, just about this specific issue. If we ask the skeptical question, ‘Who is to say who is right?’, we ought to have the courage of our historiographical convictions—not because we are sensitive to historical differences whereas Derek is not, not because we have achieved the unnatural condition called ‘historical thinking’ whereas Derek has not, but because we believe that we are right in *this* particular case for *these* particular reasons.

What Is Hard About Thinking Like an Historian

I have been arguing that we should reject Wineburg’s diagnosis that Derek suffers from the malady of presentism—a ‘natural’ condition, according to Wineburg, but still a malady. I was initially tempted to replace one generic diagnosis with another one, a diagnosis that sounded more like alternative medicine: Derek does not have a disease, but rather certain elements are out of balance. He does not need to be cured of his presentism; instead, he needs to bring familiarity and strangeness into equilibrium. But characterizing proper historiographical judgement as balancing familiarity and strangeness is also an abstraction that provides no guidance for the teaching of history—and misses the discipline-specific qualities of historical thinking.

And in fact, no one is more attuned to discipline specificity than Wineburg himself. Consider his discussion of critical thinking. ‘I really don’t believe,’ he says in an interview,

that there are generic, domain-general, free-floating cognitive capacities that hover above a person's ability to read a poem, to solve a physics problem, to interpret historical documents, or to figure out infelicities of grammar in an essay. (Wineburg, 2001b)

Poetry, physics, history, and grammar are substantively different from each other. They each have their characteristic challenges and puzzles, their characteristic intellectual moves, the traditions upon which they call implicitly or explicitly. Engaging in the work of any of these fields entails not the application of a generic disposition called 'critical thinking,' but rather the development of sensitivity to these challenges, familiarity with these moves, and appreciation of these traditions. In this sense, critical thinking, and historical thinking, is like language: we do not learn to speak language, but rather we learn to speak a specific language.

The case of Derek demonstrates the way in which we need to attend to the specific disciplinary contexts of our epistemic judgements. What Derek needs is more experience in the study of history, and more sophistication in his historical analysis. But this does not mean didactic lessons in anti-presentism. It does not mean historiographical shock treatment, to dislodge his natural way of thinking that the past is like the present. Instead, he needs to develop greater sensitivity to the kinds of things that do change over time (including the kinds of historiographical judgements that change over time), as opposed to the kinds of things that do not. This is quite specific to the discipline.

Earlier, I noted that Wineburg diagnoses Derek with the malady of presentism. Switching metaphors, we might say that, for Wineburg, presentism is the cardinal sin of historiography. And if presentism is the cardinal sin, then atonement is achieved through the assumption of historical difference. However, this assumption, if taken globally, is as detrimental as the opposite assumption of historical similarity; just as historical thinkers need to be alert for moments of historical difference, so too they need to be alert to moments of historical similarity. An alternative candidate for the position of the cardinal sin of historiography presents itself, however—the sin of *anachronism*. Anachronism is not the same as presentism. The sin of anachronism occurs when one imports specific elements from the present into the past in an inappropriate fashion. Presentism refers to the mindset of the historian or student of history; anachronism refers to failure in a specific historiographical judgement or detail. To label something as anachronistic is to make the claim that the historian or student of history ought to know better than to employ this specific detail in the historical account. If anachronism is the cardinal sin, rather than presentism more globally, then the atonement is not the assumption of historical difference *tout court*, but rather sensitivity to the specific historiographical clues that tell us when something is out of place. Our concern about Derek, then, is not that he is presentist, but that he is being anachronistic, a concern generated because of our own specific sense of what good students of history ought to know about a specific human phenomenon, namely martial norms. Good students of history ought to know that martial norms change over time, and that people in differing cultures conceive of self-sacrifice in differing ways, placing different values atop the hierarchy.

