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Citation

Paul, H. J. (2024). A virtue ethics for historians: prospects and limitations. *History And Theory*, 63(4), 3-22. doi:10.1111/hith.12364

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

ARTICLE

A VIRTUE ETHICS FOR HISTORIANS: PROSPECTS AND LIMITATIONS

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ABSTRACT

How feasible would it be to develop a virtue ethics for historians that is analogous or similar to virtue-ethical approaches to research integrity that have been proposed for other areas of academic inquiry? The field of history is an interesting one, as few disciplines have an equally well-documented history of thinking, talking, and writing about virtues. This history merits ethicists' attention, as it offers a unique opportunity for grounding ethical reflection in the lived realities of historical research and teaching. In the spirit of a "history and philosophy of history," this article contributes to such a project by staging a conversation between virtue ethics and the history of historiography. Drawing on a range of nineteenth- and twentieth-century examples, it argues that much of what applied virtue ethicists are recommending scholars to do has a long pedigree in the history of historiography. Critical virtue ethics, too, is a project to which historians can easily relate, especially insofar as they are committed to virtues of truthfulness in an age of post-truth. If this suggests that there is room, or perhaps even a need, for a virtue ethics for historians, the cases examined in this article also prompt critical questions, especially ones regarding the teachability of virtue, the potential of virtue talk to be misused for polemical and exclusionary purposes, and the sort of tasks that a virtue ethics is capable of addressing. In light of these considerations, the article calls for reflection on the "affordances" of virtue. It claims that the case for a virtue ethics will be strongest if it is grounded in a realistic understanding not only of the beneficial uses to which categories of virtue can be put but also of unintended uses to which virtue talk is susceptible and of tasks for which virtue thinking is less prepared.

Keywords: applied virtue ethics, ethics of history, historians' virtues, history and philosophy of history, history of historiography, scholarly virtues, virtue ethics

INTRODUCTION

How feasible would it be to develop a virtue ethics for historians that is analogous or similar to virtue-ethical approaches to research integrity that have been proposed for other areas of academic inquiry? Recent decades have seen an upsurge of interest in virtue-ethical projects, primarily in business ethics and medical ethics, but also in the sciences, social sciences, and humanities.² Much of this

1. Research for this article was funded by the Dutch Research Council (NWO).

2. Key titles include Bruce Macfarlane, *Researching with Integrity: The Ethics of Academic Enquiry* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Marilyn C. Morris and Jason Z. Morris, "The Importance

interest seems to be driven by a desire for what Carl Schneider, in a book about institutional review boards, called an “ethics with a human face”: an ethics that does not consist of rules or protocols but helps scholars navigate the complex demands of ethical integrity in real-life situations.³ What does integrity mean in a culture of haste? Is generosity in crediting others a laudable habit or an effective means of killing one’s career? To what extent is moral anger an appropriate attitude for researchers dealing with violent events? When scholars call for virtue-ethical reflection, they do so in the hope that virtues—traits of character, partly innate and partly acquired, which are regarded as desirable, generally or in specific contexts⁴—may serve as idioms for talking about personal (attitudinal, dispositional, motivational) aspects of research and teaching that rarely surface in methodology handbooks or scientific codes of conduct. More importantly, they hope that such conversations will contribute to a culture in which teachers and researchers stimulate each other to develop “vocational virtues” more actively than universities currently tend to do.⁵

As sympathetic as this may sound, there are both benefits and risks involved in talking about virtues that scholars should display. This article seeks to identify some of these by exploring the prospects and limitations of a virtue ethics for historians. In line with the examples just given, “virtue ethics” here serves as shorthand for a *practice-oriented* type of virtue ethics that is committed to providing practitioners with tools for fostering habits that are conducive to the goals of their practice. I will be talking not about moral philosophies that try to prove the conceptual priority of virtue over duty or happiness⁶ but about a historian’s equivalent to what is usually referred to as “applied virtue ethics.”⁷ How feasible

of Virtue Ethics in the IRB,” *Research Ethics* 12, no. 4 (2016), 201–16; Nathan Emmerich, ed., *Virtue Ethics in the Conduct and Governance of Social Science Research* (Bingley: Emerald, 2018); Clare Rawdin, “Calming the ‘Perfect Ethical Storm’: A Virtue-Based Approach to Research Ethics,” *Ethics and Education* 13, no. 3 (2018), 346–59; Robert T. Pennock, *An Instinct for Truth: Curiosity and the Moral Character of Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019); Celia Deane-Drummond, Thomas A. Stapleford, and Darcia Narvaez, eds., *Virtue and the Practice of Science: Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (Notre Dame, IN: Center for Theology, Science, and Human Flourishing, 2019); and John Duffy, *Provocations of Virtue: Rhetoric, Ethics, and the Teaching of Writing* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2019).

3. Carl E. Schneider, *The Censor’s Hand: The Misregulation of Human-Subject Research* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 134.

4. This deliberately broad definition draws on Jennifer Cole Wright, Michael T. Warren, and Nancy E. Snow, “Our Working Model of Virtue,” in *Understanding Virtue: Theory and Measurement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 12, and Blaine J. Fowers, Bradford Cokelet, and Nathan D. Leonhardt, *The Science of Virtue: A Framework for Research* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), 20.

5. For example, Jonathan Brant, Edward Brooks, and Michael Lamb, eds., *Cultivating Virtue in the University* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), Jason Baehr, *Deep in Thought: A Practical Guide to Teaching for Intellectual Virtues* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2021); and Jason S. Baehr, ed., *Intellectual Virtues and Education: Essays in Applied Virtue Epistemology* (New York: Routledge, 2017). The term “vocational virtues” comes from Pennock, *An Instinct for Truth*, xx.

6. For more on this, see Timothy Chappell, “Virtue Ethics in the Twentieth Century,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics*, ed. Daniel C. Russell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 149–71, and William David Solomon, “Early Virtue Ethics,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Virtue*, ed. Nancy E. Snow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 303–20.

7. On “applied virtue ethics” as a response to “philosophy’s overwhelming concentration on moral semantics and its apparent inattention to practical moral problems,” see Guy Axtell and Philip Olson,

would such an equivalent be? If historians care about honesty, accuracy, and love of truth, can they foster such qualities in their students by presenting them with exemplars embodying these virtues? Would virtue-ethical thinking be able to serve as a corrective to academic reward systems that value productivity over creativity? Or would it rather be a means of keeping established truth-power relations in place, enabling academic establishments to censure minority voices on moral grounds? What would, in other words, be the advantages and disadvantages of developing a historian's equivalent to such studies as *The Virtues in Medical Practice*, *The Virtuous Physician: The Role of Virtue in Medicine*, and *Virtue in Business: Conversations with Aristotle*?⁸

What makes the field of history an interesting case study for exploring these questions is that there are few other disciplines, with the possible exception of medicine,⁹ that have an equally well-documented history of thinking, teaching, and writing about virtues. Recent scholarship shows that historians have been assessing historiographical competence in terms of virtues for millennia.¹⁰ Already in ancient Greece and early Han China, historians stylized themselves as men surpassing others in industry, accuracy, or truthfulness.¹¹ Also, they engaged in spirited debates about the perceived virtues or vices of their predecessors. Had Herodotus been a “father of history” or a “father of lies”?¹² Had Sima Qian epitomized a “righteous air” or betrayed his vocation with a “love for the strange, contrary to the spirit of the Classics”?¹³ To a degree that scholars are only beginning to appreciate, this ancient legacy shaped much of historical thinking up until

“Recent Work in Applied Virtue Ethics,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (2012), 183. On the relation between applied virtue ethics and “virtue ethics as a theoretical approach to moral philosophy,” see Rebecca L. Walker and Philip J. Ivanhoe, introduction to *Working Virtue: Virtue Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems*, ed. Rebecca L. Walker and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 2. When I speak about “practice-oriented” instead of applied virtue ethics, I do so because I find the adjective “applied” a little too constraining. It implies, if not a priority of theory over practice, then at least a mode of analysis in which theoretical analysis precedes empirical investigation.

