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Historical Objectivity



6.1 Questions

1. “Every history is written from a certain point of view and makes sense only from that point of view” W. H Walsh. Discuss the problem of objectivity in history in the light of this statement.
2. Why is the concept of historical objectivity so controversial?
3. “History is radically and viciously subjective” react to this statement.
4. To what extent is history objective?
5. Discuss the problem of objectivity in history in the light of this statement.

6.2 What is Objectivity?

- It means not biased or not subjective (one persons opinion).
- What everybody agrees on correct opinion.
- What people accept as historical truth at any given time?
- Objective judgment is made by testing in all ways possible ones subjective impressions, so as to arrive at objectivity.

Therefore, objectivity is balanced assessment of the evidence. This is professional work of in collecting, identifying, weighing evidence and analyzing evidence.

According to Christopher Blake in his article *can history be objective* has argued that historians try to discover what happened how it happened why it happened and what it meant. It has been argued that written history can never be

objective, even if the personal bias of the historian can be overcome (which many doubt), it is still inevitable that what is written must be relative to the tastes, customs, and prejudices of the creative moment. No two historians can agree on what really happened, an agreement in one generation fails to survive the next.

6.3 Historical Objectivity

Every reputable historian acknowledges the need for some sort of objectivity and impartiality in his work. He distinguishes history from propaganda, and condemns those writers who allow their reconstruction of the past as bad workmen who do not know their job. Most historians agree that their work is primarily a cognitive activity, concerned with an independent object, the past whose nature they had to investigate for its own sake, though they would doubtless add that their knowledge of that object is always fragmentary and incomplete.

However the fact remains that disagreements amongst historians is common, instead of an agreed interpretation of any period emerging, a plurality of views emerge e.g. Marxist, liberal, conservative, catholic protestant, rationalists, royalist, republican etc.

These theories are held in such a way that their supporters think each of them to be, if not the find truth about the period under study, at any rate correct in essentials a conviction that make them think all others are erroneous.

There is history objective? Historians have failed to develop an historical “consciousness in general”, a set of agreed canons of interpretation which all who work at the subject would be ready to acknowledge. What are we to say about this situation?

We might attempt to maintain not only that historians are influenced by subjective factors. Others argue that impartial history, so far from being an ideal is a downright impossibility in support of this, it can be argued that every historian books at the past from a certain point of view, which he can no more around i.e. than he can jump out of his own skin it can also be maintained that the disagreements of historians, when carefully analyzed, seem to turn on points which are not matter for argument but depend on the interest and desires of the contending parties, whether in a personal or in a group capacity.

Historical disputes, according to this way of thinking, are at bottom concerned not with what is true or false, but with what is and what is not desirable and fundamentals historical judgments are in consequence not strictly cognitive but “emotive” This would be far to about the distinction between history and propaganda, and therefore to undermine the claim that history is (or can become) a truly scientific study.

It is also argued that the past failure off historians to reach objective truth is no evidence that it will always elude them and attempt to show that the development of a common historical consciousness it’s not out of the question.

A German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey who is a positivist, argued that objective history ought to rest on an objective study of human nature, for general judgments about human nature have an important part to play in historical interpretation and explanation.

The concept of historical objectivity is radically different from that of scientific objectivity, the difference coming out in the fact that while all reputable historians condemn biased and tendentious words, they do not so clearly endorse the scientific ideal o wholly impersonal thinking.

The work of the historian, like that of the artist, may be thought to be in some sense of an expression of his personality, and is plausible to argue that this is of vital account for the subject we are considering.

It is argued that the artist is not content only to have and express his emotions, he wants to communicate what he takes to be a certain vision or insight into the nature of things and the artistry would claim truth and objectivity for his work for that very reason.

It might be maintained that the best way of dealing with the problem of historical objectivity is to assimilate historical thinking in this respect to the thinking of the artist.

