

# Theorizing Historical Consciousness

*Edited by Peter Seixas*



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## Historical Consciousness: Narrative Structure, Moral Function, and Ontogenetic Development<sup>1</sup>

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JÖRN RÜSEN

Question: What comes immediately into your mind, when you think history?

Answer: Today will tomorrow be yesterday.<sup>2</sup>

### A Narrative in Four Variations

The ancient castle of Col is located in the highlands of Scotland. It is the ancestral residence of the chiefs of the Maclean clan and is still in the possession of a member of the Maclean family, who lives in the castle. On the wall is a stone engraved with the following inscription: *If any man of the clan of Maclonich shall appear before this castle, though he come at midnight, with a man's head in his hand, he shall find here safety and protection against all.*

This text is from an old Highlands treaty concluded upon a highly memorable occasion. In the distant past, one of the Maclean forefathers obtained a grant of the lands of another clan from the Scottish king; that clan had forfeited its land by giving offence to the king. Maclean proceeded with an armed force of men to take possession of his new lands, accompanied by his wife. In the ensuing confrontation and battle with the other clan, Maclean was defeated and lost his life. His wife fell into the hands of the victors, and was found pregnant with child. The chief of the victorious clan transferred the pregnant Lady Maclean to the custody of the Maclonich family with a specific stipulation: if the child born should be a boy, it was to be killed immediately; if a girl, the baby should

be allowed to live. Maclonich's wife, who also was pregnant, gave birth to a girl at about the same time Lady Maclean gave birth to a boy. They then switched the children.

The young boy Maclean, having by this ruse of transposition survived the death sentence passed on him before birth, in time regained his original patrimony. In gratitude to the Maclonich clan, he designated his castle a place of refuge for any member of the Maclonich family who felt himself in danger.

This narrative is contained in Samuel Johnson's *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, first published in 1775.<sup>3</sup> It is my intention in this chapter to utilize this story in order to demonstrate the nature of narrative competence and its various forms, and the importance of such competence for moral consciousness. To approach this demonstration in a concrete manner, let us envisage this narrative within the context of an actual situation in which moral values are challenged, and where their use and legitimation require historically based argumentation.

Imagine you are a member of the Maclean clan living now in the ancestral castle: one dark night a member of the Maclonich clan – let us call him Ian – knocks at your door asking for help. He tells you he is being sought by the police because of a crime he is alleged to have committed. How would you react? Would you help hide him from the police, or decide on some other course of action? Imagine that later on you find it necessary to explain what is going on to a friend of yours who chances by and is unfamiliar with the ancient clan narrative. Whatever your action in respect to Ian Maclonich, you are obliged to narrate to your friend the tale about the switched infants in order to make plausible to him (and thus interpretable) the situation in which you find yourself and the decision you have made. Your narration of this clan legend will probably differ depending on the nature of that decision. Moreover, your original decision itself depends on our interpretation of the ancient clan legend about the transposed infants.

I submit that there are four principal possibilities for such an interpretation:

1. You can hide Ian Maclonich because you feel there is a *binding obligation* on your part to honour the ancient Highland agreement. In this case, you will tell your friend that you – as a Maclean – feel obliged to assist Ian because you regard as binding the ancient and still existent ties between the two clans. You then proceed to narrate the legend of the transposed infants, with the conclusion that you will hide Ian Maclonich from the police in keeping with the ancient clan treaty, thus renewing

and continuing its long validity in the relationship between the two clans.

2. You can hide Ian Maclonich, yet do so for a variety of other reasons. Thus, you can say that you have helped Ian because in the past a Maclonich once aided a member of the Maclean clan, and you now feel obliged to reciprocate on the basis of a *general principle* of reciprocity of favours. Or you can say that you are coming to his aid in order to fulfil the obligation of a treaty between clans: because treaties have to be kept as such, that is, they are binding qua treaty. Then you go on to narrate the legend, concluding with a remark that mutual aid or the keeping of a treaty between clans is a guiding and important moral principle for you, as proven already when the male baby was rescued.

3. You can refuse to hide Ian Maclonich. Then you first have to explain his request for help by narrating the tale of the infants and the stone with its inscription. But you will comment on this story by stating that you do not believe it, that it is merely a 'myth' or 'legend' devoid of any evidence or binding validity, and that it does not obligate you morally in any way. Or you can argue that since the introduction of modern English law, those old clan treaties have lost the validity they once had, and are outdated. In this case, you present a series or combination of *critical historical arguments* to relieve yourself of the obligation to keep the ancient treaty. You argue historically in order to sever any bonds between you and the Maclonich clan, which may have been valid and binding in the past.

4. You can decide to convince Ian Maclonich that it is fruitless to hide from the police and that it would be better for him to surrender himself to the authorities. You, in turn, promise to do whatever you can to assist him, for example, by hiring the best lawyer available. In this case, you narrate the tale of the infants, but circumscribe it by adding the following argument: the legal system has gone through an enormous transformation from the clan law of the pre-modern age to our modern period. You still feel obliged to help someone from the Maclonich clan, but wish to do so in a way based on *modern considerations*, and not as the ancient treaty prescribes.

This ancient clan narrative dealing with the Macleans, the Maclonichs, and the exchanged infants in its four variations provides the point of departure for my arguments here. The tale indicates the need for historical consciousness in order to deal with moral values and moral reasoning. Its four variants, I hope to demonstrate, reflect four stages of development by learning.