8. Edmund D. Pellegrino and David C. Thomasma, *The Virtues in Medical Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); James A. Marcum, *The Virtuous Physician: The Role of Virtue in Medicine* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012); Edwin M. Hartman, *Virtue in Business: Conversations with Aristotle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

9. Robert Baker, *Before Bioethics: A History of American Medical Ethics from the Colonial Period to the Bioethics Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Andrew Wear, Johanna Geyer-Kordesch, and Roger French, eds., *Doctors and Ethics: The Earlier Historical Setting of Professional Ethics* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993); Earl E. Shelp, ed., *Virtue and Medicine: Explorations in the Character of Medicine* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985).

10. In Herman Paul, *Historians' Virtues: From Antiquity to the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), I have tried to provide a state-of-the-art overview, with references to all relevant literature in modern Western languages up until 2022.

11. Alexander Meeus, “Truth, Method and the Historian's Character: The Epistemic Virtues of Greek and Roman Historians,” in *Reconciling Ancient and Modern Philosophies of History*, ed. Aaron Turner (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 83–122.

12. J. A. S. Evans, “Father of History or Father of Lies: The Reputation of Herodotus,” *The Classical Journal* 64, no. 1 (1968), 11–17.

13. Esther Sunkuyng Klein, *Reading Sima Qian from Han to Song: The Father of History in Pre-Modern China* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 215; Liu Xie, *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons: A Study of Thought and Pattern in Chinese Literature*, transl. Vincent Yu-chung Shih (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1983), 87.

the modern period. In the confessional quarrels dividing early modern Europe, it was the virtue of impartiality that emerged as a marker of reliability, just as in the heyday of nationalist fervor it was objectivity that became a virtue for historians pretending only to serve “science” (*Wissenschaft*).¹⁴ Textbooks on historical methods presented themselves as “manuals of virtue,” while students of history were advised to consider another career choice if they failed to possess the qualities needed for archival research.¹⁵ Book reviewers evaluated not only books but frequently also authors’ character traits as reflected in their publications.¹⁶ Even in the second half of the twentieth century, at a time when many believed to live “after virtue,” historians continued to draw on repertoires of virtue, most notably in reviews and methodology manuals, but also, more subtly, in documents such as the American Historical Association’s “Statement on Professional Conduct.”¹⁷

This rich history of virtue thinking offers us an interesting opportunity to approach the question with which we started—what are the prospects and limitations of a virtue ethics for historians?—from a historical perspective. Drawing on historians’ centuries-long experience with virtues and vices, we might ask: Is there a sense in which historical insight may contribute to current virtue-ethical reflection?¹⁸ What are the prospects and limitations of a virtue ethics for historians in light of how their predecessors in centuries past used to talk, teach, and quarrel about virtues? What lessons are there to learn, or what warnings to heed? In the spirit of what I have elsewhere called a “history and philosophy of history,”¹⁹ this article will explore these questions by staging a conversation between practice-oriented virtue ethics, on the one hand, and recent historiographical studies of historians’ virtues, on the other, in the expectation that cross-fertilization between the two may contribute to a grounded assessment of what a virtue ethics for historians can and cannot provide.²⁰

14. Joseph H. Preston, “English Ecclesiastical Historians and the Problem of Bias, 1559–1742,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 32, no. 2 (1971), 203–20; Lorraine Daston, “Objectivity and Impartiality: Epistemic Virtues in the Humanities,” in *The Making of the Humanities*, vol. 3, *The Modern Humanities*, ed. Rens Bod, Jaap Maat, and Thijs Weststeijn (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), 27–41.

15. Henri-Irénée Marrou, *De la connaissance historique* (Paris: Seuil, 1954), 10; Ch.-V. Langlois and Ch. Seignobos, *Introduction aux études historiques* (Paris: Hachette, 1898), 97. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

16. Sjang ten Hagen, “Evaluating Knowledge, Evaluating Character: Book Reviewing by American Historians and Physicists (1900–1940),” *History of Humanities* 7, no. 2 (2022), 251–77; Christiaan Engberts, “Scholarship, Community Formation and Book Reviews: The *Literarisches Centralblatt* as Arena and Meeting Place,” *Studia Historiae Scientiarum* 20 (September 2021), 651–79.

17. Kim M. Hajek, Herman Paul, and Sjang ten Hagen, “Objectivity, Honesty, and Integrity: How American Scientists Talked about Their Virtues, 1945–2000,” *History of Science* 62, no. 3 (2024), 442–69.

18. One rare example of a study addressing this question is Thomas H. Bivens, “The Language of Virtue: What Can We Learn from Early Journalism Codes of Ethics?,” in *The Ethics of Journalism: Individual, Institutional, and Cultural Influences*, ed. Wendy N. Wyatt (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 165–84.

19. Herman Paul, “History and Philosophy of History (HPH): A Call for Cooperation,” in *Philosophy of History: Twenty-First-Century Perspectives*, ed. Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 165–79.

20. On the importance and limitations of grounding virtue ethics in empirical research, see Fowers, Cokelet, and Leonhardt, *The Science of Virtue*, esp. 291–309.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Drawing lessons from the past is, of course, an issue fraught with difficulties. Two of them stand out: philosophers' hesitation to derive normative judgments from empirical findings and historians' worry that lessons simplify the past or encourage selective readings of the historical record. In light of these concerns, it is important to spell out what (and what not) to expect from an encounter between history and virtue ethics as staged in this article. First of all, the is/ought distinction remains in place: empirical findings cannot tell virtue ethicists what to do. This is not because there are watertight divisions between normative theorizing and empirical research; rather, it is because even the most persistent habits of past generations do not prevent us from making choices different from theirs. (How else could we distance ourselves from deeply entrenched patterns of racial or colonial thinking?) A justified rejection of such legacies, however, is something different than ignorance of past experiences. If research integrity specialists develop e-learning modules and online group exercises for stimulating scientists' moral character development,²¹ it may be useful to recall that Plato's question "Can virtue be taught?" has been endlessly debated throughout the centuries, with only some philosophers answering the question unambiguously in the affirmative.²² In light of this history, the hope for quick educational fixes may be a little naive. Similarly, as wonderful as it may sound to stimulate impartiality, honesty, and fair-mindedness—who could be against this?—the history of virtue thinking shows that non-white and non-male individuals have often been denied the dispositional ability to develop such virtues (with objectivity, thoroughness, and perseverance being almost routinely framed as masculine virtues).²³ As long as there are no checks and balances against such abuses of virtue talk, unqualified enthusiasm about the promises of virtue-ethical reflection seems unwarranted. Notably, in both of these examples, the "lessons" provided are sobering ones: they call for caution. This exemplifies the spirit in which I would like to conduct the conversation between virtue ethics and the history of historiography. Historical insight is not an arbiter in matters ethical but a source of practical knowledge, full of liberating and sobering experiences, awareness of which may help ground ethical theory in the lived realities of historical research and teaching.

This also goes a long way toward addressing historians' worry that the desire to draw lessons from the past is incompatible with serious historical inquiry. I regard this worry as justified to the extent that such lesson-drawing violates historians'

21. Natalie Evans et al., "VIRT²UE: A European Train-the-Trainer Programme for Teaching Research Integrity," *Research Ethics* 20, no. 2 (2024), 187–209.

