

Thesis: BA(Hons) (Philosophy) (2014):

Toward a Dialectic Account of Objectivity in Historical Inquiry

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Abstract

This thesis is a work in the Philosophy of History. In it, we undertake the task of explicating a case defending a particular account of objectivity in historical inquiry, namely, a dialectic account of objectivity. Initially, we introduce the issue with a preamble with respect to the history of the objectivity question in the historical profession, and how objectivity has been typically cast in it. The core argument then proceeds in three steps. First, we discuss Thomas Nagel's account of the absolute conception, which leads to the intuitive conclusion that truth is something 'out there' that is accessible by us. Second, we defend Bernard Williams' account of the genealogical conception of truth, supporting the contention that truth is something we ought to value, and that particular virtues of truth such as Sincerity and Accuracy follow from this. Following on from this, we derive the third and final step, namely, the dialectic conception of objectivity, whereby both the absolute and external nature of truth and the value we place on truth and its virtues implies that we need to do the best that we can to strive to find out what the truth is, and a person counts as being more or less objective according to the relevant degree to which he or she employs particular truth-conducive virtuous characteristic traits with that aim across the course of his or her inquiry. Finally, we end with a brief note on the application of dialectic objectivity to historical inquiry specifically, and propose some suggestions for further research.

1 Introduction

In his research into the history of the objectivity problem in the field of historical inquiry, Peter Novick explains how, traditionally, those historians who have typically been taken to be ‘objective’ rather than merely ‘subjective’ are those who have been able to provide an account of the course of past events *wie es eigentlich gewesen*.¹ Here’s how he characterises the traditional view:

The objective historian’s role is that of a neutral, or disinterested, judge; it must never denigrate into that of advocate or, even worse, propagandist. The historian’s conclusions are expected to display the standard judicial qualities of balance and evenhandedness. As with the judiciary, these qualities are guarded by the insulation of the historical profession from social pressure or political influence and by the individual historian avoiding partisanship or bias—not having any investment in arriving at one conclusion rather than another. Objectivity is held to be at grave risk when history is written for utilitarian purposes. One corollary of all this is that historians, as historians, must purge themselves of external loyalties: the historian’s primary allegiance is to ‘the objective historical truth,’ and to professional colleagues who share a commitment to cooperative, cumulative efforts to advance towards that goal.²

There are several notable elements of this traditional account. First, Novick refers to

¹ Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge University Press: 1988), p.1. The phrase *wie es eigentlich gewesen* was coined by the German historian Leopold von Ranke and is taken to be paradigmatic of the ideal of objectivity in the profession of history. Being translated, it purports it to be possible for the historian or group of historians to be able, by various rigorous methods, to provide an account of the past “as it really happened” and therefore to come to an objective knowledge and understanding of what really occurred in the past.

² *Ibid.* p.2.

the *method* of the judicial process as paradigmatic of objective historical inquiry. In the law-courts, generally every measure is taken in finding out, analysing and assessing evidences in the right way so as to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the accused party is guilty or not. Then, the law-court will communicate the court's beliefs concerning the same, and in such a manner so that the accused may have a proper understanding of the outcome and its reasons. The law-courts want to be as accurate and impartial as possible so as to arrive at a correct judgement concerning the case, even though it may not be absolutely certain that the belief arrived at is true. In this context, an outcome is typically taken to be just when the process has been undertaken in this way, and unjust if otherwise.

Secondly, in the same quotation, Novick also alludes to what philosophers might call *moral/epistemic virtues* like 'balance', 'evenhandedness' and 'neutrality'—admirable qualities or characteristic traits people might have which make them more trustworthy and reliable people. In general, it is taken to be a good thing to be a virtuous person, and a bad thing not to be a virtuous person. Virtue is often sought after in epistemological and moral contexts. Epistemically virtuous character traits make it more probable that one will arrive at true beliefs. Morally virtuous character traits make it more likely that a person will live in an ethical manner. Anything that is not virtuous in this way makes it more probable that one will arrive at false beliefs, and more likely one will live in an unethical manner. Thus, we typically value virtue in that we think that a person who either lacks virtue is missing something in their ethics or epistemology, and we therefore want to help them to be virtuous people. Vice is the opposite of virtue. Vicious people have bad or undesirable character traits, and we see them as not only lacking in something but as fundamentally out of touch with the way things ought to be done, and therefore in some kind of handicapped position epistemically or morally. We typically take such people to be stupid or immoral. Consequently, we take it to be good to practice virtue, and bad to practice vice.

Third, Novick mentions inquirers' *responsibilities* such as avoiding 'external loyalties', 'partisanship' and 'bias'. The justification for this would seem to be the nature of the discipline itself. What you think a discipline is doing will determine what you think will be a good source of information for valid conclusions to be arrived at in that profession. No physical chemist derives his empirical conclusions from his being a Republican, or a Democrat, or a Marxist. Scientific data just is empirical data from the physical world. Similarly, no objective historian should take from his or her own socio-political and perhaps even religious interests so as to make some kind of assumption that somehow counts as a reason in favour of a conclusion in a historical account of some period of history, or in explaining or making sense of some select set of historical facts so as to infer some historical hypothesis. Therefore, conclusions in history that are motivated by external, non-historical concerns are taken to endanger objectivity in historical inquiry.