### The Relationship between Historical Consciousness and Moral Values and Reasoning

In the situation depicted in our narrative, we must decide upon a course of action. Such a decision is dependent on values. These values are general principles, guidelines for behaviour, key ideas, or perspectives that suggest what should be done in a given situation where various options exist. Such values function as a source of arbitration in conflicts and as objectives guiding us when we act.

What does it mean to term such values 'moral'? Our perspectives shape action systematically, acknowledging the social relationship within which we live and have to decide upon a course of action to be taken. They express this social relationship as an obligation for us, addressing us at the core of our subjectivity and calling upon our sense of responsibility and conscience.

How does history enter into this moral relationship between our action, our self, and our value orientations? The narrative sketched at the outset of the chapter can serve to furnish an answer: when moral values are supposed to guide the actions we take in a given situation, we must relate them to this situation, interpret the values and their moral content with respect to the actuality in which we apply them, and evaluate the situation in terms of our code of applicable moral values. For such a mediation between values and action-oriented actuality, historical consciousness is a necessary prerequisite. Without that consciousness, we would not be able to understand why Ian Maclonich has asked us to hide him from the police. Without such consciousness as a prerequisite to action, we would be unable to deal with the situation and arrive at a decision that appears plausible to all parties involved – Ian, my visiting friend, and myself as a Maclean.

But why should historical consciousness be a necessary prerequisite for orientation in a present situation requiring action? After all, such consciousness by definition is pointed toward events in the past. The simple answer is that historical consciousness functions as a specific orientational mode in actual life situations in the present: it functions to aid us in comprehending past actuality in order to grasp present actuality. Without narrating the ancient story of the exchanged infants, it would be impossible to explain to my visiting friend the 'actual situation' and justify – which is to say legitimate – my decision. Moreover, the narrative's explanatory power serves to ground the situation not only for

the uninformed outsider, but for myself as well as an involved party, a Maclean clansman.

What then is specifically 'historical' in this explanation, this interpretation of the situation and its legitimation? In its temporal orientation, historical consciousness ties the past to the present in a manner that bestows on present actuality a future perspective. This implied reference to future time is contained in the historical interpretation of the present, because such interpretation must enable us to act – that is, it must facilitate the direction of our intentions within a temporal matrix. When we say we feel bound or obligated by the ancient treaty, we define a future perspective on our relationship to the Maclonich clan. The same is true of all other historical explanations and legitimations associated with our decision.

I wish to derive a general characteristic of historical consciousness and its function in practical life from the narrative example given.<sup>4</sup> Historical consciousness serves as a key orientational element, giving practical life a temporal frame and matrix, a conception of the 'course of time' flowing through the mundane affairs of daily life. That conception functions as an element in the intentions guiding human activity, our 'course of action.' Historical consciousness evokes the past as a mirror of experience within which life in the present is reflected and its temporal features revealed.

Stated succinctly, history is the mirror of past actuality into which the present peers in order to learn something about its future. Historical consciousness should be conceptualized as an operation of human intellection rendering present actuality intelligible while fashioning its future perspectives. Historical consciousness deals with the past qua experience; it reveals to us the web of temporal change in which our lives are caught up and (at least indirectly) the future perspectives toward which that change is flowing.

History is a meaningful nexus between past, present, and future – not merely a perspective on what has been, *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. It is a translation of past into present, an interpretation of past actuality via a conception of temporal change that encompasses past, present, and the expectation of future events. This conception moulds moral values into a 'body of time' (e.g., the body of the continuing validity of an ancient treaty). History clothes values in temporal experience. Historical consciousness transforms moral values into temporal wholes: traditions, timeless rules of conduct, concepts of development, or other forms of

comprehension of time. Values and experiences are mediated by and synthesized in such conceptions of temporal change.

Thus, the historical consciousness of a contemporary member of the Maclean clan translates the moral idea that treaties are binding and must be fulfilled into the concrete form of an actual treaty valid over time. Historical consciousness amalgamates 'is' and 'ought' into a meaningful narrative that informs about past events to help render the present intelligible, and to bestow upon present activity a future perspective. In so doing, historical consciousness makes an essential contribution to moral-ethical consciousness. The sense-creating procedures of historical consciousness are necessary for moral values, and for moral reasoning as well if the plausibility of moral values is at stake. The reference here is not to a *logical plausibility* of values (in respect to their coherence, for example); rather, it is to plausibility in the sense that values must have an acceptable relationship to reality.

Historical consciousness has a practical function:<sup>5</sup> it bestows upon actuality a temporal direction, an orientation that can guide action intentionally by the agency of historical memory. This function can be termed a 'temporal orientation.' Such an orientation occurs in two spheres of life, involving (a) external practical life and (b) the internal subjectivity of the actors. The temporal orientation of life has two aspects, one external, the other internal. The external aspect of orientation via history discloses the *temporal dimension of practical life*, uncovering the temporality of circumstances as shaped by human activity. The internal aspect of orientation via history discloses the *temporal dimension of human subjectivity*, giving self-understanding and awareness a temporal feature within which they take on the form of historical identity, that is, a constitutive consistency of the temporal dimensions of the human self.

By means of historical identity, the human self expands its temporal extension beyond the limits of birth and death, beyond mere mortality. Via this historical identity, a person becomes part of a temporal whole larger than that of his or her personal life. Thus, the role of a member of the Maclean clan of today presupposes a historical family identity, which extends back to the ancient time when clans battled over a king's gift of territory. By giving Ian Maclonich assistance today, we affirm this identity of what it means to be a Maclean in respect to the future. A more familiar example of such 'temporal immortality' (as historical identity can be characterized) is national identity. Nations often locate their wellsprings in a hoary and ancient past, and project an unlimited future perspective embodying national self-assertion and development.