22. See, for example, W. K. C. Guthrie, *The Sophists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 250–60; Yong Huang, "Can Virtue Be Taught and How? Confucius on the Paradox of Moral Education," *Journal of Moral Education* 40, no. 2 (2011), 141–59; Matthew Rose, "Can Virtue Be Taught? Thomistic Answers to a Socratic Question," *The Thomist* 77, no. 2 (2013), 229–60; and Alessandra Tanesini, "Teaching Virtue: Changing Attitudes," *Logos and Episteme* 7, no. 4 (2016), 503–27.

23. Falko Schnicke, *Die männliche Disziplin: Zur Vergeschlechtlichung der deutschen Geschichtswissenschaft 1780–1900* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2015).

standards of inquiry, for instance, by projecting present-day concerns onto the past, interpreting the historical record through excessively teleological lenses, or dividing historical agents into good and bad. Also, insofar as the desire to learn from the past is premised on an assumption of continuity between past and present that is historically untenable, historians' reservations about the exercise are fully warranted. Arguably, however, one can learn from the past without engaging in "presentism," "Whiggism," or "moralism." The best way to learn something new—to expand one's horizons, to stretch one's imagination—is to open oneself to unfamiliar perspectives. From this, it follows that the "otherness" of the past is not an obstacle but a precondition for learning anything valuable from the past.²⁴ In addition, historians would do well to abandon the idea that insights gained from historical study take the form of categorical statements ("lessons"). Learning from the past is better understood as a widening of one's understanding of human possibilities, or what William Walsh called "a concrete grasp of such things as: how human beings with specified characters and specified aims react to situations apprehended under this or that description; what sorts of obstacle people encounter in pursuing goals of certain kinds in certain describable conditions; what sorts of consequences, other than intended consequences, human actions can have, again in circumstances of particular kinds."²⁵ If this article stages a conversation between virtue ethics and the history of historiography, it does so in the hope of enriching virtue-ethical reflection with this kind of history-based insight.

One final clarification is in order. What "history-based insight" looks like depends, of course, on the selection of historical examples. In a satirical text such as Lucian's *How to Write History*, historians' virtues appear in a different light than in Liu Xie's *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*. Likewise, Catholic *érudits* in seventeenth-century France spoke differently about the qualities needed for historical study than authors such as Edmundo O'Gorman, the Mexican historian who detested historical antiquarianism. If this is one reason not to generalize too quickly from individual case studies, another reason for caution is that the secondary literature is still uneven. Despite promising attempts to expand the scope of research to Latin America, Asia, and Africa²⁶ as well as to earlier periods such as Greek and Roman antiquity,²⁷ most research so far has focused on historical scholarship in nineteenth- and twentieth-century

24. Herman Paul, *Key Issues in Historical Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 123–38.

25. W. H. Walsh, "What Can We Learn from Historians?," in *La philosophie de l'histoire et la pratique historique d'aujourd'hui* [Philosophy of history and contemporary historiography], ed. David Carr et al. (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1982), 183.

26. João Rodolfo Munhoz Ohara, "The Disciplined Historian: 'Epistemic Virtue', 'Scholarly Persona', and Practices of Subjectivation: A Proposal for the Study of Brazilian Professional Historiography," *Práticas da História* 1, no. 2 (2016), 39–56; João Rodolfo Munhoz Ohara, "Virtue Language and Boundary Drawing in Modern Brazilian Historiography: A Reading of *Historians of Brazil*, by Francisco Iglésias," *História da Historiografia* 12, no. 30 (2019), 44–70; Dawid Rogacz, "The Virtue of a Historian: A Dialogue between Herman Paul and Chinese Theorists of History," *History and Theory* 58, no. 2 (2019), 252–67; L. R. C. Schulte Nordholt, "Africanising African History: Decolonisation of Knowledge in UNESCO's *General History of Africa* (1964–1998)" (PhD diss., Leiden University, 2021).

27. Meeus, "Truth, Method and the Historian's Character."

Europe.²⁸ Although this creates a representativity problem for anyone aiming for high-level generalizations (“this is what most historians in most times and places have typically done”), the sort of insight that I am after does not require such generalizations. It rather consists of Walsh-like reminders of the kind that certain pedagogical views *may be* implied in the language of virtue or that virtue talk *may have* exclusionary effects for women and other minority groups—in full awareness of the fact that the same vocabulary has *also* been used to challenge masculine standards of intellectual life.²⁹ The prospects and limitations that I will identify are, consequently, not timeless features of an ahistorical discourse but strengths and weaknesses suggested by the experiences of some historians in some particular times and places.

I will start on a positive note by arguing that some of the things virtue ethicists care about have long been familiar to historians. In this first round of conversation, not much dissonance will arise. In the second round, by contrast, I will use historical examples to raise some critical questions that ethicists may want to attend to. While none of these points invalidate a virtue ethics for historians, they call for caution and constant awareness of what virtue does and does not afford.

TEACHING STRATEGIES

Although historians may have a hard time following philosophical debates about the nature of virtue (How does virtue contribute to human flourishing [*eudaimonia*]? To what extent does it resemble a skill? Is every virtue flanked by two vices?), they will easily find common ground with applied virtue ethicists. This is because the focus in this subfield lies on practices where people learn to be virtuous or find themselves prevented from cultivating virtues. For historians, such first-order concerns are recognizable enough. When they speak about virtues needed for historical study—honesty, impartiality, open-mindedness—they usually do so with practical aims in mind: teaching students, assessing colleagues’ work, or drawing critical attention to forces threatening their professional integrity. Although this first-order discourse may be informed by theoretical assumptions, in the way that the old trope of the “born historian” (*historicus nascitur non fit*) presupposed a pedagogy of virtue in which nature mattered

28. For example, Elise Garritzen, *Reimagining the Historian in Victorian England: Books, the Literary Marketplace, and the Scholarly Persona* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023); Christiaan Engberts, *Scholarly Virtues in Nineteenth-Century Sciences and Humanities: Loyalty and Independence Entangled* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021); J. J. L. Saarloos, “The Scholarly Self under Threat: Language of Vice in British Scholarship (1870–1910)” (PhD diss., Leiden University, 2021); Herman Paul, “The Virtues of a Good Historian in Early Imperial Germany: Georg Waitz’s Contested Example,” *Modern Intellectual History* 15, no. 3 (2018), 681–709; Jo Tollebeek, *Men of Character: The Emergence of the Modern Humanities* (Wassenaar: NIAS, 2011); and various contributions to Herman Paul, ed., *How to Be a Historian: Scholarly Personae in Historical Studies, 1800–2000* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019).

29. John J. Conley, *The Suspicion of Virtue: Women Philosophers in Neoclassical France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); Sandrine Berges, *A Feminist Perspective on Virtue Ethics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

more than nurture,³⁰ its goal is not to enable reflection on the concept of virtue as such but to serve as an idiom for reflection on more practical matters: Should historians be loyal to the state? Is writing *sine ira et studio* something to aspire to or something to reject? How can we design our courses in such a way as to help students develop the “skills, habits of mind, and critical methods that make up the mental process of the good historian”?³¹

Not only will ethicists’ questions resonate with historians, but some of their proposed answers will too. Several of the teaching strategies recommended by applied virtue ethicists have a long pedigree in the history of historiography. Take the strategy of naming and defining virtues (“direct instruction on core virtue concepts and terms”).³² Lists of virtues that historians need to possess can be found across the centuries, from Lucian’s *How to Write History* (“That, then, is the sort of man the historian should be: fearless, incorruptible, free, a friend of free expression and the truth”) to Jacques Barzun and Henry Graff’s *The Modern Researcher* (1957) and Zachary Schrag’s *The Princeton Guide to Historical Research* (2021).³³ Many nineteenth- and twentieth-century student manuals told aspiring historians in some detail what virtues they needed and what vices they must avoid. According to one of the most influential titles in the genre, “patience is the cardinal virtue of the scholar. . . . The true scholar is cool, reserved, circumspect. . . . [H]e ought to be gifted with prudence, an exceptionally powerful attention and will, and . . . to combine a speculative turn of mind with complete disinterestedness and little taste for action”—qualities that the authors went on to unpack with definitions, admonitions, and examples.³⁴