History might be said to give us a series of different but not incompatible portraits of the past, each reflecting it from a different point of view. Can historians hope to attain objective knowledge? Do historians aim at objectivity like the scientific?

Certainly it is true that reputable historians are united in demanding a species of impartiality and impersonality in historical work. Historical writing in which arguments and conclusions are twisted to suit the personal prejudice of propagandist aim of the writer is universally condemned as bad. Genuine history according to historians is distinguishable from propaganda because of objective validity. Are there pluralities of divergent accounts of the same subject in history? Does each generation find it necessary to rewrite the histories written by its predecessors? At any given point of time and place there is available differing and apparently inconsistent versions of the same set of essentialism, each of them claiming to give the whole truth.

The interpretation of one historian is repudiated by another. It appears from this that historical thinking is a subjective element, different from that which is

to be found in scientific thinking, and that this factor limits or alters the character of the objectivity which historians can hope to attain.

Is it possible for historians to free themselves from all particular preconceptions and approach their facts in a wholly impersonal way? Can history achieve objectivity as in science, say physics? Product would not be history historians argue that every history is written from a certain point of view and makes sense from that point of view. A concept which is important in historical thinking is that of selection – history is selective in two ways.

Every actual piece of historical writing is departmental since it is only on an aspect or limited set of aspects of the past that a particular historian can concentrate his attention – historian makes a limited contribution to ideal history.

No historian can narrate everything that happened in the past even within the field he chooses for study. All must select some facts for special emphases and ignore others altogether. I.e. those ideas that find their way into books of history are those that have some degree of importance.

What is important again is relative; relates to what happened independently of anyone's thinking now to the person making the judgment of importance. It can be seen clearly from this consideration that each historian obviously does bring to his studies a set of interests, beliefs, and values which is clearly going to have some influence on what he takes to be important.

The conclusion is that history is radically and viciously subjective and in the light of this, writes off its pretensions to be scientific in any sense of the term.

6.4 Why is Historical Objectivity Problematic?

Every historian acknowledges the need for objectivity and impartiality in their work. Historians argue that they should distinguish history from propaganda and condemn those writers who allow their feelings and personal preconceptions to influence or affect their reconstruction of the past as bad workmen, who do not know their work. Most historians agree that their work is primarily a cognitive activity and are concerned with independent object, the past. Historians need to investigate that past for its own sake.

6.5 What is the Problem Then?

However, the fact remains that disagreements amongst historians is common, instead of an agreed interpretation of any period emerging, a brutality of views emerge for example Marxist, liberal, conservative, catholic, protestant, republican, royalist and rationalist. The supporters of each of these theories think their position or view is the final truth and they think that all others are erroneous.

Historians have failed to develop an historical “consciousness is general” a set of agreed canons of interpretation which all historians would be ready to acknowledge. It is argued that no two historians can agree on what really happened. An agreement in one generation fails to survive the next (historical skepticism) i.e. with new information history is rewritten. History can have same evidence, but different interpretation.

6.6 Factors Contributing to Disagreements amongst Historians

6.6.1 Personal Bias

There is plenty of evidence of the influence of personal likes and dislikes in historian's presentation of facts. Is it an obstacle to the attainment of objective truth in history? Historians ought to be free from personal prejudice by recognizing them and guarding against them. Historians should also condemn those historians who they think are biased based history.

6.6.2 Group Prejudice

A man's religion s opinions ought to influence this history to the extent of making him incapable to the actions of men who did not share them. The assumptions which historians make as class conscious members of the proletariat or staunch Protestants must be such as they can justify on rational grounds or they must be extruded from their history.

6.6.3 Conflicting Theories of Historical Interpretation

This is based on a theory of the relative importance of different kinds of causal factor in history. Historians must use theory to make any sense of his facts. A theory of historical interpretation if it is to claim any justification must be a well established empirical hypotheses, based on a case study of the actual facts of historical change (historical materialism). Disagreements are many each supporting their theory.