What Good Historical Thinking Looks Like

Wineburg himself actually provides us with rich empirical material for a better conceptualization of what it means to think historically—in line with the emphasis on the specific and the particular that I have been describing—in his contrasting case of an experienced historian, Alston, confronting a set of primary documents about President Abraham Lincoln (and who was asked, like Derek, to think aloud as he did so). This expert, an Americanist, had not studied Lincoln or the American Civil War since graduate school, and the details of that historical period have receded from his memory. When trying to make sense of the variety of contradictory documents, Alston finds himself stumbling. But with time, and by asking many questions, he sorts them out, and starts to integrate the contradictions between them. ‘Although Alston started the task confused and full of questions, he ended up with a nuanced and sophisticated understanding of Lincoln’s position’ (Wineburg, 2001a, p. 21). Wineburg emphasizes that the various pieces of evidence are not so much placed in their original contexts as they are woven together into a single fabric.

Wineburg then concludes his discussion of Alston as follows.

Alston’s reading shows a humility before the narrowness of our contemporary experience and an openness before the expanse of the history of the species. It grants people in the past the benefit of the doubt by casting doubt on our ability to know them as easily as we know ourselves ... Other readers used these documents to confirm their prior beliefs. They encountered the past and labeled it. Alston encountered the past and learned from it. (p. 22)

In other words, Alston represents exactly what Wineburg has been calling the unnatural but desirable humanized condition.

But, just like the characterization of Derek, this characterization too is overly generic. Alston’s expertise—his ability to find his way and piece together these texts into a coherent whole—ought to be describable in terms that are more particular to the domain of historical thinking (or, the domain of the interpretation of historical documents). Elsewhere Wineburg does offer a depiction of what Alston does well that is somewhat more specific.

His expertise lay not in his sweeping knowledge of this topic but in his ability to pick himself up after a tumble, to get a fix on what he does not know, and to generate a road map to guide his new learning. He was an expert at cultivating puzzlement. (p. 21)

But even this is too generic. While the rhetoric of ‘pick himself up after a tumble’ might indicate a domain-neutral quality of resilience, we can read the description of Alston more closely as suggesting a more discipline-specific sense of what historical thinking entails: a facility in the reading of a certain genre of documents without a pre-conception of what those documents must mean. That facility is expressed in terms of what the historian *does* with them: reading them in a certain way, not getting

discouraged when they do not make sense or when they contradict each other, and especially, knowing how to ask questions about their perspective.

More helpfully, Wineburg develops the specificity of historical thinking in greater detail by identifying typical patterns of behavior among experts that are absent among novices (Wineburg, 1991, 2001a; ch. 3 and ch. 4; Wineburg, 2005; 2007; Wineburg, Martin, & Monte-Sano, 2013; also see Reisman & Wineburg, 2008). For example, he notes that experts engage in what he calls a ‘sourcing heuristic,’ an immediate search for clues about the provenance of a particular text even before the content of the text is considered, and persistent attention to the relationship between provenance and content. In other words, in addition to telling stories about the past, good historians tell stories about the historiographical evidence that they encounter—implicitly or explicitly constructing narratives about what a document is, how it came to be, and what it now means. Wineburg also describes a ‘corroboration heuristic,’ a pattern of cross-checking one document against others, moving back and forth in a non-sequential fashion, weaving multiple sources together into a coherent whole. These practices must be learned over time as novices gain experience in the business of historical inquiry. But they are not ‘unnatural.’

Thus the two cases, Derek and Alston, lead to two conclusions that challenge Wineburg’s own. First, while Wineburg claims that expert historians possess a ‘humility before the narrowness of our contemporary experience,’ precisely the kind of humility that novices like Derek lack, that level of generality misses the real historiographical work here. Alston is not just humbly non-presentist. Instead, he and other expert historians know how to read certain kinds of documents, even outside their specific field of expertise; they know how to interrogate them; they know how to weave them into a meaningful whole. They know how to employ the sourcing heuristic and the corroboration heuristic. These are not merely skills. They are habits of mind and hand, the moves of an intellectual practice combined with the dispositions to pursue them. Wineburg’s own research has brought all this into focus.