### The Narrative Competence of Historical Consciousness

The linguistic form within which historical consciousness realizes its function of orientation is that of the narrative. In this view, the operations by which the human mind realizes the historical synthesis of the dimensions of time simultaneous with those of value and experience lie in narration: the telling of a story.<sup>6</sup> Once the narrative form of the procedures of historical consciousness and its function as a means of temporal orientation are clear, it is possible to characterize the specific and essential competence of historical consciousness as 'narrative competence.'<sup>7</sup> Such competence can be defined as the ability of human consciousness to carry out procedures that make sense of the past, effecting a temporal orientation in present practical life by means of the recollection of past actuality.

This general competence concerned with 'making sense of the past' can be divided into three sub-competencies. These can be best defined in terms of the three elements that together constitute a historical narrative: form, content, and function. In respect to *content*, one can speak of the 'competence of historical experience'; in respect to *form*, the 'competence of historical interpretation'; and in respect to *function*, the 'competence of historical orientation.'<sup>8</sup>

1. Historical consciousness is characterized by the 'competence of experience.' This competence entails an ability to have temporal experience. It involves the capacity of learning how to look at the past and grasp its specific temporal quality, differentiating it from the present. A more elaborate form of such competence is 'historical sensitivity.' In terms of our narrative, it is the competence to understand the stone in the wall of the Maclean castle and the need to take note of its inscription: that is, that it bears information important for the members of the Maclean family.

2. Historical consciousness is further characterized by the 'competence of interpretation.' This competence is the ability to bridge time differences between past, present, and future through a conception of a meaningful temporal whole comprising all time dimensions. The temporality of human life functions as the principal instrument of this interpretation, this translation of experience of past actuality into an understanding of the present and expectations regarding the future. Such a conception lies at the core of the meaning-creating activity of historical consciousness. It is the fundamental 'philosophy of history' active within the meaning-creating activities of historical consciousness,

shaping every historical thought. In terms of our narrative, it entails the competence to integrate the event of the exchange of infants into a concept of time which links that ancient period with the present, giving this complex a historically weighty significance for the Macleans in their relationship with the Maclonichs. Such a concept could be embodied either in the notion of the unbroken validity of the treaty or in the evolution of law from a pre-modern form to its modern manifestation.

3. Historical consciousness, finally, is characterized by the 'competence of orientation.' Such a competence entails being able to utilize the temporal whole, with its experiential content, for the purposes of life orientation. It involves guiding action by means of notions of temporal change, articulating human identity with historical knowledge, and interweaving one's own identity into the concrete warp and woof of historical knowledge. In terms of the Highlands narrative, it entails the ability to utilize the interpretation of the treaty in order to deal with the current situation and determine a course of action: that is, to decide whether or not to hide Ian, or assist him in some other way, and to legitimate this decision – in each instance using a 'good historical reason' related to one's identity as a member of the Maclean clan.

#### Four Types of Historical Consciousness

In the preceding sections, an attempt was made to explicate the basic operations of historical consciousness, its relationship to moral consciousness, and its main competencies. Now we turn to the question of *development*.

The various incisive theories on the development of moral consciousness worked out and empirically confirmed by such thinkers as Piaget, Kohlberg, and others are familiar from the literature on cognitive development.<sup>9</sup> My intention here is to propose an analogous theory of development concerning the narrative competence of historical consciousness, so crucial for relating values to actuality or morality to activity by a narrative act: the telling of a story about past events.

In order to find stages of structural development in historical consciousness, it is necessary, first of all, to distinguish basic structures within the procedures involved in making historical sense of the past. I propose to explicate such basic structures in the form of a general typology of historical thinking. This typology conceptually encompasses the entire field of its empirical manifestations, and can therefore be utilized for comparative work in historiography, including intercultural comparisons.<sup>10</sup>

The typology is already implicit in the four different modes of historical argumentation briefly alluded to above in connection with the request by Ian Maclonich to seek refuge from the police. What then is the typological meaning of these four modes?

My starting point is the function of historical narration. As already mentioned, such narration has the general function of serving to orient practical life within time. It mobilizes the memory of temporal experience, developing the notion of an embracing temporal whole, and bestows on practical life an external and internal temporal perspective.

Historical consciousness realizes this general function in four different ways, based on four different principles for the temporal orientation of life: (a) affirmation of given orientations, (b) regularity of cultural patterns and life patterns (*Lebensformen*), (c) negation, and (d) transformation of topical orientating patterns. These are all brought about via the agency of historical memory.

There are six elements and factors of historical consciousness in terms of which these four types can be described. These are displayed in table 1.

#### The Traditional Type

Traditions are indispensable elements of orientation within practical life, and their total denial leads to a sense of massive disorientation. Historical consciousness functions in part to keep such traditions alive.

When historical consciousness furnishes us with traditions, it reminds us of origins and the repetition of obligations, doing so in the form of concrete factual past occurrences that demonstrate the validity and binding quality of values and value systems. Such is the case when, for example, in our role as a member of the Maclean clan, we feel an obligating link to an ancient treaty. In such an approach, both our interpretation of what occurred in the past and our justification for hiding Ian Maclonich are 'traditional.' Some other examples of such 'traditionality' are commemorative public speeches, public monuments, or even private stories narrated by individuals to each other with the purpose of confirming their personal relationship. Thus, both you and your partner will indeed be 'enamoured' of the narrative describing how you first fell in love – if indeed you still love each other.