Similarly, historians will have no difficulty recognizing a second virtue-ethical teaching strategy: adding flesh and blood to abstract virtues by studying the lives and works of eminent scholars. In response to Robert Pennock and Michael O’Rourke counseling scientists to expose their students to exemplars of virtue (by reading Darwin’s autobiography or watching a video about Einstein),³⁵ historians might declare that they have done such things since ancient times. The history of historiography is full of stories about historians who were called courageous because they showed a commitment to truth-telling even if this put their lives at risk (a famous anecdote from *The Commentary of Zuo*) or impartial because

30. See Donald R. Kelley, *The Descent of Ideas: The History of Intellectual History* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 163, and Lutz Danneberg, “Kunst, Methode und Methodologie bei August Boeckh,” in *August Boeckh: Philologie, Hermeneutik und Wissenschaftspolitik*, ed. Christiane Hackel and Sabine Seifert (Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2013), 239–40.

31. Conal Furay and Michael J. Salevouris, *The Methods and Skills of History: A Practical Guide* (Arlington Heights: Harlan Davidson, 1988), 8.

32. Evans et al., “VIRT²UE,” 191. See also Duffy, *Provocations of Virtue*, 124–25.

33. Lucian, *How to Write History*, in *Lucian*, vol. 6, transl. K. Kilburn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), 57 (*Hist. conscr.* 41); Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff, *The Modern Researcher* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1957), 56–60; Zachary M. Schrag, *The Princeton Guide to Historical Research* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 24–35.

34. Ch. V. Langlois and Ch. Seignobos, *Introduction to the Study of History*, transl. G. G. Berry (New York: Henry Holt, 1932), 126–27. For the original phrasing, see Langlois and Seignobos, *Introduction*, 103.

35. Robert T. Pennock and Michael O’Rourke, “Developing a Scientific Virtue-Based Approach to Science Ethics Training,” *Science and Engineering Ethics* 23 (January 2017), 250–51.

they had done “admirable justice” to people of other religious backgrounds (as Edmond Bolton, in seventeenth-century England, claimed about Bede).³⁶ Indeed, before the history of historiography became a field of its own, one committed to examining instead of reproducing historians’ collective memories, the most common way for historians to be remembered by posterity was because of virtues that they had supposedly embodied (Sérgio Buarque de Holanda as an epitome of scholarly rigor) or vices to which they had involuntarily lent their names (“Hugh Trevor-Roper” serving as a byword for racist prejudice among African historians in the 1960s).³⁷

Practicing (“learning by doing”) is another didactic practice that has a longer history than applied virtue ethicists seem to be aware of. As Kasper Risbjerg Eskildsen has argued, nowhere did historians’ virtues matter more than in the informal seminar-like gatherings that nineteenth-century German historians called “historical exercises.” While methodology books listed the virtues deemed necessary for aspiring historians, it was only in small-group research exercises, later known as seminars, that students learned how to be accurate, critical, fair-minded, and impartial. These virtues were cultivated not primarily by reflecting on them but, more practically, by reading Carolingian charters, subjecting them to source criticism, bringing the results to bear on the existing literature, and having one’s argument torn apart by a clever fellow student—all under the watchful eye of a senior historian who was expected to exemplify the virtues that the students tried to develop.³⁸

It would be easy to dismiss these examples of naming, exemplifying, and practicing virtues as relics from bygone eras. It is true that historians no longer commemorate their predecessors with hagiographical speeches, marble busts, or (in the Japanese case) portraits decorated with bonsai, laurel, and chrysanthemums.³⁹ However, while the modes of commemoration have changed, some of the didactic principles at work in the examples above have persisted. In many history departments around the world, seminars are still reminiscent of nineteenth-century *historische Übungen*, even if their learning objectives are formulated in terms of skills rather than virtues. Similarly, making abstract standards concrete with real-life examples is a didactic strategy that introductions to historical studies have continued to employ, although the emphasis has sometimes shifted from historians’ character traits to the virtuous or not-so-virtuous

36. “The Assassination of Duke Chuang of Ch’i,” in *The Tso Chuan: Selections from China’s Oldest Narrative History*, transl. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 147; Edmond Bolton, *Hypercritica; or, A Rule of Judgment for Writing, or Reading Our History’s* (Oxford, 1722), 213.

37. Ohara, “Virtue Language,” 60; Schulte Nordholt, “Africanising African History,” 53–56.

38. Kasper Risbjerg Eskildsen, “Virtues of History: Exercises, Seminars, and the Emergence of the German Historical Discipline, 1830–1900,” *History of Universities* 34, no. 1 (2021), 27–40; Kasper Risbjerg Eskildsen, “The Humanities in the Vocational University: On the Unity of Teaching and Research,” in *Writing the History of the Humanities: Questions, Themes, and Approaches*, ed. Herman Paul (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 267–85.

39. Falko Schnicke, “Rituale der Verkörperung: Seminarfeste und Jubiläen der Geschichtswissenschaft des 19. Jahrhunderts,” *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 63, no. 4 (2015), 337–58; Michael Facius, “A Rankean Moment in Japan: The Persona of the Historian and the Globalization of the Discipline, c.1900,” *Modern Intellectual History* 19, no. 1 (2022), 231.

ways in which scholars engage with the historical record or each other's work.⁴⁰ Clearly, then, insofar as didactic practices are concerned, virtue ethicists do not have to worry that they are imposing something "from without": historians have long been familiar with them.⁴¹

DIAGNOSING WRONGS AND THREATS

Something similar applies to a second classic function of virtue talk: providing historians with an idiom for diagnosing developments that they perceive as threatening the integrity of their work. This second point may seem to follow from the first one, insofar as warning students against vices ("professional risks to which scholars are prone") seems part and parcel of any education aimed at fostering virtues.⁴² The point is broader, though. Critical assessments of vicious habits establishing themselves in the historical profession can be found everywhere—in journal articles and book reviews even more prominently than in lecture notes. It is striking, moreover, how often such diagnoses were conducted in terms of virtues and vices. On few occasions did discussions of historians' virtues and vices reach higher levels of intensity than when scholars saw their work or their understanding of the historian's vocation being threatened.⁴³

Ranke's proverbial objectivity is a case in point. While this virtue might seem to belong to a tranquil world of "normal science," it actually served as a polemical device that historians used, approvingly or otherwise, in response to perceived wrongs or dangers. How could historical scholarship contribute to the *Bildung* of the nation, asked many a German critic in the post-1848 period, if Ranke treated the past as an object of bloodless analysis rather than as a nourishing tradition?⁴⁴ A few decades later, by contrast, Max Lehmann and others welcomed Rankean objectivity as a remedy to the political instrumentalization of historical study in the hands of Heinrich von Treitschke and other Prussian enthusiasts.⁴⁵ Similarly, in the 1950s, Jadunath Sarkar presented it as a corrective to what he perceived as the excessive nationalism of India's dominant historiographical school at the time.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, Communist authors in Eastern Europe and the USSR had turned Rankean objectivity into an epitome of bourgeois naivete—an image not too different from a stereotype promulgated in the late 1950s by Hayden White and others ("Ranke, poor soul, . . . ruined his sight attempting to 'tell how it really happened'").⁴⁷

40. See Hajek, Paul, and ten Hagen, "Objectivity, Honesty, and Integrity."

41. Pennock and O'Rourke, "Developing a Scientific Virtue-Based Approach," 244–45.

42. Langlois and Seignobos, *Introduction aux études historiques*, 106.

43. Paul, *Historians' Virtues*, 22–24, 52–54.

44. Günter Johannes Henz, *Leopold von Ranke in Geschichtsdenken und Forschung*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2014), 163–76.