Second, the cases of Derek and Alston suggest that historical thinking is a matter of the specific questions that we know to ask, not just a general orientation to the past. Derek’s error is not only that he does not bring the picture of the Minutemen crouching behind the rock wall into engagement with the textual sources, using the corroboration heuristic as a good historian would. He also misinterprets the historical persistence or variation of martial norms, assuming that self-preservation is a constant. We might say, then, borrowing from R.S. Peters’ (1964) formulation, that Derek is not yet sufficiently initiated into a tradition of historiographical inquiry. Historiographical expertise is not just a matter of how we cope with historical materials that are put in front of us, and it is certainly not merely a technical skill. Instead, it seems more accurate to analogize the practice of historical thinking to the speaking of a language. Languages combine form and content; they are historically located but contain within them their own norms of practice; they are learned but they are certainly not ‘unnatural.’ Learning to think like an historian is a matter of learning to speak the language of the discipline of history.

Conclusion

In his classic work *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1971), the great literary critic Lionel Trilling considers the question of the strangeness and familiarity of the past. ‘Generally,’ he writes, ‘our awareness of the differences between the moral assumptions of one culture and those of another is so developed and active that we find it hard to believe there is any such thing as an essential human nature’ (p. 1). That formulation seems to track with the kind of attitude that Wineburg celebrates as mature historical thinking. However, Trilling continues, there are other moments, in our encounter with great literature, ‘that persuade us that human nature never varies’ (p. 2). The pastness of the past dissolves, as we encounter the insights of Sophocles or Shakespeare. And lest we rest on that assumption, in yet another encounter, ‘we find ourselves noting [those features of the historical situation] that distinguish the morality of one age from that of another’ (p. 2). This ambivalence, he suggests, is part of the work of literary judgement. And so it is, too, in historical judgement more generally.

I have argued above that Derek is not stuck in his presentism, and that Alston should not be taken as a paradigm of generic ‘humility’ and ‘openness,’ as Wineburg suggests. Derek is open to the past in one situation, and not in another; his mistake is a local one, reflecting an unfortunate historiographical blind spot, rather than a generic intellectual vice. And Alston’s virtue is likewise discipline specific, reflecting his ability to make his way among conflicting historical materials in the particular way that historians do. In emphasizing these particulars, I have used Wineburg’s own research against his conclusions, drawing on the evidence and arguments that he has generated against his claims about the general ‘unnaturalness of historical thinking.’

I now want to return to Wineburg’s most fundamental argument, about the purposes of history. He introduces us to Derek in order to demonstrate how unnatural it is to see the past as different than the present, as a step towards making the claim that history has the potential to humanize us. How can we help Derek to be more like Alston? How will Derek become more attuned to difference, which is to say, more human? Wineburg’s answer is that the study of history will help us to appreciate the ways in which the past is different than the present.

But there is a flaw in the logical structure of the argument. Wineburg wants to demonstrate that history humanizes us (i.e. it makes us sensitive to the difference of the past). In order to do so, he introduces the example of Derek to suggest that we need humanity (i.e. sensitivity to the difference of the past) in order to interpret history well. In other words, Wineburg wants to claim that A (studying history) causes B (humanity, in the sense of an appreciation of difference). What he actually shows is that not-B (lack of humanity; lack of appreciation of difference) causes not-A (a misunderstanding of history).

Now, if not-B causes not-A, it seems at least plausible that B is a necessary precondition for A. For example, if I assert that the absence of fuel in my car causes the engine not to run, then it is reasonable to conclude that the presence of fuel is a necessary precondition for the engine to function. But even if we agree that B (humanity and appreciation of difference) is a necessary precondition for A (good historical interpretation), it certainly does not follow that the opposite is true, that A (good

historical interpretation) leads to B (humanity). That would be like saying that a functioning engine leads to a full tank of gas! If we are to be convinced that studying history has a particular salutary effect—that it humanizes us—we cannot look to the necessary preconditions for responsible historiography. If B causes A, that is no evidence for a claim that A causes B.

