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Review: Moral History from Herodotus to Diodorus

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Lisa Irene Hau

Moral History from Herodotus to Diodorus. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016. viii + 312 pp. \$125.00. ISBN 9781474411073 (hbk).

'In any case, I hate everything that merely instructs me without augmenting or directly invigorating my activity', declares Goethe in Nietzsche's quotation at the beginning of 'The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life'. As if inspired by Nietzsche's essay, Lisa Irene Hau's *Moral History from Herodotus to Diodorus Siculus* shows the invigorating power of history for both ethical and political life. Since its ascendancy in the 19th Century, positivist history has maligned its moral cousin. Yet Hau shows how the moral didactic agenda of ancient historians does not diminish their historical worth as history; moral history also seeks to inspire and provoke its readers in ways that positivist history does not. *Moral History* develops an incisive typology of moralizing techniques, drawing on close readings of Hellenistic as well as Classical historiography, including Polybius, Diodorus Siculus, Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, and others. Hau's novel, lucid, and cogent arguments should inspire students of ancient political thought to widen their consideration of ancient history even as it invigorates their moral lives towards nobler exempla.

Moral history intends to instruct its readers on living a moral life. This instruction comes through various strategies employed by an author to teach the reader something about the ethical implications of various human actions and behaviors; moral history directs the reader toward specific actions or thought. While these directions speak first of all to the character and choices of individuals, political views follow. The audience for these histories is primarily those with power, yet like Athenian tragedy many of these historians sought to operate at multiple levels – to entertain as well as instruct. Moral history has strong affinities with elegiac poetry, epinician poetry, and tragedy, all of which contain didactic elements while also delivering other primary content.

Hau sets up her argument by presenting a typology of moralizing techniques in moral history. Moralizing can be more or less explicit and thus either tend towards the prescriptive or the descriptive. Explicit moralizing often takes place in pauses during the narration of events. A narrator might insert an aside – such as Thucydides' famous comment that Nicias was a virtuous man undeserving of his fate – or digress to comment on the character at length – such as Thucydides' earlier comments about Alcibiades' chariot racing. Guiding moralizing in the introduction or conclusion of the history is often quite explicit. On the opposite end of the spectrum from explicit moralizing, implicit

moralizing can take at least two different forms. On the one hand, it can arise in the course of the narration through evaluative adjectives, speeches, moral vignettes, and more literary techniques such as juxtaposition, contrast, and correlations between action and result. On the other hand, implicit moralizing can also be built into the overall structure of the history through patterns and repetitions as well as emplotments.

Polybius gives many examples of explicit moralizing. His moralizing digressions, for example, tell his readers what to think about the events he has described, such as when he comments on the brutal way in which the mercenaries of the Mercenary War treated their captives:

Therefore, considering these events one would not hesitate to say that it is not only the bodies of human beings and some of the ulcers and tumors that have come about in them which can become aggravated and ultimately beyond healing, but also, and much more, their souls.... In the end, they turn into beasts and discard human nature. This condition must be believed to originate in most part from bad habits and bad upbringing from childhood, but there are many contributing causes, and the most important of them is the constant abusiveness and greed of their leaders. (pp. 31-2)

Polybius does not just describe but explains inhuman behavior. He uses colorful, emotional language and assigns moral causes to these actions. In other similar examples, we also encounter expressions as well as simile, generalization, and analogy. Polybius does not merely recount events, in other words, but tries to provoke a moral reaction in his reader. While presenting a coherent historical narrative, Polybius also guides the reader toward specific responses.

With Diodorus Siculus we see a 'complete commingling of the ideas of history as memorial and history as teacher' (p. 76). Like Polybius, Diodorus Siculus moralizes in narrative pauses through digressions and asides. Yet he also moralizes more implicitly through the style of narration he employs. This especially appears in Diodorus Siculus's fascination with cruelty and suffering. Again and again Diodorus Siculus narrates the brutality of tyrants and the hatred it provokes from subjects. Vivid descriptions of atrocities such as Diegylis' habit of chopping off and swapping around the limbs of his still living victims or Dionysius' torture of Phyton of Rhegium – in which he drowned Phyton's son in the sea then led Phyton around the city, bound to a siege-engine, to be publicly flogged and 'subjected to every indignity' – show this cruelty as despicable and an example to be avoided. Known for taking

large chunks of texts from his sources, Diodorus Siculus nonetheless imports a moral framework, tidying up the contradictory moralizing from his sources and molding them into a coherent moral-didactic system.

On the basis of her examinations of Polybius and Diodorus Siculus as well as a survey of fragmentary Hellenistic historiography, Hau demonstrates a consistent canon of moralizing in this tradition. The wrongness of immoderation is a dominant theme of all historiographers. The tyrant or bad leader appears repeatedly as an example of immoderation, exemplified by gluttony, inebriation, and sexual excess as well as cowardice and effeminacy. Virtues attract less attention – as if to say that sticks teach better than carrots – although moderation and courage are praised throughout.

When Hau turns to Classical historiography the deeper insightfulness of her book becomes apparent. Hellenistic historiography has long been known as moralistic; classical historiography, however, has been regarded as more serious and less rhetorical – real history as opposed to its moralistic descendant. But Hau's typology educes the implicit moralizing within Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, and the fragmentary Classical historians; this illuminates a deeper continuity among all the historians and thus a tradition of moral history that spans Greek antiquity.