6.6.4 Underlying Philosophical Conflicts

Historians approach the past each with his/her own philosophical ideas, and that this has a decisive effect on the way they interpret it – ethical, religious, metaphysical, outlook etc. Thus it necessary that historian should become aware of their own moral and metaphysical preconception and to be on their guard against reading them naively into their history. The contention would be that objectivity in history is achieved if the facts depicted accurately and that histories should not contradict each other but complement one another.

To attain objectivity the historian needs not merely standard knowledge of how people do behave in a variety of situations, but for further a standard conception of how they ought to behave. He needs to get state not merely his factual knowledge but also his metaphysical ideas. Why?

1. Are those pluralities of divergent accounts of the same subject in history?
2. Does each generation find it necessary to rewrite the histories written by its predecessors?
3. At any given point of time and place there are available differing and apparently inconsistent versions of the same set of events, each of them claiming to give, if not in the whole truth about it?
4. The interpretations of one historian indignantly repudiated by another?
5. It appears from this that historical thinking is a subjective element, different from that which is to be or alters the character of, the objectivity which historians can hope to attain.
6. Is it possible for historians to free themselves from all particular preconceptions and approach their facts in a wholly impersonal way?

7. Can history achieve objectivity as in science, say physics?
8. Product would not be history. Historians argue that every history is written from a certain point of view and makes sense from that point of view.
9. A concept which is important in historical thinking is that of selection. History is selective in two ways:
 - Every actual piece of historical writing is departmental, since it is only on an aspect or limited set of aspects of the past that a particular historian can concentrate his attention – historian makes a limited contribution to ideal history.
 - No historian can narrate everything that happened in the past even within the field he chooses for study all must select some facts for special emphasis and ignore others altogether. i.e. those ideas that find the way into books of history are those that have some degree of importance.

6.7 Can History be Objective?

Can historians obtain or attain objectivity? Is it possible for historians to free themselves from all particular preconceptions and approach their facts in a wholly impersonal way? Can history achieve objectivity as in science? Can historians hope to attain objective knowledge? Do historians aim at objectivity like scientists? Objectivity is obtainable simply as a result of discounting those aspects of historical writing which lack the requisite “indifference to persons and places” the methodology used in history enquiry can yield objective knowledge of the past.

6.7.1 Arguments for Objectivity in History

1. It is argued that the past failure of historians to reach objective truth is not evidence that will always elude them. It is an attempt to show that the development of a common historical consequence is not out of the question. A German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey argued that objective history ought to rest on an objective study of human nature for it plays an important role in the historical interpretation and explanation.
2. The concept of historical objectivity is radically different from that of scientific objectivity, the difference coming out in the fact that while all reputable historians condemn biased and tendentious work, they do not so clearly endorse the scientific ideal of wholly impersonal thinking.
3. It might be maintained that the best way of dealing with the problem of historical objectivity is to assimilate historical thinking in respect to the thinking of the artist (art practical cognitive) e.g. the work of an artist and historian may be thought to be an expression of his personality it is argued that the artist is not content to have and express his emotions, he wants to communicate what he takes to be ascertain vision or insight into the nature of things – the artist would claim truth and objectivity same to historian.
4. History gives a series of different but not incompatible portraits of the past, each reflecting it from a different point of view i.e. the contention would be that objectivity in history is achieved if the facts are depicted accurately and that disagreements in history would not contradict each other but complement one another to attain objectivity.