45. *Ibid.*, 427–47.

46. Jadunath Sarkar, "The Progress of Historical Research in India," *Modern Review* 89 (January 1951), 35–36. See also Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Calling of History: Sir Jadunath Sarkar and His Empire of Truth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 91–94, 111–13.

47. I. S. Kon, *Die Geschichtsphilosophie des 20. Jahrhunderts: Kritischer Abriss*, vol. 1, *Die Geschichtsphilosophie der Epoche des Imperialismus*, transl. W. Hoepf (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag,

If these examples already indicate that historians' seemingly cheerful discourse of virtue may respond to, or emerge out of, less than cheerful assessments of prevalent trends or conditions, such critical subtexts are even more apparent among women's historians in the late twentieth-century United States. When Gerda Lerner proposed "a new and as yet untested model of supportive and engaged scholarship," she did so out of frustration with a masculine ethos of competition and achievement "structured into our institutional and professional life."⁴⁸ Similarly, the slow scholarship movement in our time emphasizes the importance of care and attentiveness not in the hopeful expectation that naming these virtues will enable students to develop them but in an accusatory mode, blaming neoliberal university regimes for destroying the very conditions (time, attention) under which virtues conducive to responsible scholarship can flourish.⁴⁹

Could one say that, in these cases, historians' talk of virtue comes close not to applied virtue ethics but to critical virtue ethics? Although critical virtue ethics has been defined very differently, perhaps the most influential account comes from philosopher Lisa Tessman, who has defined it as a project aimed at diagnosing moral damage caused by practices of oppression.⁵⁰ Tessman's examples should make us pause: there is no way in which the problem of professors being too busy to attend to their students can be compared to that of vulnerable people being excluded from state services by a racialized discourse of character that cruelly attributes social problems to individual vices.⁵¹ The analogy, however, depends not on the subject of study but on the approach. "Critical" refers to a mode of analysis intent on identifying problems that hamper the cultivation of virtue. Whatever the nature or gravity of these problems, critical virtue ethics draws attention to factors preventing people from growing in virtuousness. So defined, historians' concerns about rampant nationalism or neoliberal university policies are indeed related to critical virtue ethics. Here, too, a conversation between virtue ethicists and historians of historiography touches on a theme that is recognizable to both.

Drawing on these two points of convergence—a critical analysis of virtue-undermining powers combined with educational practices aimed at fostering virtues—one might argue that the analysis so far points in the direction of a virtue ethics with a critical edge—that is, an ethics based on the assumption that attention to the cultivation of virtues is a matter of importance in contexts that

1964), 53–54; Hayden V. White, "Translator's Introduction: On History and Historicisms," in *From History to Sociology: The Transition in German Historical Thinking*, by Carl Antoni, transl. Hayden V. White (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1959), xxiv.

48. Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), vii.

49. Jane Simonsen, "Consuming Time or Making Time? Slow History and General Education," in *Reversing the Cult of Speed in Higher Education: The Slow Movement in the Arts and Humanities*, ed. Stephannie S. Gearhart and Jonathan Chambers (New York: Routledge, 2018), 196–208; Catherine E. Karkov, ed., *Slow Scholarship: Medieval Research and the Neoliberal University* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2019).

50. Lisa Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 48–49. See also Joseph Wiinikka-Lydon, *Moral Injury and the Promise of Virtue* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). A very different version of critical virtue ethics has been proposed by Jochen Schmidt, "Critical Virtue Ethics," *Religious Inquiries* 3, no. 5 (2014), 35–47.

51. Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 33–52.

are increasingly inhospitable to precisely those kinds of virtues that historians need for studying the past: patience, care, attentiveness, and open-mindedness. A virtue ethics for historians, one might say, should be committed to promoting truthfulness in an age of post-truth, attention to the voices of others in cultures that value speaking over listening, and perhaps even a stance of detachment in contexts where moral and political emotions run high.⁵²

CAN VIRTUE BE TAUGHT?

It would be premature, however, to draw conclusions before the encounter between virtue ethics and the history of historiography has entered its second stage. Whereas the first round of conversation focused on points of convergence, the second one, to which we will now turn, is more challenging insofar as it questions some current virtue-ethical assumptions in the light of past experiences. It points, more specifically, to the limits of what virtue thinking can achieve as well as to some risks inherent to the use of such a personal vocabulary.

The first of these sobering lessons has to do with the teachability of virtue. Much applied virtue ethics is premised on the assumption that virtue can be taught—by naming, exemplifying, practicing, or otherwise. When Pennock asked his respondents if they believed virtue could be acquired along one or more of these lines, no less than 94 percent answered that it could.⁵³ Similarly, in another recent study, “participants recognized socialization as [a] highly important and continuing process in which individuals acquire virtues.”⁵⁴ Interestingly, this idea even persists in studies that accuse neoliberal university policies of frustrating the cultivation of virtue. The premise of the charge is that professors could have contributed to such cultivation (for example, by spending time with their students, in and outside of the classroom) if they had not been forced to maximize their research output.⁵⁵ But is the university classroom indeed a space where virtues can be taught?

Contrary to what one might expect, the high prevalence of virtue talk in nineteenth-century Europe did not go hand in hand with high expectations of

52. Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Andrew Dobson, *Listening for Democracy: Recognition, Representation, Reconciliation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). For a text written in a similar spirit, see Thomas Albert Howard, “On Prudence and Historical Inquiry,” *Fides et Historia* 37/38, no. 2/1 (2005/2006), 23–34.

53. Robert T. Pennock, “What Traits of Character Do Exemplary Scientists Value? Results from the Scientific Virtues Survey” (PowerPoint presentation, Sixth World Conference on Research Integrity, Hong Kong, 3 June 2019), <https://www.singaporestatement.org/downloads/former-conferences/6th-wcri-in-hong-kong-2019/papers-and-presentations-4/456-wcri-2019-robert-pennock-what-traits-of-character-do-exemplary-scientists-value/file>.

54. Vicko Tomić, Ivan Buljan, and Ana Marušić, “Perspectives of Key Stakeholders on Essential Virtues for Good Scientific Practice in Research Areas,” *Accountability in Research* 29 no. 2 (2022), 86.

