

Exploring how Alternative History can merge different perspectives regarding Ethical Responsibility – insights from the Oral Presentation Round Table #1 chair

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Abstract. This paper examines two distant, yet complementary research approaches presented at the 4th international Conference of 'What if...? World History 24/25, held at University of Vigo, dedicated to the theme of Ethical Responsibility. These presented works explore how alternative historical scenarios can contribute to contemporary ethical debate., with one focusing the hypothetical consequences of the complete success of the artistic avant-garde movements and their lasting social and moral impact, while the other investigates both counterfactual and historical evidence of gender inequality, with particular attention to Olympe de Gouges and the struggle for women's rights. Together, these perspectives highlight the connection between imaginative historical thinking and ethical reflection, suggesting ways in which history may inform the development of more responsible and equitable social frameworks.

Keywords: Ethical responsibility; alternative history, counterfactual analysis; avant-garde art; gender equality; social imagination.

1. Introduction

It is broadly accepted that ethical responsibility must be capable of autonomously generating self-enforceable norms that do not depend on the existence of a law and the coercive power of the state [1], norms that hinges on "our concern with living a good human life" where societal norms sustain non-formal justice [2 p 243].

To achieve a deeper understanding of the social-determinant concept of ethical responsibility, this article bridges two distinctive yet complementary studies¹: the first is mostly concerned with artistic insights, and the latter, with its legal understandings, aims to explore how creative imagination and juridical reasoning intersect. Both studies question how history, art, and ethics could have evolved

¹ The studies, as per the oral presentations mentioned in this work, can be accessed here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YJ9rOJJqql0>

differently under altered social and philosophical circumstances, by employing counterfactual² analysis to approach ethical responsibility from each distinct disciplinary perspective.

First introduced work, by Sol Alonso Romera, presented a valuable insight imagining a world where the avant-garde artistic movements had prevailed and continued shaping modern consciousness. At the counterpart of this round table, Mariana Blengio Valdés presented a distinctive investigation about how the inclusion of Olympe de Gouges' feminist vision in foundational legal documents might have produced a more equal society. Together, these analyses invite a reconsideration of how creative and legal thoughts co-produce ethical responsibility and collective awareness.

This paper proceeds next by presenting the methodology used in the analysis, then it explores both distinct studies, highlighting its main characteristics, indicating afterwards not only the conclusions but also future avenues.

2. Materials and Methods

Aiming to achieve this paper's objectives, it was first considered both the authors' research and respective oral presentations, as well as the enriching final discussion at the round table. Additionally relevant to this work was the alternative history methodology, as reflecting on "what could have been" invites not only historical reinterpretation but also a renewed awareness of contemporary moral obligations, as alternative history opens new perspectives towards the future [3 p 39]³:

Alternative History is a field more close to literature than history. The basic reasoning of alternative history resides in distancing itself from the 'official' or 'factual' history, focusing on its variations through speculative logic on 'what it could have happened if?' (What if?).

[...]

As result, alternative stories have a decisive role regarding the future

[...]

Considering counterfactual analysis involves the creation of hypothetical scenarios where specific elements of the input are altered to observe the resulting changes in output [4], this valuable alternative history methodology underscores how this approach can reveal new dimensions of ethical reflection, justice, and social transformation.

3. Background: the presented studies

Alternative history, ethical responsibility, creative imagination, art in general and juridical reasoning background are the distinct contexts of these two studies, which, once combined, demonstrate a mutual correlation. While Sol Alonso's input is mainly related with artistic insights and how its consciousness contributes to an elevated form of society, Blengio Valdés' approach offers a rather legal perspective regarding how it can contribute to a higher social equity.