5. The fact that historians give many causes to the same event shows objectivity.
6. According to Christopher Blake in his article can history be objective? Has argued that historians try to discover what happened, how it happened, why it happened and what it meant objective.
7. Be intellectually objective is to discount and eliminate personal (bias) Factors in the operation by which a conclusion is reached.
8. Among the working canons of historians are standards for determining the accuracy or reliability of sources the standards are corporately applied thus leading to objectivity.
9. A considerable part of history is acceptable to the community of professional historians beyond all questions by these standards objective.
10. Objectivity is obtainable and achievable simply as a result of discounting those aspects of historical writing which lack the requisite “indifference to persona and places.”
11. The methodology used in historical inquiry can yield objective knowledge of the past.
12. it has been propounded that being objective entails reporting accurately together with some neutrality in the idioms, words and languages can determine whether history is objective or not.
13. Some writers argue that history can be objective if reasonable people would accept it and provide it is not asked is a philosophical sense – can anything be known?

14. History like science is objective for history aims at discovery facts of the past as they really were and interpret them objectively like natural science, it uses various methods of enquiry such as observation, classification, formulation of hypotheses and analysis of evidence before interpreting and reconstructing the past i.e. history seeks to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth (absolute truth).
15. Euro-centric vs. Afro-centric views today there are efforts by the African generation of historic analysis, equipped with modern tools of investigation and informed modern technologies of science are partly directed at correcting the distortions perpetuated by earlier generations of non African historians or directed at filling the gaps which were left y those earlier scholars.

The historian can at least for the purposes of research and writing divest himself/herself of all taint of religious, political, philosophical, social, sex, economic, class, moral, aesthetic, nationality, race, ethnicity, prejudices, personal likes/dislikes, personal bias, group prejudice, underlying philosophical conflicts, conflicting theories of historical interpretation etc and view events with strict impartiality and come up with factual knowledge, first as a mirror reflects any objects to which it is held upon.

6.8 Relativists or Subjectivists

The historian is forced to select from the total information present to him in records of all kinds and however he may explain his choice, there must be a personal factor involved (subjectivity). Through the historian may claim that his final products must by the conventions of professional probity, contain a factual and therefore indisputable foundation, this is discounted as a naïve suppression

of the possibility of willfully slanting ones statements of fact, or of accidental equivocation through the vagueness of ordinary words.

Levy argues that “even to employ the term “fact” or “went” is to make a selection, therefore subjective terms/words the historian uses subjective. Prof. Qakeshott in his book, *Experience and its Modes* asserts that “we know nothing of a course of historical events apart from some systems of postulates... what is known is always in terms of what is presupposed (historians begin from an interpretative which he reinterprets.”

Walsh attacks historical writing is not entirely creative and therefore individual element is a bar to objectivity and removal of the bar is seen as a problem of practice rather than of principle. History is not objective because historians do not agree completely. Everyone has his/her own view. To be intellectually objective is to discount and eliminate personal (bias) factors in the operations by which a conclusion is reached.

Prof. Knox argues that if Hegel’s philosophy is due to his own psychological makeup or is a function of conditions, economic or other, prevailing in his own time, the same is true of the historians own methodology and of any possible standards of criticism (the question of falsity or truth cannot arise).

Max Nordau the interpretation of history argues that objective truth is as inaccessible to the writers of history. If it has been propounded that being objective entails reporting accurately together with some vague notion of neutrality in the idioms used and in the choice and arrangement of what is said that is use of language/words can determine whether history is objective or subjective.

It is argued that science (has a paradigm of impartiality and indifference to time and place) is said to be objective. Why? Because it deals with objects,

while history is seen to be subjective since it deals with feelings, values, norms, customs, traditions and emotions of human beings.

These writers who argue that history is a science (because to them history aims at discovering facts of the past as they really were) interpret them objectively. Like other natural science it uses various methods of enquiry such as observation, classification, and formulation of hypotheses and analysis of evidence before interpreting and reconstructing the past. They argue that history seeks to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth (absolute truth).

Other argues that history is subjective, why? Scientists generally deal with facts which can be observed directly and can be tested by experiment, but historical facts cannot be observed directly and can be arrived only indirectly through inference.

History deals with events that have posed and cannot be repeated, therefore intentions behind human actions cannot be directly observed but can be reached through inference and imaginative powers of the mind, therefore history is subjective. Historians cannot write without any point of view.

