Theory of Knowledge

Do historians and human scientists have an ethical obligation to follow the directive: “do not ignore contradictory evidence”? Discuss with reference to history **and** the human sciences.

AOKs: History & Human Sciences

Word count: 1600

History and Human Sciences are both areas of knowledge that heavily depend on evidence.

If historians want to research about an ancient society during thousands of years ago, they rely on evidence like artefacts, scriptures etc. This evidence helps historians to expand their knowledge about a specific niche in history, which in conclusion gives human beings a broader understanding of their past.

Similarly, when human scientists want to examine human behaviour and characteristics, they can achieve this by using methods and tools like studies, interviews and social experiments. This evidence again helps humans to get a broader understanding of themselves and draw conclusions based on several societal, cultural and religious factors.

After concluding that an evidence can have various forms e.g. physical, psychological etc.[1] it is important to note that the value of an evidence is in tight correlation with the observer's interpretation, meaning that an evidence can have different meanings in research depending on the researcher looking at it.

Ethical means relating to beliefs about right and wrong.[2] An obligation is a duty to do something [2] and can vary from person to person. If one combines these two principles of human behaviour, one can conclude that an ethical obligation is a person's duty based on their beliefs about right and wrong.

Something being contradictory suggests the idea of two or more facts, ideas or statements implying that opposite things are true.[3] As mentioned earlier, evidence is anything you see or experience that makes you certain about something being true. If one was to combine these two terms, contradictory evidence would be an experience that proves the opposite of an already manifested ideology or evidence.

On the surface, historians and human scientists do have an ethical obligation to consider contradictory evidence, as they play a fundamental role for humanity when it comes to understanding human nature in the past but also expanding current knowledge about human behaviour. Ignoring evidence that contradicts with opinions of historians and human scientists from the past could lead to future generations believing misinformation. The essay will discuss and compare different perspectives of both historians and human scientists using real world examples to conclude whether historians and human scientists have an ethical obligation to follow the directive: "do not ignore contradictory evidence".

In cases where scholars criticize their own countries of taking unethical measure, historians can carry the ethical obligation to not ignore those historical accounts and evidence, as they can build a fundamental understanding of a conflict in the past.

During colonial empires in human history e.g. Colonialism in African Sub – continent, philosophers and scientists often tried to justify the actions of colonial powers by declaring the oppression as a method to "civilize" the local inhabitants, often in the name of God. Early accounts of oppressed people were often ignored and overshadowed by colonial propaganda. Not only did this lead to brutal behaviour on indigenous people, but it kept on fuelling colonial ideologies further worsening the devastating situation of the local inhabitants. However, philosophers such as Kant, Smith and Diderot held a critical viewpoint on the legitimacy of the

[1]Collins. (n.d.). *Evidence*. Collins Dictionary. Retrieved November 21, 2024

[2]Collins. (n.d.). *Ethical Obligation*. Collins Dictionary. Retrieved November 21, 2024

[3]Collins. (n.d.). *Contradictory Evidence*. Collins Dictionary. Retrieved November 21, 2024

colonies and criticised the idea of Europeans having an obligation to "civilize" the rest of the world by also underling the brutality used by colonial oppressors. [4]

The colonies being "civilizing" or barbaric and inhuman are completely opposite ideas. Conclusively it is especially important for modern day human scientist, or at least it was when first discussing the validity of colonies, to not ignore contradictory evidence in the form of great philosophers like Kant, Smith and Diderot questioning the brutal means of colonial powers. Ignoring those could have led to an opinion solely based on justifying colonial accounts and propagandic scriptures. Therefore, one can claim that ignoring contradictory evidence in history could lead into believing false and propagandistic ideas meaning historians should not ignore evidence highlighting the opposite of a commonly followed ideology.

There can also be cases where ethical considerations can lead historians to prioritize some evidence over others, especially if human lives are involved in the matter, constructing an ethical barrier for historians.

Cristopher Columbus was and is still to this date seen as a heroic explorer, discovering the sub – continents of Americas. This narrative dominated the European society for many centuries, and the deep lying roots could still be seen in history books used by various schools. In many countries of the Americas, the Columbus Day is celebrated highlighting the arrival of Cristopher Columbus. However, in recent times the heroic image of Columbus is questioned by historians as throughout history, various evidence has opened a dark chapter of his arrival in the Americas. Not only do they mention his desire to use the indigenous people as slaves and using their resources for his own profit, but they also talk about legal actions taken against him upon his arrival back in Spain. Most of the evidence are extracts taken out of his personal diary. [5]

This is a primary example of how historians can face various ethical barriers when discussing whether contradictory evidence should be valued when discussing a commonly believed fact. On the one hand Columbus' discovery of the Americas holds such an immense value for some people, that a national holiday was created just remember this milestone of human exploration. However, on the other hand ignoring the cruelty carried out on the indigenous habitants by Columbus and his men can disvalue human lives and offend people with ancestors coming from this niche of society. Sensitive topics like these require thorough thinking before publishing any statements that could insult a group of people or overshadow historical facts.

