



Towards an epistemological theory of historical consciousness

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ABSTRACT: This paper presents a theoretical analysis of the concept of historical consciousness. It argues that a focus on the epistemological problems concerning historical consciousness can be a way of constructing a theory of the concept that both incorporates the diverse perspectives that exist in research about the concept and specifies how a historical consciousness can be developed in an individual.

KEYWORDS: Historical Consciousness; History Didactics; Historical Culture; Historical Thinking; Uses of History.

Introduction

This paper deals with historical consciousness. By stating that, I want to inform the presumptive reader that this text will be primarily theoretical in character and that the concept of historical consciousness (or, rather, the author's attempts at coming to terms with the concept) will be what guides the theoretical investigation that follows. I will also deal with some central history didactical concepts that relate to and enhance an understanding of the concept of historical consciousness. From a Swedish perspective historical consciousness has been the central concept of history didactics for the last 30 years and recently (pre-dominantly in the last decade) it has attracted an increasing amount of attention in the UK and North America as well. I believe this may have interesting repercussions on how the concept of historical consciousness can be understood.

Historical consciousness is, however, a concept generally perceived to be vague and complex (Cf. Duquette, 2011, p. 259; Nordgren, 2006, p. 15), and at the same time it has been theoretically deployed in a variety of areas (Cf. Fausser, 2000, pp. 42–44). Consequently there are many bids as to how a historical consciousness could and should be interpreted; a historical consciousness is claimed to enhance such diverse things as sense making, history making, identity constitution, and moral character in an individual. There are also different views regarding how it is developed in an individual (Thorp, 2013a, pp. 213–217, 2013b, pp. 107–112). It has also been argued that historical consciousness is difficult (if not impossible) to study since it is an immaterial notion and that it is not obvious how it relates to its manifestations (Cf. Axelsson, 2004, pp. 23–24). Furthermore, research on historical consciousness in Germany and Scandinavia has been regarded as incompatible with research on the concept from the UK and North America (Cf. Lund, 2012, pp. 97–98, 110). These issues have rendered historical consciousness a rather multifarious notion that can be hard to grasp and the aim of this paper is to outline a comprehensive theory of historical consciousness that will incorporate these various perspectives and specify how it can be

manifested and developed in an individual. As the title of this paper suggests, what is presented here should be regarded as a brief sketch of what such a theory could look like. As brief and sketchy as it may be, this approach to the concept is original and can hopefully inspire (or provoke) new theoretical investigations or perspectives.

I will argue that historical consciousness ought to be understood as an understanding of how matters past, present, and future relate to each other in a way that enables the individual to create a specific kind of meaning in relation to history. It will be further argued that historical consciousness can be discerned through three different manifestations that are on different levels; narratives, uses of history, and historical culture. Given these manifestations, it becomes evident that one must understand historical consciousness as a phenomenon that can be of different kinds due to basic assumptions concerning an awareness of the need of contextualisation and awareness of the temporality of truth claims, and it will be claimed that the genetic historical consciousness is the most developed form of historical consciousness in that it is a form of historical thinking that enables persons to acquire a historiographic gaze through genetic and genealogical contextualisations of history. Finally, the paper ends with a discussion concerning the significance of historical consciousness, and it is argued that understanding genetic historical consciousness as the ability to contextualise history and historical knowledge is exactly what makes historical consciousness an important history didactical concept since it can be the foundation of a development of individuals' identity and morality.

The presentation that follows will be divided into the following sections: 'Definition' (that argues for a certain definition of the concept), 'Development' (that delves into matters of how an individual develops a historical consciousness), and 'Significance' (this section offers an argument to why the concept is important to individuals).

Definition

Definition and Application

In 1979 the German historian Karl-Ernst Jeismann defined historical consciousness as a notion that '[incorporates] the connection between interpretation of the past, understanding of the present, and perspective on the future' (Jeismann, 1979, pp. 40–42), and this has become the generally accepted definition in history didactical research (Ahonen, 2005, p. 699). This is an ability that is sometimes called 'multi-chronological' (Ammert, 2008, p. 56). I believe this definition poses both ontological and epistemological problems. Ontologically, it seems to assume that there is a connection between the past, present, and future. Epistemologically, it links different types of cognitive approaches to the different temporal segments: a past is interpreted, a present understood, and a future perspectivised. With Jeismann's definition, it could be argued that it becomes essential to show that there is a connection between the temporal segments (an ontological problem), and that the different temporal segments require different kinds of cognitive approaches (an epistemological problem).