Absolute impartiality is not possible in history because the historian is a narrator and he looks at the past from a certain point of view. He/she cannot write any point of view. It is argued that the historian is expressing his personality in his work. The scientist on the other hand is impersonal, impartial and capable of experimental action; therefore, it is argued scientists are objective.

Some writers argue that history is subjective because of its inability of historical narratives to portray the past correctly. The writing of history using one's own perspective on one's age or time e.g. causes of the 1st world war there could be today's perspective, different from those of the past. The historian's inability to engage in narrative that portrays the present correctly shows that it is

subjective. The historian's impossibility of verifying statements in a satisfactory manner when compared to science shows that it is subjective.

6.8.1 The Factors that Contribute to Subjectivity

- Historian's social position determines his/her research topic that the topic is already subjective undertaking start from a biased position.
- Different people write with reference to some values e.g. Christian writing about prostitution start from a biased position, even the hypotheses starts from a biased position.
- The historian cannot be detached from the subjects (feelings, emotions, values, norms).
- It is argued that history is not objective because the historians work is conditioned by his personality, politics class, nationality and the mental climate of his times.
- Historians have generally accepted that the historical research procedure is objective; therefore, it is necessary to strike a balance btw objectivity and subjectivity. Historians should try to overcome extreme subjectivity biases, prejudice, mental climate and politics they should not be carried away. Therefore objectivity subjectivity is an unresolved issue.
- Historical interpretation of a given phenomenon the reasons he gives for favouring multiplicity are that evidence underdetermines historical interpretations and that there are no universally accepted criteria on the basis of which the relative acceptability of competing interpretations can always be assessed.

According to relativists, they argue that all history accounts are equally biased and worthless, they propound that;

1. There is no single cause which determines the course of historical events. The historian must adopt a tentative and empirical attitude towards historical causation and accept a pluralistic outlook.
2. That, historical events are so complex and elusive that not later historian however well trained, honest and industrious can ever fulfill Leopold von Ranke's dream of reconstructing the past exactly as it was.
3. That what the public, including the historians accepted as historical truth at any time will depend as much upon the mental climate of the period as on the validity of facts themselves.
4. That what is accepted as objective (truth) by historians and the public will shift markedly from time to time due to emotional factors.
5. That the main value of such facts as can be discovered and tentatively stated lies in the extent to which they can help us to understand the past and present and plan for the future.
6. Ali Mazrui says the problem of subjectivism argues that current issues are sometimes those in which people are still emotionally involved. They may have taken positions on behalf of this or that partly in a dispute or in favor of a controversial interpretation of a particular event, or in defense of a political leader or political ideology. Such partisan position could interfere with a scholar's capacity to be objective on a given issue. It can be argued that special emotional attachments strongly condition academic opinions on a particular subject.

7. An English adage posits that “distance lends enchantment to the views” the adage seems less objective is ones perception of it, for it becomes more attractive but historiography sometimes, nearness rather than distance that lends enchantment to the view. It is the nearness that continues to cast a spell of enchantment detrimental to historical objectivity.
8. Historians can be very partisan when looking at episodes far away from their own times e.g. war different versions depending on the nationality of the historian (do not want to concede defeat).
9. Another example Europeans vs. Africans. Today there are efforts by the generation of historical analysts, equipped with modern tools of investigation and informed modern technologies of science, are partly directed at correcting the distortions. Perpetrate by earlier generation of non African historians, or directed at filling the gaps which were left by those earlier scholars.
10. The historian can at least for the purposes of research and writing divest himself of all taint of religions, political, philosophical, social, sex, economic, moral and aesthetic interests and view events with strict impartiality somewhat as a mirror reflects any objects to which it is held upon.
11. The historian is destroyed by internal contradictions and therefore his powers are limited, he may search for but cannot find objective truth of history or write it as it actually was.