Traditional orientations present the temporal whole, which makes the past significant and relevant to present actuality and its future extension as a continuity of obligatory cultural and life patterns over time.

TABLE 1 The four types of historical consciousness

	Traditional	Exemplary	Critical	Genetic
Experience of time	Repetition of an obligatory form of life	Representing general rules of conduct or value systems	Problematising actual forms of life and value systems	Change of alien forms of life into proper ones
Patterns of historical significance	Permanence of an obligatory life form in temporal change	Timeless rules of social life, timeless validity of values	Break of patterns of historical significance by denying their validity	Developments in which forms of life change in order to maintain their permanence
Orientation of external life	Affirmation of pre-given orders by consent about a valid common life	Relating peculiar situations to regularities of what had happened and should happen	Delimitation of one's own standpoint against pre-given obligations	Acceptance of different standpoints within a comprising perspective of common development
Orientation of internal life	Internalization of pre-given life forms by limitation – role taking	Relating self-concepts to general rules and principles – role legitimization by generalization	Self-reliance by refutation of obligations from outside – role making	Change and transformation of self-concepts as necessary conditions of permanence and self-reliance – balance of roles
Relation to moral values	Morality is dictated by obligatory orders; moral validity as unquestionable stability by tradition	Morality is the generality of obligation in values and value systems	Breaking the moral power of values by denying their validity	Temporalization of morality; chances of further development become a condition of morality
Relation to moral reasoning	The reason of values is their effective pre-giveness, enabling consent in moral questions	Arguing by generalization, referring to regularities and principles	Establishing value criticism and ideology critique as important strategies of moral discourses	Temporal change becomes a decisive argument for the validity of moral values

Traditional orientations guide human life externally by means of an affirmation of obligations requiring consent. Such traditional orientations define the 'togetherness' of social groups or whole societies in the terms of maintenance of a sense of common origin. In regard to internal orientation, such traditions define historical identity, the affirmation of predetermined cultural patterns of self-reliance and self-understanding. They shape identity formation as a process in which roles are assumed and played out.

The importance of tradition for moral values is clear. Traditional historical orientation defines morality as tradition. Traditions embody morality as an unquestioned stability of *Lebensformen*, cultural and life patterns over time and its vicissitudes.

With respect to moral reasoning, traditions are reasons upholding and underpinning the moral obligation of values. If practical life is orientated predominantly in terms of traditions, the reason informing values lies in the permanence of their actuality in social life, a permanence that history serves to bring to our recollection.

### *The Exemplary Type*

It is not traditions we utilize here as argument – but rather rules. The story of the struggles between the clans and the transposition of the two infants stands here for a general timeless rule: it teaches us what course of action to take, and what to refrain from doing.

Here historical consciousness deals with the experience of the past in the form of cases representing and embodying rules of temporal change and human conduct. The horizon of time experience is significantly expanded in this mode of historical thought. Tradition moves within a rather narrow frame of empirical reference, but historical memory structured in terms of exempla is open to process an infinite number of past events, since they do not possess any specific significance in themselves, but rather only in relation to an *abstract idea of temporal change and human conduct*, valid for all times, or whose validity is at least not limited to the specific event.

The pattern of significance involved here has the form of timeless rules. History in this conception is viewed as a past recollected with a message or lesson for the present, as didactic: *historia vitae magistra* is a time-honoured apothegm in the Western historiographical tradition.<sup>11</sup> It teaches rules, their derivation from specific cases, and their application.

The mode of orientation realized by historical consciousness in this



exemplary type is rule-focused: it entails the application of historically derived and proven rules to actual situations.

Many classical examples of historiography in a variety of differing cultures reflect this type of historical significance. In the ancient Chinese tradition, the best example is the classic by Suma-Kuang, *Tzu-chih t'ung-chien* (*A Mirror for Government*). Its very title indicates how it conceives of the past as exemplum: political morality is taught in the form of cases of governments that have succeeded or failed.

In respect to the internal orientation of life, exemplary historical thinking relates life roles and principles, and functions to legitimate such roles by abstract reasoning. Historical identity is here constituted by one's assuming the regularity of cultural and life patterns. Historical identity is given the shape of prudence (*prudentia*). Exemplary historical thinking provides competence in deriving general rules from specific cases and applying them to other cases.

Such a mode of historical consciousness makes a significant contribution to moral reasoning. Exemplary historical thought discloses the morality of a value or value system culturally embodied in social and personal life by proving its generality: that is, that it has a validity extending beyond its immediate concrete eventfulness, a validity extending to a gamut of situations. Morality is conceptualized as having timeless validity.

The contribution of this mode of historical interpretation to moral reasoning is clear: history teaches moral argument by means of the application of principles to specific and concrete situations – such as a knock on the door by a member of the Maclonich clan in the dead of night.

### *The Critical Type*

The decisive argument in the critical version of our narrative is that as a member of the Maclean clan, we feel no obligation whatsoever to its presumed 'binding' quality. For us, it is an ancient tale that has lost any relevance for present action and actuality. Yet this is not automatically so: as a Maclean, we are still somehow a part of this story, for the ancient stone indeed bears its inscription upon our wall. Thus, we must discredit the story if we do not wish to help Ian in his distress. We must present a new interpretation that – by means of historical reasoning – denies the validity of the treaty.

The easiest way to do this is to state that the story is untrue. In order to

be convincing, however, we must muster evidence, and that requires us to engage in critical historical argumentation, establishing the plausibility of the contention that there are no historical reasons that could motivate us to offer help to Ian Maclonich.