Although employing evaluative phrasing, moralizing vignettes, and moralizing speeches (as evident in the much-discussed figure of the 'wise adviser'), Herodotus' *Histories* introduce implicit moralizing that occurs through patterning and repetition as well as narrative juxtaposition. The pattern of the rich and powerful man brought low by unpredictable and sudden disaster figures the entire book, from Croesus' rise and fall to the arc of the Persians from Cyrus to Xerxes, to which Herodotus calls attention in the final pendant of Book IX. In addition to this pattern, Herodotus juxtaposes characters in the narrative to call attention to moral differences: Spartan courage at Thermopylae contrasted with Persian uselessness (7.208-12); the hunger and desperation of Xerxes' army on their flight after Salamis contrasted with their overconfident splendor when they had reach the Hellespont before (8.115-20; 7.44-56). While Herodotus thus seems to anticipate the maxim the Hellenistic historians put explicitly – namely, 'not to feel too comfortable in success and not to let good fortune go to your head' (p. 187) – his implicit treatment confronts the reader with tensions and ambiguities that require further thought. As Hau puts it, the moral is 'vague and not foolproof' (p. 193).

Thucydides presents a fascinating case because of his reputation of being both a 'realist' – and thus not ostensibly moral – as well as a cynic – and thus moral insofar as he appears to be an anti-moralist. Similar to her subtle reading of Herodotus, Hau's analysis of Thucydides elucidates his implicit moralizing.

Thucydides' description of his work as valuable for all time suggests a joining of memorial and didacticism: it offers understanding of the past as well as instruction for the future. Yet Thucydides' didacticism is complex. He mostly refrains from explicit moralizing, instead presenting moral problems that force readers to draw moral inferences for themselves. When Eurymedon and his Athenian fleet do not intervene while the Corcyraeans massacre one another (3.81-5), Thucydides does not say 'the Athenians had the power to stop the Corcyraeans massacring each other, and yet they did nothing' (p. 200) – but the reader cannot miss this implication. Thucydides' moralizing has a 'minimalist subtlety' (p. 215). Episodes like the Melian Dialogue stand by themselves without explicit comment while demanding a reaction.

Long considered too good a moralist to be a historian, Xenophon has often been considered the antithesis of Thucydides. His moralizing techniques are manifold – juxtaposition, abstract summary, digressions, asides, and evaluative phrasings abound – in ways that seem to look more towards the Hellenistic historiographers than his Classical forebears. With the intriguing exception of the Oxyrhynchus historian, subsequent fragmentary Classical historiography exhibits a similar trend toward explicit moralizing, and often in a similar vein: emphasizing vices rather than virtues and offering moral lessons about divine justice and changeable fortune. All of Xenophon's works are moral-didactic but they also distinguish themselves for their *practicality*, anticipating the clear lessons drawn by Hellenistic historians about how to live – and how *not* to live – in the world they address.

Although Hau seeks to draw a continuous narrative from the classical through the Hellenistic historians, the differences between the implicit moralizing more pervasive in Herodotus and Thucydides and the explicit moralizing that predominates among all subsequent historians beg a number of questions. Can these different forms have the same teaching? Conforming both explicit and implicit moralists to one paradigm of moralizing as 'didactic' tends to efface complexity in favor of simplistic 'lessons'. When Hau encapsulates the 'overall didactic lesson of the *Histories*' as a pithy moral maxim – 'not to feel comfortable in success and not to let good fortune go to your head' (p. 187) – she seems to ignore how Herodotus engages readers in moral complexity rather than simply teaching them lessons. There is a difference between describing the game and playing it. How are these engaging readers in complexity rather than reducing moral life to such lessons?

Putting the classical historians in context can shift how we adjudge their effects. Hau comments on Thucydides' subtlety, that 'twentieth- and twenty-first-century readers like this' because 'we dislike being told what to think and prefer to feel we have detected the author's hidden meaning' (p. 200). Perhaps,

but the difference strikes me as more than a matter of preference. Implicit moralizing creates an experience for the reader that explicit moralizing does not. Herodotus and Thucydides dramatize moral problems in ways analogous to the tragedians; they create what Raymond Williams calls 'a structure of feeling', 'social experiences in solution' that hold readers in ambivalent affective space, refusing resolution and provoking not just questions but ethical uncertainty. Unlike their explicit successors, Herodotus and Thucydides perplex their readers, stinging them like Socrates into the painful experience of *aporia*.

Hau says little about the broader social and political context of these historians, but I wonder how a historical *paideia* must change depending on the surrounding regime. Hau's treatment 'from a moral angle' (p. 72) implies other angles. What about history from a 'democratic angle'? Or history from the angle of vital, flourishing life? What could history do in democratic Athens that it couldn't in Imperial Rome? And what might history do today that it could have in the ancient world? Hau's trove of discoveries about the techniques and strategies of these moral historians should hasten even more work on the implications of these lessons for social and political life. *Moral History from Herodotus to Diodorus Siculus* is certainly invigorating.

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