Another way of defining the concept can be as an *understanding* of the relation between past, present, and future (Cf. van der Leeuw-Roord, 2000, p. 114). With this definition the epistemological problems of Jeismann's definition are reduced to matters of understanding. This definition does, however, also have ontological problems connected to it (there is still a relation between past, present, and future), but I want to argue that these can be evaded with this definition since it focuses on our way of viewing the world, not the world *itself*. It is the individual's *understanding* of the relation between what has been, is, and will be that is the focus, not the relation itself.

If the definition of historical consciousness is that it deals with how people understand multi-chronological relations, an extended understanding of the concept can be reached by applying it to how people understand history. It does not specify *how* this comes to be the case, but I want to argue that understanding at this general level does not have to do that. It merely suggests that an individual that has an understanding of multi-chronology makes a different sense of history than a person that does not, hence it affects the meaning she makes. Furthermore, meaning construction through an understanding of multi-chronology can be regarded as a fundamental and inclusive definition and application of historical consciousness. The sense we make of things deals with matters of cognition at a very basic and existential level. From this level it will then be possible to construct theories about historical cognition and its development, and how identity construction happens and how this affects an individual's view of morality. This is what the rest of this paper will deal with.

Manifestations

This sub-section seeks to specify how a historical consciousness can be manifested. I want to argue that at the most fundamental level a historical consciousness is manifested through narratives, and that these narratives can be applied to uses of history on an individual level and historical culture on a societal or public level.

Narratives

When an individual expresses something historical she does it through narratives (Cf. Rüsen, 2004, pp. 128–129, 2012, p. 47). Narratives could be regarded as cognitive structures we use to connect individual statements to create meaning of what we experience (Cf. Kuukkanen, 2012, p. 342). Thus, it could be argued that an individual's understanding of history and, consequently, her historical consciousness is expressed through narratives. This view has been criticised since it has been argued that history can be expressed by other means, i.e. through frameworks and facts, and that we for this reason should include other manifestations of historical consciousness (Cf. Lee & Howson, 2009, p. 241). With the basic view of narration applied above it could however be argued that these frameworks and facts have to be narrated to become meaningful as well and that they therefore could be regarded as narrative. The definition of historical consciousness presented above focuses on how an individual *understands* narratives and it is by assessing in what *manner* this is narrated that we can say something about an individual's historical consciousness.

Uses of History

When an individual narrates history she can be said to portray a use of history. Individuals use history to achieve various things, and these different uses have been typified by the Swedish historian Klas-Göran Karlsson; they can for instance be political, existential, ideological, and scientific in character (Karlsson, 1999, pp. 55–60). We can call these uses of history *what-*uses. It is, however, interesting not only to assess what use of history an individual makes, but also *how* the individual uses history. To illustrate how individuals can use history, I will employ Jörn Rüsen's typology of historical narration as strategies for what he calls 'sense-generation.' I believe this typology can be applied to illustrate *how-*uses of history since it typifies how historical narratives are used to portray history. Firstly, there is the *traditional* narration in which an individual uses history to show that traditions should be upheld in society. The next type of narration is *exemplary*, and here an individual uses history to generate rules of conduct. The third type of narration is *critical* and here history is used to criticise both contemporary and historical societies and cultures. The fourth type is the *genetic*

one, and here history is used to explain continuity and change in societies both historical and present (Rüsen, 2012, pp. 52–54).