55. Susan Haack, “Out of Step: Academic Ethics in a Preposterous Environment,” in *Putting Philosophy to Work: Essays on Science, Religion, Law, Literature, and Life* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2013), 251–317; Onora O’Neill, “The Eclipse of Virtue in the University and Wider Society,” in Brant Brooks and Lamb, *Cultivating Virtue in the University*, 83–96.

teachers' abilities to help students acquire the virtues they needed. Even in the heyday of virtue, historians expressed reserve. Georg Waitz, for instance, stated that his historical exercises were nothing but a space that enabled students to practice and further develop habits of mind that they already possessed. Teachers, Waitz continued, "can do little about this"; they can merely encourage students to do their best and bring in "a little discipline, more politely called method."⁵⁶ Like other German historians at the time, Waitz expected students to develop themselves, in self-chosen directions, by "unfolding" their potentialities rather than by following teachers' instructions. This is why the metaphor of a *seminarium* (seedbed) was so appropriate. If exercises were seedbeds, then teachers were the gardeners. Although these gardeners were held responsible for watering and weeding, the seeds had to sprout on their own. The cultivation of virtue, therefore, depended primarily on the students' *Keimfähigkeit* (ability to germinate).⁵⁷ This explains why Waitz could claim that the real "spirit and art of history and history writing" could not be taught and why Theodor Mommsen, in a famous 1874 address, maintained that the virtues needed for historical writing were "neither learnable nor teachable."⁵⁸ Also, it explains why Ernst Bernheim, in his manual on historical methods, encouraged students to scrutinize themselves. If they were hasty or sloppy by temperament, why would they enroll in a history class? No teacher would be able to make virtuous scholars out of them.⁵⁹

Although these arguments were steeped in a Humboldtian theory of *Selbstbildung* (self-education) that will no longer find much support, they raise a question that is as relevant now as it was then. If virtues are character traits, and students have their characters largely formed by the time they enter university, how much can teachers shape students' virtues? The answer will depend on where the virtues needed for historical study sit on the spectrum between character traits developed early in life and professional habits that people can only learn on the job. This answer, moreover, will not necessarily be identical for all the qualities that historians need. However, as long as we take virtues to refer to ingrained habits of character, without pragmatically redefining them "from heritable, evolved tendencies" into "cultivable scientific habits,"⁶⁰ some reservation regarding the teachability of virtue seems in order. Assuming that naming, exemplifying, and practicing are strategies for cultivating students' virtues, don't these strategies

56. [Konstantin Höhlbaum], *Die Jubelfeier der historischen Übungen zu Göttingen am 1. August 1874: Bericht des Fest-Comités* (Göttingen: Dieterich, 1874), 9, 14.

57. Friedrich Ritschl, "Zur Methode des philologischen Studiums (Bruchstücke und Aphorismen)," in *Friedrich Ritschl's kleine philologische Schriften*, vol. 5 (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1879), 21.

58. Georg Waitz, *Friedrich Christoph Dahlmann: Gedächtnisrede gehalten in der Aula der Universität Kiel am 13. Mai 1885* (Kiel: Universitäts-Buchhandlung, 1885), 5; Theodor Mommsen, "Rede bei Antritt des Rektorates, 15. Oktober 1874," in *Reden und Aufsätze* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1905), 10.

59. Ernst Bernheim, *Lehrbuch der historischen Methode: Mit Nachweis der wichtigsten Quellen und Hilfsmittel zum Studium der Geschichte* (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1889), 507. Similar reservations were voiced by British historians such as Charles Oman; see Garritzen, *Reimagining the Historian in Victorian England*, 211–13.

60. Pennock and O'Rourke, "Developing a Scientific Virtue-Based Approach," 248n4.

work best if students are, at least to some extent, already inclined to be patient, attentive, precise, and fair-minded?⁶¹

An affirmative answer implies that historical study demands virtues that historians are only partly able to nurture themselves. This is not a unique situation: political philosophers have made similar observations about virtues required for democratic citizenship, which people rarely acquire within the political system itself.⁶² It is, nonetheless, an inconvenient truth, as it challenges the illusion that the historical profession can reproduce itself simply by offering a new generation the right kind of training. If virtues amount to character traits—“entrenched dispositions of character . . . which are consistently manifested in behavior across many different types of situations”⁶³—we must acknowledge that the cultivation of virtue lies only partly within professionals’ sphere of influence. Practically speaking, this may not be much of a problem as long as the virtues that historians care about are also valued and nurtured outside of the profession. It becomes a challenge, however, when discrepancies arise between historians’ virtues and the ethos prevailing in other segments of society. If historians seek to advance “truthfulness in an age of post-truth, attention to the voices of others in cultures that value speaking over listening, and perhaps even a stance of detachment in contexts where moral and political emotions run high” (as the previous section put it), where can they expect their students to have developed such unfashionable attitudes? The more “counter-cultural” historians’ virtues become, the more difficult it becomes to nurture them in students who do not already possess them.

AD HOMINEM DISCOURSE

A second problem to which historians of historiography may want to draw attention is the inherently ad hominem character of virtue talk. Virtue ethics is premised on the assumption that the moral life is deeply personal: character traits take priority over duties, responsibilities, and rules. As such, virtue ethics is a powerful corrective to moral cultures that prefer moral expectations to be codified in protocols or codes of conduct. Bringing virtues back into the conversation implies a shift of emphasis from external moral standards to personal moral abilities. Historically, however, historians’ experiences with foregrounding the personal have not only been positive. While few people will have suffered from naming, exemplifying, and practicing virtues, historians’ habit of evaluating others in terms of virtue and vice often caused much pain. Let me offer two examples: ad hominem “vice-charging” and the exclusion of minorities.⁶⁴

61. This worry is voiced in Heather Battaly, “Intellectual Character Education: Some Lessons from Vice Epistemology,” in *Handbook of Philosophy of Education*, ed. Randall Curren (New York: Routledge, 2023), 137–48. See also Noel L. Clemente’s response in “Educating against Intellectual Vices,” *Ethics and Education* 19, no. 1 (2024), 112, 116.

62. Peter Berkowitz, *Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 189–92.

63. Wright, Warren, and Snow, “Our Working Model of Virtue,” 15.

64. “Vice charging” is a term borrowed from Ian James Kidd, “Charging Others with Epistemic Vice,” *The Monist* 99, no. 2 (2016), 181–97.

One of the more remarkable features of historians' book reviews in nineteenth-century Europe is how personal both praise and blame could be. Especially in the cases of very good or very bad studies, reviewers frequently invoked authors' character traits as factors explaining these uncommon achievements. One of the best-known controversies in Victorian historiography—Edward Freeman's attacks on Anthony Froude's *History of England* in the pages of *The Saturday Review*—illustrates this habit in a quite dramatic way. Freeman did not limit himself to pointing out infelicitous errors and misjudgments in Froude's account of Elizabethan England but went on to attribute these flaws to the author's lack of training and aptitude: "There are doubtless incurable defects in Mr. Froude's own mind. . . . He lacks that calm and judicial intellect, that love of truth at all hazards, which distinguishes Bishop Thirlwall and Mr. Hallam. He has not the stuff in him which could ever guide him to their unfailing accuracy and unswerving judgment."⁶⁵ This, of course, is a textbook example of an *argumentum ad hominem*: a critique reducing failures of work to failures of character. As Freeman was not the only historian used to conducting polemics in such a personal manner,⁶⁶ one wonders: Where did this ad hominem discourse come from?

Ian Hesketh has interpreted Freeman's assault as an act of boundary work, intent on marking the difference between professional and amateur historians.⁶⁷ The clash had a biographical background too.⁶⁸ What matters for our purposes, however, is that Freeman's vice-charging mirrored a commitment to the virtues of "scientific" history. Lecturing on "the methods of historical study," Freeman told his Oxford students that these methods amounted to "habits of thought and study" or "habits of mind."⁶⁹ Although these habits consisted of more than virtues (they also encompassed interpretative tact and trained judgment), Freeman left no doubt that he attached great value to carefulness, honesty, impartiality, and especially accuracy.⁷⁰ Arguably, if these were the virtues conducive to good historical scholarship, it was only a small step to infer that the deficiencies of Froude's *History of England* stemmed from a lack of virtue on the author's part. Excessive as Freeman's vice-charging may have been, in assessing Froude's work, he applied the same standards of virtue that he propagated in class. This raises a

65. [E. A. Freeman], "Froude's Reign of Elizabeth (First Notice)," *The Saturday Review*, 16 January 1864, 81.

66. On the prevalence of such ad hominem reasoning in nineteenth-century historiographical controversies, see Johannes Kunisch, "Der Historikerstreit über den Ausbruch des Siebenjährigen Krieges (1756)," in *Friedrich der Große in seiner Zeit: Essays* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2008), 48–105, and Roger Chickering, *Karl Lamprecht: A German Academic Life (1856–1915)* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1993), 108–283.