So is Wineburg simply wrong in his argument that good historical interpretation requires sensitivity to the past? Is he simply wrong that history possesses the potential to sensitize us to differences in the past and the present? No, he's not exactly wrong about either of these claims. First, good historical interpretation *does* require sensitivity to the 'pastness' of the past, in some appropriate balance of familiarity and strangeness. But it is more accurate to frame the requirement in more specific terms: good historical interpretation is a matter of being open to the right kinds of things, of asking the right kinds of questions, of appreciating the right kinds of evidence, of making the right kinds of legitimate assumptions while avoiding the wrong kinds. The job of history educators is not to operate at the level of abstract appeals to openness or sensitivity to difference, but to think (with our students) about what kinds of questions we ought to ask of documents and why, to think about categories of analysis and to probe their usefulness, to foster not merely generic habits but the discipline-specific ones that Alston, for example, demonstrates. The empirical research of Wineburg and others who have followed his lead provides us with rich examples of the way that experts ask questions and the categories of analysis that they use—what we might call their discipline-specific intellectual virtues.

Second, the study of history *does* have the potential to humanize us; learning about others *can* encourage our humility about what we think we know. But the causal arrow does not go only one way. Instead, we might think about a circle of causality, in which the study of history has the potential to influence one's general sensitivities, and in which one's general sensitivities have the potential to influence the specific study of history. At the same time, however, we ought to be modest about what kinds of transfer we can expect from one domain to another. On the one hand, one would certainly hope and expect that immersion in educational environments dedicated to the development of intellectual character in particular subject areas would have the potential to influence intellectual character generally. On the other hand, discipline-specificity mitigates skill transfer. An historical judgement about the Minutemen depends on a combination of the abstract virtue of openness to the difference of the past and the specific knowledge that martial norms change over time, so there is no guarantee that that openness will be employed in another setting with other historiographical concepts in play, much less in other domains altogether.

Thus, there is certainly no guarantee that sensitive, humble, and self-aware interpreters of historical documents will also be sensitive, humble and self-aware interpreters of other kinds of literature, much less that they will be sensitive, humble and self-aware individuals in their interpersonal relationships. Wineburg's claim that 'history holds the potential ... of humanizing us in ways offered by few other areas in the school curriculum' (2001a, p. 5) is overly optimistic, and too dependent on a flawed conception of historical thinking as overcoming the unnatural state of presentism. Nevertheless, one may still be convinced that in history, as in other subjects, we ought

to emphasize character, both intellectual and moral, as the most fundamental of our goals.

Is historical thinking unnatural? Not in the sense that Wineburg claims it is. Historical thinking is not primarily a matter of appreciating difference, and even if it were, it would not be unnatural, given that we encounter difference around us all the time. On the other hand, it is surely the case that expert historians enact a set of domain-specific practices that they have had to develop, for no one knows them simply by virtue of being human. They are learned, but not unnatural. It is surely the case, too, that attention to the specific features and aspects of those practices will enable us to conceptualize the learning that novices must undertake, to design learning experiences in a variety of educational institutions that promote that learning with greater efficiency and intentionality than we currently do, and to avoid the misplaced anxiety over the absorption and retention of facts in favor of a more robust depiction of historiographical sophistication. Rather than conceptualizing historical thinking as an unnatural act, then, we should instead conceptualize it as learning to speak and write the language that we call history.

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Note

1. See Hans-Georg Gadamer on 'Prejudices as conditions of understanding' (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 277). Wineburg himself paraphrases Gadamer as follows: 'How can we overcome established modes of thought ... when it is these modes that permit understanding in the first place?' (2001a, p. 10). But on my reading of Gadamer, he is not concerned with *overcoming* established modes of thought, but rather with describing the processes of interpretation in which established modes of thought (along with other necessary pre-judgements) both shape and are shaped by the encounter with the text.

Notes on contributor

Jon A. Levisohn is associate professor and the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Chair in Jewish Educational Thought at Brandeis University, where he directs the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education. Email: levisohn@brandeis.edu.

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