Especially in human sciences, when scientists discover new findings about human behaviour through studies, it should be important to consider contradictory evidence that may follow up ensuring that the ideas behind the study can be evolved with new insights from other human scientists. In the 2000s and 2010s studies psychological studies built a fundamental understanding of the human brain trying to determine how environmental factors influence a persons will power. Roy Baumeister's studies play a significant role in understanding self – control in psychology. Participants were divided into two groups in the "radish and chocolate cookie" test. One half were given radishes before assigning them to solve impossible puzzles and the other half chocolate cookies. Participants eating radishes were intentionally exposed to the appetizing fragrance of freshly baked cookies. The study found out that the group consuming radishes

[4]Kohn, Margaret. Reddy, Kavita. (May 9, 2006, substantive revision Jan 17, 2023). *Colonialism*. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Retrieved November 21, 2024

[5]Myint, B. (Updated: October 9, 2023). *Was Christopher Columbus a Hero or Villain?*. Biography. Retrieved November 21, 2024

before solving puzzles gave up after just eight minutes, while the other group lasted 19 minutes on average. The effect was called “ego depletion” and underlined that humans have a limited

supply of willpower, and it decreases with overuse. [6] Additionally, facing self – denial while working on a task e.g. in this case not being able to eat the cookies while being exposed to their scent, further enhances this effect. However, an article in the journal “Perspectives on Psychological Science” shortly after the publishment of the ego depletion effect disclaimed Baumeister’s findings. The study conducted experiments on 2000 subjects across multiple labs on several continents and found absolutely nothing. A zero – effect for ego depletion. [6]

In this case, the “radish and chocolate cookie” test was declared inaccurate by other scientists after its publishment. Attention span and will – power can vary among different cultures, households and groups of people as not everyone puts the same value on it. These characteristics of human beings often develop in their younger years and depending on the circumstances faced by the participants scientists can not conclude a universal theory. However, this does not mean that Baumeister’s finding were irrelevant as it was the fundament for future studies and proposed to other scientists to gather more data with the help of modifications in the studies. Therefore, human scientists can hold an ethical obligation to not ignore contradictory evidence, especially when it comes to work on a common goal: being able to understand the human mind.

In some cases, however, it is possible that the ethical obligation of human scientists’ changes and it is more beneficial and ethical for scientists to ignore contradictory evidence. For instance, scientists researching ancient DNA on ancestral human remains work closely with indigenous people. Therefore, both official and unofficial ethical guidelines have been created that deal with protecting indigenous people’s values and believes, even if scientific contradictory evidence is found. [7] The human scientist must weigh the benefits of publishing and not publishing the findings. [8] The International Ethical Guidelines for Biomedical Research Involving Human subjects exactly deal with this topic.

Overall, one can conclude that historians and human scientists **do** have an ethical obligation to follow the directive: “do not ignore contradictory evidence”, as both professions build the fundament for knowers dealing with the past of humans but also their behaviour. It is especially essential for knowers studying these branches to get an unfiltered and unbiased view on different events, studies and results. Apart from that, especially because these professions deal with sensitive topics involving human conflicts and believes, it makes it even more important to respect suppressed minorities and not overshadow contradictory evidence, following the mainstream as everyone else. However, this also means that if ignoring contradictory scientific evidence leads to the overall benefit of a niche from society, it can be considered to ignore the evidence out of respect and put moral above science. When comparing the pro and cons of following or not following the directive, one can clearly see that both these Areas of Knowledge heavily rely on evidence and in most cases, not ignoring evidence leads to the enhancement of already established theories.

[6]Engber, Daniel. (March 6, 2016). *Everything Is Crumbling*. SLATE. Retrieved 21. November 2024

[7]Fleskes, Raquel E. Bader, Alyssa C. Tsosie, Krystal S. Wagner, Jennifer K. Claw, Katrina G. Garrison, Nanibaa‘ A. (May 10, 2022). Ethical Guidance in Human Paleogenomics: New and Ongoing Perspectives. Annual Reviews. Retrieved 21 November, 2024

[8]Cioms. (Geneva 2016). International Ethical Guidelines for Health-related Research Involving Humans. CIOMS. Retrieved 21 November, 2024

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