3.1 Hypothetical histories and ethical responsibility in artistic movements

The Spanish Professor Sol Alonso Romera studied which ethical dimensions exist in an avant-garde influenced world, highlighting the power of art to transform its social norms and ethical pillars. According to the author, besides defying conventional hierarchies, the innovative avant-garde's

² This counterfactual analysis is considered as defined in a previous work, i.e., "how the course of history might have been altered, considering what possible and different outcomes might have resulted", available here:

<https://www.up.pt/casacomum/wp-content/uploads/sites/520/2022/07/02.pdf>

³ Translated by the author from the Portuguese original text: A história alternativa é um género mais próximo da literatura do que da história. O argumento básico da história alternativa consiste em distanciar-se da história 'oficial' ou 'real', para concentrar-se em variações dela baseadas em raciocínios como "o que teria acontecido se?" (E se?). [...] Por consequência, as histórias alternativas têm um papel decisivo relativamente ao futuro [...]

approaches also contributed to a more inclusive society and aesthetically engaged one [5]. In this scenario, the hypothetical success of the avant-garde movement would welcome a collective sense of ethical innovation, which would promote a parallel evolution of creativity and moral reflection. According to this author, ethical responsibility rises from artistic creation and social participation, of both artists and audiences interested in fostering an environment that promotes freedom, equity, and critical thinking.

Additionally, a key argument presented by Romera is the notion of “art as ethical mirror”, defending that society could have progressed more nuanced moral sensibilities, emphasizing empathy, diversity, and inclusivity by imagining a continuous avant-garde influence. This very perspective underlines the interdependence of cultural and ethical progress, suggesting that ethical responsibility extends beyond individual action to comprehend a broader socio-cultural framework.

Ethical responsibility suggests personal reflection and social commitment, not being confined to abstract morality but emerging from lived experiences, shared narratives, and the capacity to anticipate alternative realities [6]. As Paul Ricoeur proposes, imagination plays a crucial role in moral reasoning since it allows us to project new hidden possible futures and re-evaluate past inequalities [7]. In this regard, the correlation between artistic creation and legal reasoning offers fertile ground for studying ethical questions. While art is the perceivable form of cultural expressions, law establishes frameworks for justice and accountability. Their dialogue mirrors the tension between freedom and structure, creativity and normativity, that defines moral life itself [8].

3.2 The counterfactual method - gender equality and ethical responsibility: imagining otherwise

Mariana Blengio Valdés examined ethical responsibility through the lens of gender history, by using counterfactual analysis to explore how different historical choices could have advanced outputs. Her research is based on Olympe de Gouges, a pioneering advocate for women’s rights, so to examine ethical implications by contrasting factual historical outcomes with hypothetical alternatives, demonstrating how reflective analysis can inform contemporary ethical practice [9].

This author underlines that counterfactual methodology provides a powerful tool for assessing moral responsibility across time. By asking “what could have been,” researchers and citizens benefit from a higher appreciation of historical injustices and the ethical urgency of restoring them. For instance, if de Gouges’ proposals presented in the “Declaration of the Rights of Women and Female Citizen” had been widely implemented, as the right to vote, the access to education, the recognition of divorce, marriage equality or the protection for illegitimate children and single mothers, society norms regarding gender equality and civil and social rights for women might have evolved more rapidly, fostering more equitable opportunities and responsibilities for women.

Moreover, this specialist points out that counterfactual thinking not only sets speculative scenarios, but also clarifies moral imperatives in the present moment. By understanding how past ethical failures shaped contemporary inequality, society can identify more effective strategies for achieving justice, demonstrating the continuity of ethical responsibility across generations. In fact, the counterfactual method – by applying the question “what if” – allows not only artists but also philosophers to discuss historical determinism [8], as this kind of thinking can disclose new possibilities previously difficult to see or anticipate were and also accentuate the relevance of past ethical implications of choices [10, 11].

The speculative narrative presented by Alonso Romera, where a world where avant-garde art movements continued uninterrupted is imagined, highlights how aesthetic innovation could have contributed to a more participatory and human society [5]. On the contrary, Blengio Valdés’ legal counterfactual – conceiving a world where women’s rights through the inclusion of Olympe de

Gouges influence were early recognition - demonstrates the moral urgency of rewriting exclusionary histories [9]. Together, these perspectives remind us that ethical reflection accepts an ongoing discussion between what is and what could have been, a form of moral imagination that resists resignation

3.3. Integrating artistic and gendered perspectives

Combining these two studies shows the existence of converging insights on ethical responsibility, to highlight different moral dimensions: Alonso Romera emphasizes the cultural and aesthetic consequences of alternative histories while Blengio Valdés underlines the social and political consequences, particularly regarding equality.