Historical Culture

When individuals use history they uphold a historical culture. A historical culture can thus be perceived as an agglomeration of different uses of history. An important aspect of historical culture is that it is the societal historical landscape that individuals are born into. The historical culture of a society thus *a priori* affects how individuals interpret historical events or facts (Carr, 1986, pp. 50–53; Karlsson, 2008, p. 11). This means that a historical culture is constituted by the historical consciousnesses and uses of history of its members, but at the same time it determines and affects what kind of historical consciousness and use of history its members have or make. In other words, the historical culture of a society is present when the individual member is born into or otherwise enters it, but this individual member can later on influence the historical culture of that same society to a certain degree through her use of history (which is determined by her historical consciousness). Historical culture can thus be seen as a dynamic concept that shapes individuals' historical consciousnesses, but at the same time can be shaped by the historical consciousnesses and uses of history of its individual members (Cf. Karlsson, 2005, p. 724; Rüsen, 2012, pp. 57–58).

Epistemic Qualities of Historical Consciousness

From the narratives and uses of history of individuals we can discern that there can be different epistemic qualities of a historical consciousness. This sub-section presents a typology that allows us to illustrate different types of historical consciousnesses and differentiate between them. Furthermore, by using a qualitative typology of the concept it enables us not only to theorise on whether an individual understands multi-chronology, but also to say something about *how* she understands it. Peter Seixas has extended Jörn Rüsen's widely accepted typology of historical consciousness (Rüsen, 2006, p. 72) to illustrate different ways of understanding history, and I think these extensions can be helpful for the present purposes. The types of historical consciousness are the (i) traditional type, (ii) exemplary type, (iii) critical type, and (iv) genetic type.

The *traditional type* of historical consciousness is epistemologically quite rudimentary: we know history because we are told so by parents, relatives, friends, media, and history teachers. Pieces of historical knowledge have the character of being substantive and either true or false. There are no means for a critical assessment of history or historical accounts, and, consequently, no means for treating contradictory accounts of history (Seixas, 2006, p. 145).

The *exemplary type* of historical consciousness turns history into a positivist science: the truth is out there waiting to be discovered. It is only a matter of applying the right kind of method when approaching history. Furthermore, values, such as human rights, are historically derivative: we can, for instance, know what rights the individual has through studying history (Seixas, 2006, pp. 146–147). This view is similar to the traditional view because it treats historical accounts as substantive, although this view is more advanced since it engages with how to verify or falsify historical claims, albeit in a simplistic manner.

A *critical type* of historical consciousness is a move beyond the positivist view of the previous types since it questions the possibility of truth in history (Seixas, 2006, p. 148). It does not, however, offer us a method of how to treat history, apart from falsifying (or verifying) its accounts. What follows is a kind of relativism: all historical accounts are equally false (or true). Furthermore, it displays an inability to historicise the point of view of the meaning-making subject: it is one thing to claim that everyone else makes mistakes when

using history, and another to realise that the only way of making that postulation is to use the same kind of method as the others: the historical example. It is consequently a failure to realise that all categories and all statements about the world are subject to historicity, including those of the experiencing subject.

Finally, the *genetic type* of historical consciousness is the most advanced type, and a person with this kind of historical consciousness takes neither an objectivist nor a relativist stance regarding the possibility of historical knowledge from an epistemological perspective. Instead, it displays an appreciation that knowledge is constructed ‘by a community of inquiry that exercises mutual checks and balances within itself.’ Thus, ‘[h]istorical knowledge changes over time, and, yet, in any particular historical era, there are standards for valid historical accounts or arguments’ (Seixas, 2006, p. 149). Hence, it is a realisation that *all* categories and *all* points of views are contingent on the historical context in which they take place, and that this is absolutely normal, and, consequently, a pre-requisite for historical knowledge. It is still possible to talk about true and false accounts of history, but it is a much more complex matter than with the other types of historical consciousness.

What I perceive to be essential in distinguishing between traditional, exemplary, and critical historical consciousness on the one hand and genetic historical consciousness on the other, is the individual’s ability to appreciate the representative aspects of history. A person with the three former types of historical consciousness treats historical accounts as true (or false) propositions about reality, thus conflating historical representations of facts with historical facts. This leaves little room for meta-historical considerations. A person with a genetic historical consciousness, however, could be argued to distinguish between historical representations of facts and historical facts in themselves, enabling a meta-historical approach (Cf. Ankersmit, 2013, pp. 190–191).