67. Ian Hesketh, "Diagnosing Froude's Disease: Boundary Work and the Discipline of History in Late-Victorian Britain," *History and Theory* 47, no. 3 (2008), 375–80.

68. Ian Hesketh, "Fanatical Hatred or Brotherly Love? Rethinking E. A. Freeman's Feud with J. A. Froude," in *Making History: Edward Augustus Freeman and Victorian Cultural Politics*, ed. G. A. Bremner and Jonathan Conlin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 255–72.

69. Edward A. Freeman, *The Methods of Historical Study: Eight Lectures Read in the University of Oxford in Michaelmas Term, 1884: With the Inaugural Lecture on the Office of the Historical Professor* (London: Macmillan, 1886), iv, 158.

70. *Ibid.*, 10, 99, 101, 102, 304, as discussed in Herman Paul, "Habits of Thought and Judgement: E. A. Freeman on Historical Methods," in Bremner and Conlin, *Making History*, 273–89.

challenging question: To what extent does the teaching of virtues—strategies of naming, exemplifying, and practicing—facilitate or perhaps even stimulate ad hominem assessment practices à la Freeman?

A similar question can be asked about the exclusion of women and other minorities in Freeman's time and after. As Bonnie Smith has shown, one of the arguments used to legitimize the exclusion of women from the ranks of professional historians was their limited propensity for masculine virtues of the sort that male historians such as Freeman deemed necessary for historical research and writing.⁷¹ While Freeman acknowledged that women could excel in compassion and care, he believed that more important habits of mind, such as courage, endurance, and independence, were beyond women's reach.⁷² Consequently, insofar as women were allowed to join the historical enterprise, they ended up in second-rank positions, as assistants in Freeman's "historic harem" or as "amateurs by choice," who disappointedly turned their backs on the masculine world of academic professionalism.⁷³ This problem of character-based exclusion did not disappear with the gradual leveling of gender inequalities. In early twentieth-century Oxford, Indian students faced similar forms of discrimination, albeit on racist rather than misogynist grounds. In his memoirs, historian Cyril Philips recounted how Oxford dons treated Indian students as "second-class citizens," supposedly incapable of developing the qualities needed for serious scholarship.⁷⁴ As students of Black history remind us, such denials have long accompanied the (male, white) discourse of virtue and character.⁷⁵ Because virtue talk refers to personal qualities, embodied by persons of flesh and blood, it is relatively vulnerable to ad hominem abuses or association with gendered stereotypes and racist tropes.⁷⁶

Can one speak about historians' virtues without opening the door to such abuses? Following Liezl van Zyl, one might argue that the aim of virtue-ethical teaching is not to provide students with a set of evaluative tools but to let them grow in virtuousness. The goal, in other words, is not to encourage discussion of virtues and vices displayed by others but to foster the cultivation of virtuous character traits in the students themselves.⁷⁷ While virtue concepts can easily be misused (as Communists and Catholics in Cold War America had ample chance

71. Bonnie G. Smith, *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 37–69, 130–56.

72. Elise Garritzen, "Pasha and His Historic Harem: Edward A. Freeman, Edith Thompson and the Gendered Personae of Late-Victorian Historians," in Paul, *How to Be a Historian*, 94–95, 99–100.

73. Ibid., 95–97; Gianna Pomata, "Amateurs by Choice: Women and the Pursuit of Independent Scholarship in 20th Century Historical Writing," *Centauros* 55, no. 2 (2013), 196–219.

74. Cyril Philips, *Beyond the Ivory Tower: The Autobiography of Sir Cyril Philips* (London: Radcliffe Press, 1995), 45, quoted in Chakrabarty, *The Calling of History*, 54.

75. Daryl Michael Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880–1996* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

76. Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 33–52. On gendered notions of virtue, see various contributions to Kirsti Niskanen and Michael J. Barany, eds., *Gender, Embodiment, and the History of the Scholarly Persona: Incarnations and Contestations* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

77. Liezl van Zyl, "Does Virtue Ethics Allow Us to Make Better Judgments of the Actions of Others?," in *Virtue Ethics: Retrospect and Prospect*, ed. Elisa Grimi (Cham: Springer, 2019), 99–110.

to experience),⁷⁸ virtuous persons will not allow themselves to engage in such practices. They will try to assess the work of others with due fair-mindedness, preferring to err on the side of caution rather than on the side of boldness. Attractive as this response may be, the likelihood of historians reaching such a blessed state of virtuousness may not be sufficient to alleviate the problem of “vicious vice-charging” (that is, people attributing vices in a nonvirtuous manner).⁷⁹ Hence the question remains: Can historians speak about virtues without contributing unintentionally to a culture of ad hominem arguments? Should they perhaps draw a line between occasions on which it is appropriate to talk about virtues and settings in which it is not, and should they privilege other idioms than that of virtue and vice for assessing scholars’ accomplishments in public?⁸⁰

SCOPE OF APPLICABILITY

The suggestion that virtue may not be the only moral vocabulary that historians need is confirmed by an examination of why the discourse of virtue met with growing criticism in the decades after World War II. While applied virtue ethicists have few opportunities to examine the blind spots of their approaches—they can only ask students to rate their satisfaction with virtue-based ethics instruction⁸¹—historians can help identify potential limitations by examining why the postwar period saw a growing preference for scientific method and laboratory protocols over “angelic qualities of mind possessed by individual scientists.”⁸² These last words come from John Ziman, a British physicist who, in 1968, proposed to exchange the old adages “Be honest, be truthful, be objective” for a new set of questions: “Have you checked for instrumental errors? Is that series convergent? Would anyone understand that sentence? What is the present status of that old bit of theory?”⁸³ In attending to virtue-skeptical voices such as Ziman’s, historians may help reveal limitations to the virtue-ethical project that too often remain out of sight.

In the field of historical scholarship, it was the catastrophes of World War II that prompted at least some scholars to reconsider what historians’ discourse of virtue could and could not do. As Winfried Schulze has shown, one of the first impulses of German historians in the late 1940s was to reclaim the virtue of objectivity. While enabling them to push back against the interference of

78. Jamie Cohen-Cole, *The Open Mind: Cold War Politics and the Sciences of Human Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

79. On “vicious vice-charging,” see Quassim Cassam, “Misunderstanding Vaccine Hesitancy: A Case Study in Epistemic Injustice,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 55, no. 3 (2023), 315–29.

80. Another possibility is to reevaluate the ad hominem argument and differentiate between legitimate and illegitimate versions of it. See Christopher M. Johnson, “Reconsidering the Ad Hominem,” *Philosophy* 84, no. 328 (2009), 251–66, and Heather Battaly, “Attacking Character: Ad Hominem Argument and Virtue Epistemology,” *Informal Logic* 30, no. 4 (2010), 361–90.

81. Eric Berling et al., “A New Method for a Virtue-Based Responsible Conduct of Research Curriculum: Pilot Test Results,” *Science and Engineering Ethics* 25, no. 3 (2019), 899–910.

82. J. M. Ziman, *Public Knowledge: An Essay Concerning the Social Dimension of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 78.