This combination suggests that ethical responsibility to be multidimensional, including cultural imagination and social justice. In Alonso Romera's research, ethical reflection emerges from the engagement of art and creative innovation. As far as Blengio Valdés' is concerned, ethical reflection rises from critical historical analysis and counterfactual reasoning. Together, both perspectives demonstrate that imagining alternative histories, from artistic or social lenses, enables a richer understanding of moral obligations.

This integrated approach helps to accentuate that ethical responsibility requires both aesthetic sensibility and historical consciousness, highlighting the relationship between imagination and evidence-based reasoning. As an example, policies promoting cultural literacy and gender equality can draw from both imaginative and analytical historical methods, fostering societies capable of moral and creative engagement.

Therefore, imagination does not stand against reason but rather complements it by expanding the field of ethical awareness [12]. Martha Nussbaum implies that the arts contribute to moral development by cultivating emotional intelligence, defending that emotions are "intelligent responses to the perception of value" [13]. Similarly, Hannah Arendt includes moral judgment in the faculty of imagination - the capacity to "think from the standpoint of others" [14]. Through this lens, Romera's and Blengio Valdés' interventions can be read as exercises in ethical imagination, encouraging us to reconsider not only historical narratives but also the principles underlying justice and responsibility.

4. Solutions and Recommendations

As far as the main outcomes of this round table are concerned, it is possible to point out various perspectives towards the future. In general, the combination of these two different pieces of research is valuable towards a better understanding of the importance of ethical implications for a contemporary society. Firstly, the relevance of speculative thinking in ethical perception stands out, as societies develop a critical perspective by considering what might have been, enabling a better understanding of present moral choices and the recognition of injustice, thus cultivating a more responsible and conscious culture.

Secondly, the research illustrates that ethical responsibility extends across multiple areas. As Professor Romera suggests, promoting creative and experimental opportunities may cultivate empathy and moral awareness. As Blengio Valdés demonstrated, in political and social environments the understanding of historical injustices and potential alternatives contributes to the development of fair policies and social norms. In addition, the combination of both perspectives identifies the need for an interdisciplinary approach in ethical research. Art, history, gender studies, and ethics insights together combined not only enables a holistic comprehension of responsibility, but also encourages active engagement, critical reflection, and an ethical cultivation of both cultural and social life.

Nevertheless, complex contemporary societies face new challenges regarding ethical responsibility, such as technological acceleration, environmental deterioration, and the increasing social discrimination [15], to which counterfactual analysis and artistic imagination may help as tools to reframe ethical questions. By juxtaposing artistic and legal perspectives, this reflective article invites a broader understanding of responsibility - one that acknowledges both creative speculation and institutional accountability. Ethical progress thus depends not only on rational deliberation but also on our capacity to imagine justice in a different way [16].

5. Future Perspectives and Conclusions

Ethical responsibility seems to have a broad social implementation as it has the potential to enrich human behavior. Fostering an accentuated ethical way of being towards the future, in contrast to our contemporary status, augments the possibility of establishing an increasingly more reputable and responsible society. With this perspective in mind, alternative history plays a crucial role as it inspires and stimulates an equitable human playground where this society framework is consistently under critical reflection. To achieve so, both art and legal contributions are mutually complementary to a wide understanding of the present and extremely helpful in preventing the same human errors.

This paper demonstrates that ethical responsibility can be more deeply understood through the integration of imaginative and historical approaches. Sol Alonso Romera's exploration of a world shaped by avant-garde artistic success illustrates the transformative potential of cultural innovation, while Mariana Blengio Valdés' counterfactual analysis of gender equality highlights the ethical significance of historical contingency and social justice. Together, these perspectives suggest that ethical responsibility is not only a matter of individual action but a multidimensional process involving cultural, social, and historical dimensions. Furthermore, by reflecting on alternative histories, whether through art or gendered counterfactuals, societies can cultivate a richer moral awareness, fostering conditions for more equitable and responsible futures.

The integration of artistic and juridical counterfactuals offers a multidimensional understanding of ethical responsibility. Romera's artistic imagination and Blengio Valdés' legal analysis converges in affirming that moral reflection must remain open to the possibilities of transformation. By engaging with the "what if" of history, we cultivate the imaginative and intellectual flexibility necessary for ethical renewal. Such reflection is not only theoretical but practical, as it invites us to act differently, guided by empathy, critical awareness, and the courage to reimagine justice itself.

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