# Moral Dimensions of History

## Suggested Subject Levels: 11 and 12

## Subject: History

## Suggested Ontario Curriculum Expectations:

* **Communities: Local, National, and Global**
  + Explain how different individuals and communities in Canada seek to fulfill their ambitions and express their identities.
  + Assess the importance to Canadian society of the cultural mosaic and of the right of individual self-expression, as reflected in government policies and popular attitudes (e.g., changes to the Indian Act, multicultural policies, hate-crime legislation, religious tolerance, rights of individuals who lead alternative lifestyles

## Topic: Benchmarks of Historical Thinking

## Content: Moral Dimensions of History

## Working Definition:

“Taking historical perspective demands that we understand the differences between our moral universe and those of bygone societies. We do not want to impose our own anachronistic standards on the past.”[[1]](#footnote-0)

## Goals (Aims and Outcomes):

Students should be expected to learn something from the past that helps them to confront moral matters in contemporary contexts and examine them critically.

## Objectives (Performance and Behavioural Indicators):

Students should be able to make judgments about actions of people in the past. This involves, firstly, recognizing the historical context in which they were operating so that modern norms and moral conceptions are not imposed anachronistically upon the past.

## Materials (Aids/AV/Technology):

Computers with Internet Access

## Introductory Activity (Focusing Event):

Discussion Questions, whether approached as a whole class or divided amongst smaller groups, can help students focus their thinking on questions related to the consideration of the moral dimensions of historical thinking.

Focusing, leading questions for discussion might include:

a. Have you ever done anything regrettable to someone else in your personal history?

b. Perhaps someone in your life was of great service to you, and you later felt responsible, or that you owed him or her something in return?

c. Could such a sense of gratitude, or debt, ever pass down from one generation to another, from your ancestors or to your children?

d. Could a group or a government owe a debt to someone for deeds done in the past?

## Development Activity (Modeling/Explanation/Demonstration):

Choose, considering the context of the students’ background and interest, as well as the particular community in which the school is located, questions to provoke consideration of the moral dimensions of past events.

For example, in the Canadian context, a teacher might concentrate the development of student thinking around a core question such as: “What debt, if any, do Canadians like you and me owe to those who were the victims of injustice in the past? What was the government thinking when it discriminated against Chinese Canadians? How should the government respond to demands for redress for the Head Tax or the Chinese Exclusion Act?”

Students can then be divided into groups and asked to debate, assuming various perspectives on the questions (in this case, the perspective of a Chinese Canadian paying the Head Tax or a government official collecting the Tax).

### Follow-up Activity:

Students can be asked, perhaps in collaboration with the English or Drama teacher in the school, to write a short script or scenario in which the moral dimensions of the core question are debated or discussed. The script can also relate to related, contemporary moral debates in the news.

## Practice (Guided/Monitored Activity):

Students can be asked, either individually or with a partner, to take a position on one of the following questions and present a response. Suggested formats include an essay, a work of visual art, or a speech.

Provocative prompts could include:

1. We do not want to impose our own anachronistic standards on the past

2. Historians attempt to hold back on the assumption of moral positions, but meaningful stories often involve moral judgments

3. What we learn in history has no moral implications for the present, because the context and society are otherwise.

## Independent Practice (Relation to STONES social history research):

Students can be asked to read the text on the GLBTQ Community in Kingston.[[2]](#footnote-1) Take the tour online or, if possible, in person. A class trip to the sites might be possible. A model rubric, to be modified by the teacher, is included in the folder, titled: “Historical Perspective Taking Rubric.”

Students should be asked to jot down, as they emerge, thoughts or feelings provoked by the tour text or sites. They can attempt to consider the context empathetically. How do these experiences relate to the present world and contemporary problems in society?

Students can be asked to form groups and discuss their thoughts considering the GLBTQ community and whether it has been treated fairly by the already settled Canadians within the context considered by the text (late 1880s- early 1900s)?

Students should pick an event with a particularly powerful moral meaning and explain its resonance within the broader context of the time, supporting their statements on historical information gathered from the STONES site, including pictures and text.

A poster can be created to convey the position. These can be displayed within the classroom or in the hallways of the school.

## Accommodations (Differentiated Instruction)

Extra time can be afforded to students.

## Checking for Ongoing Understanding (Formative Assessment/Feedback Opportunities)

Students can journal, following each activity within the units of study, a reflective entry considering their ongoing understanding of the benchmark for historical thinking, as well as its implications for active, participatory citizenship in contemporary contexts.

Teachers can take the opportunity to read these journals and adjust the lessons / course of study to the pace, concerns, and questions raised in the entries.

Student and teacher journals can be shared in online space using a blogging tool such as blogger.com

## Closure (Wrapping up Activities):

Using the sample worksheet included in the folder, titled “Moral Dimensions Activity Sheet,” students can continue to focus on one event or person related in the GLBTQ social history, and consider it in relation to contemporary social issues.

1. http://www.histori.ca/benchmarks/concepts/understand.php [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Downloaded, or viewed online, at http://stoneskingston.ca/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)