83. *Ibid.*, 78, 79.

foreign occupying powers, this strategy also entailed a convenient explanation of what had gone wrong.⁸⁴ Collaboration with the Nazi regime had been a matter of vice—of individual historians insufficiently appreciating the importance of objectivity. Consequently, recovery of this virtue is what historians such as Eberhard Kessel proposed as a remedy for the field.⁸⁵ Scholars with less conservative leanings challenged this cure either by restoring some complexity to the notion of objectivity or, more straightforwardly, by accusing conservatives of abusing the virtue for anti-democratic purposes.⁸⁶ The most penetrating critique, however, came from Hans Rosenberg, a German émigré to the United States who, in 1950, wrote an uncompromising report on the state of German historical studies. By warding off all “subjectivity” and “politics,” said Rosenberg, German historians close their eyes to factors beyond individuals’ sense of integrity. What they must recognize is that the German system of specialized, mono-disciplinary teaching produces scholars who are ignorant of the wider world. According to Rosenberg, “the widespread narrowness of outlook, the prevalence of immaturity of political judgement and of a harmful spirit of political parochialism, the lack of insight into the complexities of social processes, the often amazing ignorance and naïveté with reference to matters economic and technological, the staleness and inflexible conventionalism in the choice of research topics, the clinging to the ‘old stuff’ in teaching”; all this cannot be explained or remedied in terms of virtues but requires attention to social, educational, and political factors contributing to historians’ “mental isolation and impasse” (an argument further developed in the 1960s by social historians committed to taking their field “beyond historicism”).⁸⁷

For research ethicists, the question at stake here—what are the limits of the discourse of virtue?—is not a new one. In response to Bruce Macfarlane’s 2009 proposal to replace rule-based ethics training with virtue-based alternatives, David Resnik wrote a carefully balanced assessment of what virtue ethics in the realm of research integrity can and cannot provide. Among other things, he judged that norm enforcement is not among its strengths: “Principles and rules can provide better guidance for policy development than virtues because principles and rules can give clear and specific directives for behavior.”⁸⁸ The same conclusion was reached four years later by a committee responsible for revising a Dutch code of conduct that was largely framed in terms of virtues (scrupulousness, reliability, impartiality, et cetera). It argued that such language of virtue may be appropriate for educational purposes (what do we aim for?) but is less suitable for monitoring

84. Winfried Schulze, *Deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft nach 1945* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1989), 201–6.

85. Eberhard Kessel, “Rankes Geschichtsauffassung,” *Universitas* 2, no. 8 (1947), 925.

86. Otto Vossler, “Objektivität in der Geschichte,” *Die Welt als Geschichte* 10 (1950), 71–80; Walther Hofer, “Der mißbrauchte Ranke: ‘Konservative Revolution’ in der deutschen Geschichtsschreibung?,” *Der Monat* 7, no. 84 (1955), 542–47.

87. Hans Rosenberg to the US Department of State, Division of Exchange of Persons, 11 November 1950, in *German Refugee Historians and Friedrich Meinecke: Letters and Documents, 1910–1977*, ed. Gerhard A. Ritter, transl. Alex Skinner (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 409, 411; Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Die Geschichtswissenschaft jenseits des Historismus* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1971).

88. David B. Resnik, “Ethical Virtues in Scientific Research,” *Accountability in Research* 19, no. 6 (2012), 335.

norm compliance (where exactly lies the line that scientists are not allowed to cross?). In other words: virtues have their place but should be part of a broader repertoire of research-ethical concepts and tools.⁸⁹

As long as virtue-ethical work is driven by the aim to provide a full-blown alternative to deontology and utilitarianism, this may be a difficult pill to swallow. Is there any honor to be had in proposing a half-hearted virtue ethics, ready to compromise even with its biggest competitors? For historians and other practitioners, however, the intellectual independence or superiority of virtue ethics over other moral philosophies is not a matter of much concern. What they need are ethical resources—more rather than fewer—that enable them to perform a range of practical ethical tasks: setting standards and providing examples as well as enforcing norms and pushing back against integrity-undermining practices. If the discourse of virtue helps them with some of these tasks more than with others, their ethical toolbox should also include other instruments, including deontological imperatives (“thou shalt not engage in falsification, fabrication, and plagiarism”) and right-based provisions (“historians have the right to choose and design their research topics and their curricula of teaching topics without political or other nonscientific interference”) that allow for stricter enforcement than virtues of honesty and fair-mindedness.⁹⁰ Arguably, virtue-ethical proposals become stronger rather than weaker if they reflect judiciously on their scope of applicability and show awareness of vulnerabilities or limitations of the sort that our historical case studies bring to light.⁹¹

CONCLUSION

What, then, are the prospects and limitations of a virtue ethics for historians? What speaks in favor of such an ethics is the fact that historians have thought already for centuries, if not millennia, about the personal qualities that historians must possess. Although it has in recent times become less common to classify these qualities as “virtues,” the argument that scholarly research and teaching practices require certain well-cultivated traits of character (“vocational virtues”) is one to which historians can still easily relate. An ethics committed to fostering virtues of truthfulness, patience, and respect is one, moreover, that historians might welcome,⁹² partly because it helps them articulate that integrity for historians entails more than adherence to protocols, but partly also because the virtues that matter for historians are not the ones most valued in post-truth societies, or

89. Commissie Verkenning Herziening Gedragscode Wetenschapsbeoefening, “Adviesrapport” (October 2016), 10, <https://www.nwo.nl/en/netherlands-code-conduct-research-integrity>.

90. The last example is taken from Antoon De Baets, *Responsible History* (New York: Berghahn, 2009), 191.

91. See Sarah Banks, “Cultivating Researcher Integrity: Virtue-Based Approaches to Research Ethics,” in Emmerich, *Virtue Ethics*, 39: “Another difficulty with a virtue-based approach in a research context is that it can reinforce a culture of responsabilisation, where individual researchers are blamed for bad practice when it is often the case that institutional conditions are significant contributing factors.”

92. Ewa Domańska, “Historians Must Have Virtues: A Conversation with the Polish Historian and Theorist of History,” *Rethinking History* 15, no. 3 (2011), 425.

those best cultivated under neoliberal conditions. If this last point underscores the need for what I called a “virtue ethics with a critical edge,” it also points to challenges and limitations that a virtue ethics for historians will face. Drawing on historical examples, I have argued that overconfidence in the teachability of virtue is unwarranted, that virtue talk is inherently vulnerable to becoming ad hominem, and that standards expressed in terms of virtue are harder to enforce than deontological rules. Importantly, these limitations do not detract from the promise of a virtue ethics for historians; they only suggest that a virtue-ethical approach should not extend beyond its scope of applicability.⁹³

The case for a virtue ethics will be strongest, therefore, if it is grounded in a realistic understanding not only of the beneficial uses to which categories of virtue can be put but also of unintended uses to which virtue talk is susceptible and of tasks for which virtue thinking is less prepared. Put simply, it is important to attend to the *affordances* of virtue (with “affordance” being a technical term for uses that objects do and do not allow for).⁹⁴ As this article has tried to show, historians of historiography may help bring into view some of these affordances by examining what the discourse of virtue enables historians in centuries past to do. Historiographical research may help ground ethical reflection in the lived realities of historical research and teaching. It gives reasons for thinking that virtues matter while at the same time urging caution: virtues have been used for purposes we may want to reject.

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93. As noted by Fowers, Cokelet, and Leonhardt, *The Science of Virtue*, 18, a realistic understanding of what virtues can and cannot do may also help refute virtue skepticism (“virtue skeptics have generally adopted an idealized concept of virtue rather than a psychologically realistic one”).

94. A dining chair is made for sitting and can also be used as a bedside table or an improvised goal post, but it does not lend itself to be kicked around as a football. See Jenny L. Davis’s *How Artifacts Afford: The Power and Politics of Everyday Things* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020), which draws on James J. Gibson, “The Theory of Affordances,” in *Perceiving, Acting, and Knowing: Toward an Ecological Psychology*, ed. Robert Shaw and John Bransford (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1977), 67–82. I am indebted to Edurne De Wilde for introducing me to this literature.