We can develop an ideological critique, stating that there was a ruse involved, a trick by the Maclonichs to trap the Macleans into a kind of moral dependence on them. We can argue that even in that ancient period, it was prohibited to murder infants, which is the pivotal motif on which the narrative turns. Such argumentation is based on offering elements of a 'counter-narrative' to the one behind the stone engraving. By means of such a 'counter-narrative' we can unmask a given story as a betrayal, debunk it as misinformation. We can also argue critically in another way, contending that the treaty engraved on the stone has lost its current validity, because new forms of law have since emerged. Then we can narrate a brief 'counter-story,' that is, the story of how laws have changed over time.

What are the general characteristics of such a mode of historical interpretation? Here, historical consciousness searches for and mobilizes a specific kind of experience of the past: evidence provided by 'counter-narratives,' deviations that render problematic present value systems and *Lebensformen*.

The concept of an embracing temporal totality including past, present, and future is transformed in this mode into something negative: the notion of a rupture in continuity still operative in consciousness. History functions as the tool by which such continuity is ruptured, 'deconstructed,' decoded – so that it loses its power as a source for present-day orientation.

Narratives of this type formulate historical standpoints by demarcation, distinguishing them from the historical orientation entertained by others. By means of such critical stories we say *no* to pre-given temporal orientations of our life.

In regard to ourselves and our own historical identity, such critical stories express a negativity; what we do not want to be. They afford us an opportunity to define ourselves unentangled by role determinations and prescribed, predefined patterns of self-understanding. Critical historical thinking clears a path toward constituting identity by the force of negation.

Its contribution to moral values lies in its critique of values. It challenges morality by presenting its contrary. Critical narratives confront moral values with historical evidence of their immoral origins or consequences. For example, modern feminists criticize the principle of moral

universality. They claim that it channels us into overlooking the nature of 'otherness' in social relations in favour of an abstract universalization of values as a sufficient condition of their morality. They contend that such 'universalization' is highly biased and ideological, serving to establish the male norm as the general human norm and disregarding the uniqueness qua gender of men and women as a necessary condition of humanity.<sup>12</sup>

Critical historical thinking injects elements of critical argumentation into moral reasoning. It calls morality into question by pointing to cultural relativity in values contrasted with a presumed and specious universality, by uncovering temporal conditioning factors as contrasted with a bogus 'timeless' validity. It confronts claims for validity with evidence based on temporal change, highlighting the relativizing power of historical conditions and consequences. In its most elaborate variant, such critical thinking presents moral reasoning as an ideology-critique of morality. Two classic examples of such an enterprise are Marx's critique of bourgeois values<sup>13</sup> and Nietzsche's *Genealogie der Moral*.<sup>14</sup>

### *The Genetic Type*

At the core of these procedures for making sense of the past lies change itself. In this framework, our argument is that 'times have changed': we thus deny both the option of hiding Ian owing to traditional or exemplary reasons and of critically negating the obligation to this old story as a reason for refusing to hide him. In contrast, we accept the story, but place it in a framework of interpretation within which the type of obligation to past events has itself changed from a pre-modern to a modern form of morality. Here *change* is of the essence, and is what gives history its sense. Thus, the old treaty has lost its former validity and taken on a new one; consequently, our behaviour necessarily differs now from what it would have been in the distant past. We understand it within a process of dynamic evolution.

We therefore choose to help Ian Maclonich, but in a way different from that prefigured in the treaty preserved in stone on the wall of our castle. We allow the story to become part of the past; at the same time, however, we bestow upon it another future. It is change itself that gives history its meaning. Temporal change sheds its threatening aspect, instead becoming the path upon which options are opened up for human activity to create a new world. The future surpasses, indeed 'outbids,' the past in its claims on the present – a present conceptualized as an

intersection, an intensely temporalized mode, a dynamic transition. This is the quintessential form of a kind of modern historical thought shaped by the category of progress, though it has been thrown into radical doubt by speculations on postmodernity by a certain segment of the contemporary intellectual elite.

Historical memory in this mode prefers to represent the experience of past actuality as transformational, such that alien cultural and life patterns evolve into more positive 'modern' configurations.

The dominant pattern of historical signification here is that of development, where patterns change in order, paradoxically, to maintain their very permanence. Thus, permanence takes on an internal temporality, becoming dynamic. In contrast, permanence by tradition, by timeless exemplary rules, by critical negation – that is, the rupture of continuity – is in essence static in nature.

This mode of historical thinking views social life in all the profuse complexity of its sheer temporality. Differing standpoints are acceptable because they can be integrated into an embracing perspective of temporal change. Returning to our narrative, we as the modern Maclean are eager to persuade the modern Maclonich that it would be wisest for him to turn himself over to the police, and then accept our aid. His expectations and our reaction must intersect, and we believe that this intersection is part of the historical interpretation within which we deal with the actual situation. This mutual acknowledgment is part of the future perspective we derive from the past through our decision in the present not to offer him refuge, but rather to help him in a way we believe is more in keeping with the tenor of our times: 'I know a good lawyer.'

In respect to our self-understanding and self-reliance, this type of historical consciousness imbues historical identity with an essential temporalization. We define ourselves as being a cross-point, an interface of time and events, permanently in transition. To remain what we are, not to change and evolve, appears to us as a mode of self-loss, a threat to identity.<sup>15</sup> Our identity lies in our ceaseless changing.