By relating this typology to the manifestations of historical consciousness presented above, it can be possible to show how a certain use of history emanates from a certain historical consciousness. It can be argued that an individual that has no understanding of the contextual contingency of history cannot make a genetic use of history. Furthermore, she cannot negotiate or analyse the historical culture or cultures that she is a member of. With a genetic historical consciousness, however, the individual is able to analyse and scrutinise different uses of history from a contextual perspective, and she is thus able to negotiate and analyse the historical cultures she belongs to.

Summary - the Definition of Historical Consciousness

To summarise then, a historical consciousness can be regarded as an understanding of how matters past, present, and future relate to each other. This understanding enables the individual to create a specific kind of meaning in relation to history. Furthermore, there are different epistemic kinds of historical consciousnesses: for example the traditional, exemplary, critical, and genetic, which all relate to what kind of understanding an individual has of history.

A historical consciousness is expressed through narratives, but it should be perceived as an attitude towards these narratives. When an individual makes historical narratives she uses history in different ways. Uses of history can be categorised according to what kind of use they are, and how they are used. How an individual uses history is determined by what kind of historical consciousness she has: a traditional historical consciousness results in a traditional use of history, etc. When individuals use history they uphold a historical culture, but this same culture also determines how the individual perceives history and uses it. This view of

historical consciousness also shows how the concept can be perceived as distinct and different from the concepts of narration, uses of history, and historical culture.

Development

I want to argue that an ability to appreciate the representational aspects of history is what distinguishes between different types of historical consciousnesses, and for this reason it is important to look closer into the development of the epistemic types of historical consciousness. It is also important to remember that it is presently not possible to say anything about how a historical consciousness is developed in an individual: it can only be theoretically specified what it may be and we can describe its manifestations and epistemic qualities. To theorise about how a historical consciousness is developed there is a need for some kind of structure of how historical rationality and its progression works (Cf. Straub, 2006, p. 79). I believe that a fruitful way of approaching how individuals come to acquire the ability to regard history as representation (i.e. a meta-historical approach) is the concept or notion of historical thinking, predominantly developed and applied in research in the UK, USA, and Canada. Before going into the specifics of that, I think it is important to outline how I regard historical cognition.

Historical Cognition

Generally speaking there are two ways of regarding historical cognition in history didactical research: it can either be perceived as an ability to apply genetic-genealogical approaches to history (which is quite common in Sweden), or it can be perceived as an ability to contextualise historical factual knowledge and representations (which is common in the UK, USA, and Canada). I think these two approaches have a lot in common for reasons I will demonstrate below.

To apply genetic and genealogical perspectives on history is to connect the past with the present and the future, i.e. it is an ability to understand history both prospectively and retrospectively (Eliasson, 2009, p. 309). A person who understands history genetically regards historical change and development prospectively, meaning, for instance, that she explains historical change starting at one historical event and stopping at another. To view history genealogically means that one starts with the personal or contemporary point of view and from thence constructs historical accounts. A genealogical understanding of history acknowledges that all historical investigations are contemporary in the sense that the person performing the historical investigation (and the historical culture or cultures she is a member of) affects how she chooses to approach history and how she interprets it (Persson, 2011, pp. 27–30). Applying prospective and retrospective approaches can be regarded as promoting a multi-chronological understanding of history; the individual gains an appreciation of how temporal perspectives influence how we perceive and interpret history (Eliasson, 2009, pp. 317, 325; Persson, 2011, p. 128).

If a genetic-genealogical approach to history enhances a multi-chronological understanding of history, it can also be claimed to increase an individual's ability to contextualise history, since an understanding of the importance of temporal perspectives more or less forces the individual to take the historical context into account. If my perspective on history affects what kinds of questions I pose to history and how I choose to interpret the answers I get, then the perspectives of others also should be taken into account.

