

The Reasons Why We Should Not Criticize Those in the Past by the Standards of today

Jia Han

The Experimental High School Attached to Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China

dr.yang@prudens.org.cn

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Abstract: The medieval eras of King James II and King Charles II sported styles that made them look flamboyant in attire, such as skirts. However, with the massive change achieved by society today, such styles will only attract more attention. Thus, these trends that were considered normal in one era might not retain the same value as another. Social development has resulted in the constant evolution of standards and so making judgments based on current expectations would be unfair. Standards are defined as morally acceptable behaviors and these standards are always dynamic, changing as the time changes being easily affected by society and a specific situation at a certain time. Thus, if we do criticize the past by today's norms, we wouldn't be any better off in the future. However, doing so only perhaps increases the potential of letting them off the hook and disregarding the darker side.

1. Introduction

Although it is a bit uncommon to come across such eye catching sights today that large groups of men wearing fancy dress and pointed shoes in public, it wasn't so out of order in the past. During medieval England, King James II and King Charles II used to sport such a style to look more flamboyant [1]. Back then, this type of dress wasn't considered unusual. It was in vogue. Today, if men wear skirts on the road, it will cause raised eyebrows, simply because society has undergone a massive constructive change. They were following the fashion that was in trend back during their era, just like we are embracing changes that are trending today. If we find their costumes strange, perhaps future generations would most likely find our 'ripped jeans' absurd too. Even during the medieval time of England, trends kept on changing. Laces were in vogue, tunics were shorter, showing a little more leg at the end of that age [2]. Later generations might not consider the former trend, our current trend, normal. What we consider normal today may not be considered normal tomorrow. We can't criticize those in the past by the standards of today, because not only would it be unfair but it can also be deemed as senseless and futile.

2. The Definition of Standards

This passage will explain how social development results in the constant evolution of standards, thereby making a judgment of the past based on current expectations is unfair. But before that, let us define "standards." According to the Oxford dictionary, "standards" is defined as a level of behavior that people consider morally acceptable [3]. The subjectivity of the word "standards" can be seen by the keywords: "people consider" and "people think". Historical judgments often involve personal points of view and are formed by people who want to persuade others of their ideas and into believing them [4]. Hence, everyone views history through different lens. Although history is unique as an objective existence, every historian has his or her own different understanding of history, so on this basis, "judgment" can vary from person to person and from time to time [5]. Some people may have a completely different take on the past compared to others and may or may not find particular things acceptable or vice versa. For example, a child who has been taught history from the point of view of the colonial rule will always view imperialism as an 'Enlightened

Despotism', whereas the one who has learned history from the vantage point of the subjugated colonies may think of this as tyrannical. The subjective nature of history and the narrative in which it is told is what makes it difficult to be judged. But we shall take some common examples that will help us understand why it is not valid to judge the past by today's standards.

3. The Chigo System

Standards constantly evolve in tandem with society. Things that our ancestors found bizarre a hundred years ago have become a common place in our modern culture. Let us take, for example, the Chigo system in medieval Japan. In this system, adolescent males, known as Chigos, exchanged their companionship and sexual services for lodging and education at the temple. A Chigo usually served two purposes at the temple; first, to participate in religious ceremonies and public functions. Second to provide personal services to their masters, which often involved homosexual relationships with priests [6]. This was considered normal behavior for Buddhists in medieval Japan as society back then tolerated homosexual practices and did not perceive homosexuality as a moral failure [7]. Having a sexual relationship between two males, specifically, a young boy and a priest will be looked down upon in the society that we live in today, where Buddhism advocates living a life of suffering and indulging in a religious practice that prohibits lust and avoids self-indulgence [8] and believing in traditional asceticism [9]. Although stigmatization around homosexuality is becoming less severe, it is not widely accepted by many and discrimination still exists [10]. It is easier to criticize the conduct of the priests, however, we should first understand the larger historical as well as social context of that time that shaped their behavior. Otherwise, our opinions would be semi-informed and biased.

Understanding the social context, in particular, is extremely crucial because it tells us about the attitudes, public opinions, and environment of that age [11]. Once we understand the social context better, it helps us perceive the motivating factors that encourage people to act in a certain way. Although those actions may have been divergent from the current norms, understanding them will develop in us a certain degree of tolerance and empathy, thereby making us less judgmental.

4. The Evolution of the Status of Women

That was just one example. Now let's take a look at how the social status of women has evolved over the centuries. A woman's position has constantly been changing along the course of history, affected by the environment around them, especially policy and institutional changes, and thereby affecting people's attitude (referred to as standards according to the dictionary) towards women. During the Sumer civilization (4500-1900 BCE), Sumerians valued fertility. So the women who were unable to reproduce would lose out on their prestige in society. This changed during the Old Babylonian period (2000-1600 BCE), where the implementation of Hammurabi's code of laws helped women acquire more privileges than children [12]. During the Indus Valley Civilization women were highly revered and considered goddesses. This shows that as societies evolved, the position and social ranking of women changed too. By the time the Victorian Era set in, things took a turn for the worse. Women were treated like second-class members of society - incapable of making life decisions without the help of their male counterparts [13]. However, if we see today, women are on par with men in every field. Some of the ideologies that our ancestors embraced were certainly wrong and regressive, and we should hold them accountable for it to avoid a repeat of such things. However, it wouldn't be fair enough to judge them. It is because they grew up in an environment where women were relegated to performing only household chores. Their mentality was majorly shaped by the surroundings that they lived in. Today, many countries have banned marriages between same-sex. Soon, this could be viewed as perfectly normal and a child in the 22nd century may judge us for discriminating against and not allowing same-sex individuals to marry, even though nature created all of us equally.

5. Opposing Moral Relativism

Moral relativism is of the view that moral judgments are true or false to one standpoint – like a particular historical background – and no other view or standpoint is solely as unique, thus we should refrain from passing moral judgments that are characteristics of cultures other than our own. Some Historians do have differing views in regards to this debate. As Charlotte Riley states in an article published in BBC World Histories magazine, issue 7, “It is completely appropriate to critique those figures from the past whose morals fall short of our own values” [14]. If we let figures from the past off the hook for scratches on their moral records, we disregard the more morally grey areas of human nature and the darker sides of their histories.

6. Conclusion

In a nutshell, we can conclude that standards are not always permanent, as they constantly evolve all along the way. They can be easily affected by the society and a specific situation at a certain age. Therefore, judging the past by the standards of today is not only unfair but also ahistorical. A similar idea can be applied to future circumstances. As the social context evolves, we cannot imagine how standards will be in the future and how future historians will judge us. Neither can they recover the past context and standards. If we criticize the past by today’s norms, we wouldn’t be any better off in the future either. Historians should never abuse their right to judge, but maintain a neutral position and always pay attention to the “pastness” of history and strive to understand the words and deeds of their predecessors in the specific contexts of the past [15]. Although, we must also hold past figures accountable for their misdeeds. Just like the two sides of a coin – the good and the bad, right or wrong.

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