Within the horizon of this kind of historical consciousness moral values become temporalized, morality shedding its static nature. Development and change belong to the morality of values conceptualized in terms of a pluralism of viewpoints and the acceptance of the concrete 'otherness' of the other and mutual acknowledgment of that 'otherness' as the dominant notion of moral valuation.

According to this temporalization as a principle, moral reasoning relies here essentially on the argument of temporal change as necessary

or decisive for establishing the validity of moral values. Thus, one can move on from the final stage in the Kohlbergian scheme of the development of moral consciousness to a higher stage: moral principles include their transformation within a process of communication. It is here that they are realized concretely and individually, engendering difference; those differences, in turn, activate procedures of mutual acknowledgment, changing the original moral form. One fascinating illustration of this stage of moral argumentation, which cannot be elaborated on in the context of this essay, is the example of the relations between the sexes. The idea of universal human rights is another key example demonstrating the plausibility of this genetic mode of argumentation in reference to moral values.<sup>16</sup>

This typology is meant as a methodological and heuristic tool for comparative research. Insofar as morality is connected with historical consciousness, we can utilize the typological matrix to help categorize and characterize the cultural peculiarities and unique features of moral values and modes of moral reasoning in different times and places. Since elements of all four types are operatively intermixed in the procedure that gives practical life a historical orientation in time, we can reconstruct complex relations among these elements in order to pinpoint and define the structural specificity of empirical manifestations of historical consciousness and their relationship to moral values.<sup>17</sup>

### The Development of Narrative Competencies

It is not my intention here to focus on the comparative method in historiography. Instead, I wish to make use of the typology in order to construct a theory of the ontogenetic development of historical consciousness. Such a theory is familiar from psychological studies on cognitive development,<sup>18</sup> but to my knowledge there has been no serious attempt to date to widen this psychological perspective by investigating historical consciousness and its cognitive competencies. Since historical consciousness can be conceptualized as a synthesis of moral and temporal consciousness, it might appear to be a relatively simple matter to develop a genetic theory of historical consciousness. Unfortunately, however, we find that Piaget and his followers have pursued the category of time only within the framework of the natural sciences,<sup>19</sup> so that their work remains basically silent on questions of historical consciousness.

To embark upon an investigation of historical consciousness and its essential relationship with moral consciousness it is first necessary to

clear the ground, as it were: that is, a theoretical framework must be constructed that defines the field and explicates in conceptual terms what the basic questions are. It is my view that the typology sketched above can effectively serve such a purpose. It defines fundamentally and discloses the procedures of historical consciousness, even affording some basic notions as to what the development of historical consciousness might entail.

What conceptions of development can indeed be derived from the typology? We can come closer to answering this by logically ordering the types in a sequence defined by the *principle of precondition*.

The traditional type is primary, and does not presuppose other forms of historical consciousness, yet it constitutes the condition for all other types. It is the font, the beginning of historical consciousness. The logical sequence of types, each the precondition for the next is as follows: *traditional, exemplary, critical, genetic*. Though this sequence is based on logical criteria, it may have empirical applications, and there is reason to assume it is also a structural sequence in the development of historical consciousness.

The sequence entails increasing *complexity* in several aspects. Stages in human evolution can also be described in terms of an increasing capacity to digest complexity.

1. Growth in complexity can be specified and differentiated following the logical ordering of preconditions. Thus, the extent of experience and knowledge of past actuality expands enormously as one moves from the traditional to the exemplary. The critical type requires a new qualification of temporal experience based on the distinction between 'my own time' and the 'time of the others.' Finally, the genetic type goes even beyond this quality by the temporalization of time itself: that is, 'my own time' is dynamic, altering, undergoing change, as is that 'of the others' as well.

2. There is also a growth in complexity with regard to the patterns of historical significance. There is no relevant difference between fact and meaning in the form of traditional historical consciousness. They diverge in exemplary historical consciousness. In the critical form, meaning itself undergoes differentiation, intensified into even more complex differentiation in the genetic form.

3. There is a similar growth in the degree of abstraction and complexity of logical operations.

4. In addition, there is an increasing complexity of external and internal orientation. In external orientation, this can be demonstrated

by the manner in which historical consciousness characterizes social life: traditions are exclusivistic, and present one's own cultural and life patterns as the only acceptable *Lebensformen*. Exemplary thinking enlarges upon this by generalization, while critical thought elaborates definite, critique-based standpoints and delimitations. Genetic thought clears the temporal ground for a pluralism of standpoints.

5. Moving through the typological series, there is growing complexity in relation to historical identity. It begins with the unquestioned form of historical self-understanding imprinted by tradition and extends on to the fragile balance engendered by multidimensional, multiperspectival genetic forms.

My arguments here have been principally theoretical, but there appears to me to be a certain amount of empirical evidence as well to substantiate the hypothesis that historical consciousness follows the typological order sketched here in its evolution.

6. Everyday observations demonstrate that the traditional and exemplary modes of historical consciousness are widespread and frequently encountered; critical and genetic modes, in contrast, are far more rare. This fact correlates with the degree of education and knowledge, and with the progress of the human intellect toward more complex capacities.

7. Experience in the teaching of history in schools indicates that traditional forms of thought are easiest to learn, that the exemplary form dominates most history curricula, and that critical abilities, and genetic abilities even more so, require enormous amounts of effort by both teacher and pupil.