6.8.2 Arguments for Subjectivity in History

1. Some argue that impartial history is an ideal and is a downright impossibility.
2. Historians are influenced by subjective factors in their work.
3. Others have argued that every historian looks at the past from a certain point of view, which the historian jumps out of his own skin.
4. Historians are not concerned with what is true or false but with what is and what is not desirable; therefore, historical judgments are not strictly cognitive but “emotive.”
5. No historian can narrate everything that happened in the past even within the field he chooses for study. They select some facts for special emphases and ignore others altogether, therefore the historian makes a limited contribution to ideal history.
6. Every historian obviously brings to his studies a set of interests, beliefs, and values which clearly are going to have some influence on their work.
7. It has been argued that written history can never be objective, even if the personal biases of the historian can be overcome (which many doubt) it is still inevitable that what is written must be relative to the fashions, customs, and prejudices of the creative moment thus no two historians will agree on what really happened.
8. The historian selects from the total information available to him, and however, he explains his choice, there must be a personal factor involved (subjective).

9. Through the historian may claim that his final product must, by the conventions of professional probity contain a factual and therefore indisputable knowledge – this is discounted as a naive suppression of the possibilities of willfully slanting ones statements of facts, or accidental equivocation through the vagueness of ordinary words i.e. the terms /words historian uses eng “fact”, “events” is selection, therefore subjective.
10. Max Nordau in his book, *the Interpretation of History* argues that objective truth is inaccessible to writers of history.
11. Science deals with objects while historians deal. With human actions which has feelings, values, norms, customs, traditions, emotions est. subjective.
12. Scientists generally deal with facts which can be observed directly and can be tested by experiment, but historical facts cannot be observed directly since the events have passed and cannot be repeated. Therefore intentions behind human actions cannot be directly observed but can be reached. Through inference and imaginative powers of the mind, thus history is subjective.
13. Absolute impartiality is not possible in history because the historian is a narrator and he looks at the past from a certain point of view i.e. the historian is expressing his personality in his work scientist arte objective because they are impersonal, impartial and capable of experimentation.
14. Some writers argue that history is subjective because of its inability of historical narratives to portray the past correctly.

15. The writing of histories using one's own perspective in one's age or time, means that there could be today's or current perspective, different from those of the past. That is every generation writes its own history.
16. The historians impossibility of verify statements in a satisfactory manner when compared to science shows that it is subjective.
17. Historians' social position determines his/her research topic that is the topic is already subjective undertaking therefore the historian starts from a biased positivism.
18. Different people write with reference to some values that are Marxist historical materialism, while Christians legalizing abortion, prostitution; their hypotheses start from biased positions.
19. The historian cannot be detached from his subjects, because his work is conditioned by his personality, politics, class, ethnicity, tribe, nationality and the mental climate of the time.
20. Relativists argue that all history is biased and worthless because there is no single cause which determines the course of historical events. The historian must adopt a tentative and empirical attitude towards historical causation and accept pluralistic outlook.
21. That historical events are so complex and elusive that no later historian, however well trained, honest and industrious can ever fulfill Leopold Von Ranke's dream of reconstructing the past exactly as it was.
22. That what the public, including the historians accept as historical truth at any given time will depend as much upon the mental climate of the

period as on the validity of facts themselves – i.e. what is accepted as truth will shift markedly from time to time due to emotional factors (Moi).

23. Ali A Mazrui, on the problem of subjectivism argues that current issues are sometimes those in which people are still emotionally attached or involved. They may have taken positional such pattern positions could interfere with a scholars capacity to be objective on a given issue. It can be argued that special emotional attachments strongly condition academic opinions on a particular subject.
24. The historian is destroyed by internal contradictions and therefore his powers are limited he may search for the truth but cannot find objective truth of history or write it as it actually was.
25. Individual element in writing history is a bar to objectivity.
26. History is radically and viciously subjective and in this light write off its pretentions to be scientific in any sense of the term.