Research has shown that individuals read or decode historical texts differently depending on what epistemic beliefs they have about history and historical facts. People with a

procedural approach (i.e. a methodological and critical approach) to history and historical facts take the context into account when they study history, whereas people with no procedural training tend to regard history and historical facts as being either true or false (in the positivist notion of the term) and run into trouble as soon as they come across conflicting historical accounts. Having a procedural training in history thus enables the individual to take the point of view of the other, of the historical agent (Kolikant & Pollack, 2009, pp. 673–674; Seixas, 1993, pp. 366–367; Wineburg, 1998, pp. 337–340).

Furthermore, it has been claimed that an ability to contextualise is what will enable individuals to reach a rich and full understanding of history, if an individual is not able to contextualise historical matters, she will judge them according to her own standards, i.e. she will regard history anachronistically (Cf. Wineburg, 2001, pp. 18–24). This view of historical cognition seems to harmonise well with the view of historical consciousness that was presented above: the more advanced a historical consciousness a person has, the greater is her ability to appreciate her own point of view as essential to how she perceives history, and vice versa. Historical thinking is a notion that can afford a theoretical approach to how individuals may gain an appreciation of the importance of context in history.

Historical Thinking

Historical thinking is commonly defined as an ability to understand how historical knowledge has been constructed and to know what that means, and an ability to contextualise historical facts, events, and persons (Lévesque, 2008, p. 27; Seixas & Morton, 2013, p. 2). To obtain a historical thinking an individual has to learn to think like a historian, i.e. to learn to apply theoretical tools to analyse how historical knowledge is constructed (Seixas & Morton, 2013, pp. 2–3). A key element in learning to think like a historian is to acquire the ability to differentiate between and apply 1st and 2nd order concepts in history. 1st order concepts deal with the stuff of history, i.e. ‘the French Revolution,’ ‘Feudalism,’ et cetera. 2nd order concepts are more important when developing historical thinking because they deal with how we analyse historical facts (Seixas & Peck, 2004, pp. 115–116). Examples of these are ‘historical significance,’ ‘evidence,’ ‘cause and consequence,’ and ‘continuity and change’ (Lévesque, 2008, p. 17; Seixas & Morton, 2013, p. 4). By applying these concepts individuals will be able to gain a deeper understanding of what can be called the historical practice: an articulated historical thinking can enable the individual to realise that history is an art of interpretation and representation. What historians (and others) write is contingent on how they interpret and narrate history. It is thus an appreciation that there is always a use of history inherent in historical representations, be they scientific or popular in character. Hence, historical thinking can provide us with the theoretical tools to develop our own use of history and analyse that of others.

It has been argued that the main objective of historical thinking is to enable the individual to make meta-historical analyses of historical narratives (Lee, 2006, pp. 134–135; Shemilt, 2000, pp. 97–98). When an individual has mastered the ability to contextualise history and its accounts, it is claimed that she will possess an ability to scrutinise not only the historical accounts, or representations, as such, but also the person behind them. This will help the individual in making meta-theoretical analyses of how history is created. The Australian historian Robert Parkes has coined the term ‘historiographic gaze’ to illustrate this ability. He argues that the historiographic gaze extends the ‘gaze of the historian to everything, even [herself], revealing the specificity of historical knowledge and practice’ (Parkes, 2011, p. 102). Without the historiographic gaze, pieces of historical knowledge take on the appearance of being objective and factual, when they in fact are a result of a historian’s conscious choice and interpretation. Through the historiographic gaze, we get the full picture on how history is

created and gain a richer understanding of the contingent character of historical representations (Parkes, 2011, pp. 119–120).

If we return to what was written above about historical consciousness and uses of history, we may have a promising way of theoretically connecting historical consciousness and historical thinking. A historiographic gaze is not only the result of an advanced historical thinking, but also enables the individual to analyse uses of history, both that of herself and others, at quite an advanced level. A person with a historiographic gaze seems to have the meta-historical approach of a genetic historical consciousness: an appreciation of the contextual contingency of history and its representations.

Summary - the Development of Historical Consciousness

Historical thinking is a theory that deals with how progression in historical cognition works: it is argued that the most advanced kind of historical cognition is the one that takes the context of historical representations into account. The term historiographic gaze can be a convenient way of illustrating what an appreciation of the contextual contingency of historical representations can look like, and since it can also be regarded as a meta-historical attitude or stance towards (historical) narratives, it harmonises well with the view of historical consciousness presented here.