### Observations on Historical Learning and Empirical Research

In conclusion, I would like to turn to the question of historical learning. Learning can be conceptualized as a process of digesting experience, of absorbing it into competencies. Historical learning is a process of digesting the experience of time into narrative competencies.<sup>20</sup> 'Narrative competence' is here understood as the ability to narrate a story by means of which practical life is given an orientational locus in time. This competence consists of three principal abilities:

- 1 the ability to experience, which is related to past actuality;
- 2 the ability to interpret, related to the temporal whole, which combines (a) experience of the past with (b) understanding of the present and (c) expectations regarding the future; and

- 3 the ability to orient, related to the practical need to find a path through the straits and eddies of temporal change.

In theoretical terms, it is not difficult to explicate the development of historical consciousness as a process of learning. Learning is conceptualized in this framework as a specific quality of the mental procedures of historical consciousness. Such procedures are termed 'learning' when competencies are acquired to (1) experience past time, (2) interpret it in the form of history, and (3) utilize that interpretation for the practical purpose of orientation in life.

Using the typology, historical learning can be explained as a process of structural change in historical consciousness. Historical learning entails far more than simply acquiring knowledge of the past and expanding the stock of that knowledge. Seen as a process by which competencies are progressively acquired, it emerges as a process of changing the structural forms by which we deal with and utilize the experience and knowledge of past actuality, progressing from traditional forms of thought up to the genetic modes.

Thus, the typology offers a basis for a usefully differentiated theory of historical learning. Such a theory combines three central elements of narrative competence (experience, interpretation, orientation) and four stages of their development. A theory of historical learning of this kind can be of some significance for the theory of the development of moral consciousness and moral learning.

Unfortunately, theory alone does not suffice for dealing with the knotty questions of historical and moral consciousness. The proof of theory lies in amassing empirical evidence substantiating its theses, and here research still needs to be done. There have been empirical studies on historical consciousness and historical learning,<sup>21</sup> but there is still no comprehensive psychology of historical learning. No further study on the relationship between historical and moral consciousness and learning seems to exist.

An investigation of this nature faces formidable obstacles; principal among these is the intricate complexity of historical consciousness and its competencies. The four types presented here are not strict alternatives, permitting a simple count of their distribution in manifestations of historical consciousness. Normally, the types appear in complex admixtures, and it is necessary to discover their hierarchical ordering and relationship in any empirically given manifestation of historical consciousness. Nonetheless, the typology can focus our sights, and function heuristically in defining questions and preparing strategies for use in



empirical studies. Such a typology impresses on investigators that what is important to discover in regard to historical consciousness is not the extent of knowledge involved, but rather the framework and effective principles operative in making sense of the past.

How can these principles be found in empirical evidence? There is one basic, elicitation-oriented approach: let persons relate narratives that are relevant for the temporal orientation of their own personal lives, and then analyse the narrative structures of such stories. Such an investigative tack seeks to establish answers to questions such as these: what type (in the typology) do these elicited narratives seem to follow? Is there any relation between the dominant type and the age of the narrator? Or with his/her level of education?

Empirical experiments have been undertaken by our students using this approach in connection with the Highlands story.<sup>22</sup> They were told the clan tale of Maclean and Maclonich in a highly 'neutral' version. They were confronted with the current situation of Maclean and asked to decide what he should do in regard to Ian Maclonich's request for assistance, and to write a short justification of their decision containing a specific reference to the motif of the transposed infants. These texts were then analysed with regard to the patterns of historical interpretation they utilized. Empirically, the four types were indeed distinguishable, and it even proved possible to differentiate more sensitively between these basic types of the typology. It was established that there are significant correlations between the narrative patterns used, age of the respondent, and stage of education and learning.

This constitutes only one limited example of empirical research, and questions were not explored regarding the moral component of historical consciousness. Nonetheless, I would contend that any discussion of moral values and moral reasoning should also attempt to relate to the associated dimensions of historical consciousness and learning.

## Notes

1 First published in *History and Memory* 1, no. 2 (1989): 35–60.

2 Answer of a student on a questionnaire concerning historical consciousness, February 1987 (cf. Jörn Rüsen et al. 'Untersuchungen zum Geschichtsbewußtsein vom Abiturienten im Ruhrgebiet,' in Bodo von Borries, Hans-Jürgen Pandel, and Jörn Rüsen, eds, *Geschichtsbewußtsein empirisch* (Pfaffenweiler: Centaurus, 1991): 221–344.

- 3 Samuel Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1971), 133ff. The version of the tale presented here is simplified.
- 4 A summarizing description is given by Karl-Ernst Jeisman, 'Geschichtsbewusstsein,' in Klaus Bergman, Annette Kuhn, Jörn Rüsen, and Gerhard Schneider, eds, *Handbuch der Geschichtsdidaktik* (Düsseldorf: Schwann, 1985), 40–4; cf. Jeisman, *Geschichte als Horizont der Gegenwart: Über den Zusammenhang von Vergangenheitsdeutung, Gegenwartsverständnis und Zukunftsperspektive* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1985), 43ff.
- 5 This question is discussed principally from the narrow perspective of the function of historical studies in social life, for example, by Jürgen Kocka, *Sozialgeschichte: Begriff – Entwicklung – Probleme*, 2nd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), 112–31. Also see Jörn Rüsen, *Lebendige Geschichte, Grundzüge einer Historik III: Formen und Funktionen des historischen Wissen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989).
- 6 See Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); Jörn Rüsen, *Historische Vernunft: Grundzüge einer Historik I: Die Grundlagen der Geschichtswissenschaft* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983); Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984–1988); and David Carr, *Time, Narrative and History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).
- 7 I have sketched an outline of a theory of narrative competence in respect to the question of the main objectives of historical learning in 'Historisches Lernen: Grundriß einer Theorie,' in *Historisches Lernen: Grundlagen und Paradigmen* (Köln: Böhlau, 1994), 74–121.
- 8 For a more detailed explication see Jörn Rüsen, 'Historical Narration: Foundation, Types, Reason,' *History and Theory*, Beiheft 26: *The Representation of Historical Events* (1987), 87–97.
- 9 Jean Piaget, *Das moralische Urteil beim Kinde* (Frankfurt am Main: 1973); Lawrence Kohlberg, *Zur kognitiven Entwicklung des Kindes* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974); cf. R.N. Hallam, 'Piaget and Thinking in History,' in Marin Ballard, ed., *New Movements in the Study and Teaching of History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), 162–78.
- 10 For a more detailed explanation of this typology, see Jörn Rüsen, 'Die vier Typen des historischen Erzählens,' in *Zeit und Sinn: Strategien historischen Denkens* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer-Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1990), 153–230; and Rüsen, *Lebendige Geschichte, Grundzüge einer Historik III*, part I.
- 11 Cf. Reinhart Koselleck, 'Historia Magistra Vitae: Über die Auflösung des Topos im Horizont neuzeitlich bewegter Geschichte,' in R. Koselleck

- Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979), 38–66.
- 12 Cf. Seyla Benhabib, 'The Generalized and the Concrete Other: Visions of the Autonomous Self,' *Praxis International* 5, no. 4 (1986): 402–24.
  - 13 E.g., human and civil rights, in his essay 'Zur Judenfrage.' In Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke 1* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1964).
  - 14 Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Zur Genealogie der Moral' (1887), in Giorgio Colli and Massimo Montinari, eds, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe in fünfzehn Einzelbänden* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1988), 5: 245–412.
  - 15 One of Bertolt Brecht's 'Stories of Mr. Keuner' illustrates this point beautifully: 'A man who hadn't seen Mr. Keuner for a long time greeted him with the remark: "You don't look any different at all." "Oh," said Mr. Keuner, and turned pale.' Bertholt Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke 12* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1967), 383 (my translation).
  - 16 Cf. Ludger Kühnhardt, *Die Universalität der Menschenrechte: Studie zur Ideengeschichtlichen Schlüsselbestimmung eines politischen Schlüsselbegriffs* (Munich, 1987). Jörn Rüsen, 'Menschen- und Bürgerechte als historische Orientierung,' in *Historisches Lernen: Grundlagen und Paradigmen* (Köln: Böhlau, 1994), 204–35.
  - 17 An interesting contribution to such comparison with special respect to Chinese historiography is Changtze Hu, *Deutsche Ideologie und politische Kultur Chinas: Eine Studie zum Sonderwegsgedanken der chinesischen Bildungselite 1920–1940* (Bochum: Studienverlag Brockmeyer, 1983).
  - 18 Cf. note 7. In addition, see Hans G. Furth, *Piaget and Knowledge: Theoretical Foundations* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1969).
  - 19 Cf. Jean Piaget, *Die Bildung des Zeitbewußtseins beim Kinde* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974).
  - 20 Cf. Jörn Rüsen, *Historisches Lernen: Grundlagen und Paradigmen* (Köln: Böhlau, 1994), passim.
  - 21 Recent publications in this field in Germany include Bodo von Borries, Hans-Jürgen Pandel, and Jörn Rüsen, eds, *Geschichtsbewußtsein empirisch* (Pfaffenweiler: Centaurus, 1991); Bodo von Borries, Jörn Rüsen, et al., eds, *Geschichtsbewußtsein im interkulturellen Vergleich: Zwei empirische Pilotstudien* (Pfaffenweiler: Centaurus, 1994); Magne Angvik and Bodo von Borries, eds, *Youth and History: A Comparative European Survey on Historical Consciousness and Political Attitudes among Adolescents*, 2 vols. (Hamburg: Körber-Stiftung, 1997); Bodo von Borries, *Jugend und Geschichte: Ein europäischer Kulturvergleich aus deutscher Sicht* (Opladen: Leske & Budrich, 1999); Bodo von Borries, *Das Geschichtsbewußtsein Jugendlicher: Eine repräsentative Untersuchung über Vergangenheitsdeutungen, Gegenwartswahrnehmungen und*

- Zukunftserwartungen von Schülerinnen und Schülern in Ost- und Westdeutschland* (Weinheim: Juventa Verlag, 1995); Bodo von Borries, 'Forschungsprobleme einer Theorie des Geschichtsbewußtseins: Am Beispiel einer Studie zum empirischen Kulturvergleich,' in Horst-Walter Blanke, Friedrich Jaeger, and Thomas Sandkühler, eds, *Dimensionen der Historik: Geschichtstheorie, Wissenschaftsgeschichte und Geschichtskultur heute: Jörn Rüsen zum 60. Geburtstag* (Köln: Böhlau, 1998), 139–52; and Bodo von Borries and Hans-Jürgen Pandel, eds, *Zur Genese historischer Denkformen: Qualitative und quantitative Zugänge (Jahrbuch für Geschichtsdidaktik 4)* (Pfaffenweiler: Centaurus, 1994).
- 22 Hans-Günter Schmidt, "Eine Geschichte zum Nachdenken," Erzähltypologie, narrative Kompetenz und Geschichtsbewußtsein: Bericht über einen Versuch der empirischen Erforschung des Geschichtsbewußtseins von Schülern der Sekundarstufe I (Unter- und Mittelstufe),' *Geschichtsdidaktik* 12 (1987): 28–35.