Significance

Identity

It has often been claimed that a historical consciousness is relevant to an individual's identity and morality (Cf. Friedrich, 2010, pp. 649–650; Karlsson, 2009, p. 52). I think that an understanding of historical consciousness as an appreciation of the contextual contingency of history could make the concept important to identity construction and morality.

A narrative view of identity suggests that individuals create their identity when they create narratives about themselves and that an individual that has an awareness of this fact has a more profound sense of her identity (Cf. Schechtman, 2007, pp. 93–94). Furthermore, individuals that realise that they are temporally persisting subjects with a past, present, and future, will appreciate that their experiences (or the narrations of their experiences) influence how they perceive themselves in a multi-chronological manner, i.e. that a temporal awareness is an important part of an individual's identity construction (Cf. Schechtman, 2007, pp. 143–144). This view of identity construction conforms well with the view of historical consciousness presented in this paper since it may establish a connection between an individual's epistemological stance towards narratives and identity formation: how you perceive the world affects what kind of a person you are. A person that has a traditional historical consciousness and a traditional use of history will most likely regard her image of personal identity as something static, perhaps resulting in a deterministic or alienated view of the self. A genetic historical consciousness, developed through historical thinking, will however more likely regard personal narratives as dynamic and contingent on both spatial and temporal contexts. From this line of reasoning it seems that the nature of a person's historical consciousness could indeed be significant for the kind of identity she develops.

Morality

Closely connected to the view that a historical consciousness affects an individual's identity, is the view that it is essential to her moral character as well (Cf. Rösen, 2006, p. 67). I want to argue that how we perceive ourselves as individuals also affects how we view morality. What kind of person I regard myself to be determines what I believe to be meaningful in life. To be someone is to define what you are and what you are not, and to know what you like and do not like, and this obviously has moral implications (Cf. Taylor, 1992, pp. 28–29). On a similar note it can be claimed that who we perceive ourselves to be determines how we treat other people: I empathise with those that I can identify myself with and vice versa. Our identities are a source for our moral convictions (Cf. Appiah, 2010, pp. 24–25, 236–237).

Thus what kind of historical consciousness an individual has seems significant. If we adopt the view that our morality is dependent on how we perceive ourselves, and if we empathise morally with those that we identify ourselves with, an ability to appreciate the contextual contingency of narratives is important. With the binary substantive attitude connected to a traditional, exemplary, or critical historical consciousness, the narratives of others can only be accepted or rejected at face value, resulting in an inability to appreciate the importance of context in morality. With a genetic historical consciousness, however, taking the perspective of the other comes naturally. Without this ability we may end up in a static view of identity contingent on our inability to contextualise narratives. Then there would be no way to treat the other in a tolerant and reconciling way (Cf. Zanzanian, 2012, p. 219).

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to outline a coherent epistemological theory of historical consciousness that incorporates the diverse perspectives that exist in research on the concept and manages to evade some of the criticism that has been raised concerning historical consciousness. As was noted in the introduction, this is a far-reaching aim and for this reason some of the positions outlined here are merely tentative and in want of further argumentation. If one however regards this paper as a first attempt, I hope it may be possible to tolerate these deficiencies.

According to the central thesis of this paper, an ability to contextualise history and historical accounts can make the individual aware that history and the sense we make of it are contextually contingent, something that in turn will allow the individual to make meta-historical analyses and regard history and its accounts as representations of historical facts rather than historical facts in and of themselves. This ability is illustrated by the term historiographic gaze according to which the individual regards all matters as contextually contingent, even the meaning she creates herself, an ability that will allow individuals to make genetic uses of history. These uses could then be regarded as symptoms of a genetic historical consciousness. Furthermore, I argue that this ability is an important aspect of identity construction and morality thus making historical consciousness an important concept concerning these aspects. My hope is that a focus on the epistemological problems of historical consciousness will enable us to theorise what a historical consciousness can be, how it may be manifested and developed, and why it can be regarded to be a significant concept.

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