Finally, an objective historian is typically taken to be a person who is committed to 'the objective historical truth.' This is a vague concept. The idea seems to be that we can conceive of the world as having a past history, the sum total of past events or sequences that have occurred up until the present, and there is a particular way those events or sequences have unfolded, and historians now inquire into that past using their source documents and evidences so as to construct an accurate historical account of the way things happened. An historical account is taken to be more or less true given how well it explains or makes sense of past events, which are themselves inferred from source evidences. Objectivity must therefore be linked to truth-seeking in some way, in that historical research is directed towards finding out what really happened, where the truth about the past is highly valued even for its own sake, and not for utilitarian, political, didactic or aesthetic purposes only. There must therefore be some kind of connection between truth and objectivity that will need to be clarified in any account of what it takes to be objective. Does the historian's being

objective consist, on the one hand, in both (A) her having the relevant truth-conducive behaviours in the relevant degree, and (B) by these truth-conducive behaviours actually finding out what ‘the objective historical truth’ really is after all? Or does her being objective consist in simply just (A)? Perhaps objectivity consists merely in cultivating truth-conducive behaviours and virtuous characteristic traits by which it is made more probable that we come out holding true beliefs after all, even if we eventually end up holding false beliefs. On the former account, really arriving at the truth is a necessary condition for objectivity; we must not only go about researching in a certain manner, but we must really find out what the truth is. By contrast, some think that really arriving at the truth is *not* a necessary condition for objectivity. The truth may be the ultimate, ideal aim of inquiry. But since we are epistemically fallible creatures, and can never be certain that what we believe is true, then it may be hard to say that really arriving at the truth is a necessary condition for objectivity. For uncertainty will escalate as we consciously reflect on our human fallibility and try to find out whether or not it is true that something is true, and whether it is true that it is true that something is true, and so on and so forth.³ Accordingly, we shall argue in this thesis of objectivity in historical inquiry that does not require as a necessary condition any actual arrival at the truth.

We may call any defeater for objectivity in history a form of *historical relativism*. On this broad characterisation of the view, the *relativist* plays the parallel role of the epistemic sceptic. For if we take any propositional theory about the past, *P*, and we believe that we have made use of the correct truth-conducive method *M* in coming to believe that *P*, the relativist simply has the goal of trying to defeat our justification for believing that *P*. This she may do

³ We should be tentative about subscribing to the KK Thesis; the view that in order to know that *P* we must know that we know that *P*. Were that the case, then for an epistemic fallibilist who consciously reflects on his epistemic fallibility, it would be very hard for that person to say he has any knowledge after all. But surely he does. In relation to objectivity, then, we deny that true belief itself is a necessary condition for objectivity, much less a justified true belief. Rather, what is required, as we shall suggest, is a form of procedural, dialectic objectivity.

either by showing that M is not objectivity-satisfying or, if M is objectivity-satisfying, that it has not been (and perhaps *cannot* be) carried out by the inquirer in the right way.

Alternatively, she may show that we are not certain that *P*, where that lack of certainty about *P* plays a role in motivating a belief in a relativistic thesis about *P*, perhaps that not-necessarily *P* and just as likely *Q*, where *P* and *Q* are technically incompatible yet are just as viable as each other, and there is no objective way to decide between which theory *P* or *Q* to believe apart from some sort of personal preference which is not obviously a strictly *historical* reason for believing one theory over another.

We said that the historical relativist's role is similar to the epistemic sceptic's role according to form. But the relativist radically differs from the sceptical role in that she affirms not simply that, given the ambiguity between choosing one of two theses *P* or *Q*, we ought simply to withhold belief in each one, as the sceptic does. Rather, the relativist actually says that, for whatever belief *P* or *Q* we choose to hold on our personal preference, that belief *becomes* the true one, solely by virtue of the fact that the relevant party has chosen it to be so, such that whatever belief *P* or *Q* is the true one may differ between persons, places and times. The historical relativist view, therefore, has both a negative and a positive element. It is, negatively, an *objectivity-satisfaction detracting* position, and, positively, a *reason-relativism affirming* position. However, if objectivity in historical inquiry is somehow methodologically or procedurally based—that is, if it is dialectic—then we may be able to avoid such historical relativism by arguing for an account of objectivity that is agent-focused, and not belief-focused, and which can accommodate subjectivities. This would allow for certain subjective and relativistic elements in historical inquiry to obtain without the implication of a radically relativistic thesis such as has been outlined. For if subjective relativities in historical inquiry do exist, objectivity may yet persist as an agent-based enterprise that comes in degrees. One person could be characterised as being *more objective* than another person, according to this

view of objectivity. If being objective in historical inquiry is a matter of agent-focused and not belief-focused inquiry that is cast in terms of methods, attitudes and commitments to trying to find out what the truth about the past is (regardless of whether or not we ultimately get there), then a person is objective just in case, in the process of inquiry, that person makes use of an *objectivity-satisfying* method M in coming to believe that P, where M is characterised by the right kinds of attitudes, methods, and commitments held to by the inquirer, which may or may not include a cognisance of one's own personal limitations, goals and biases—in other words, their subjective relativities. One is more objective than another person according to this account when one's mode of inquiry M is maximally objectivity-satisfying, where objectivity-satisfaction is characteristically maximised by the consistent cultivation and application of the right methods, attitudes and commitments in higher degrees of emphasis and consistency on M, all with the overall intellectual goal of arriving at the truth.

1.1 Preliminary Definitions

If we wish to argue that some form of methodological/procedural or dialectic objectivity in historical inquiry is possible, we need to define *history* and its constituent terms. In this section we shall clarify some key historiographical concepts as they shall be used throughout this thesis, in precisely the manner specified here.

1.1.1 History. The term 'history' can refer either to:

(H1) the sum total of all past events/sequences/times in the world up until the present event/sequence/time;

(H2) the study of the past relating to the natural world, which is ordinarily the object of study of the historical sciences;

(H3) the study of the past relating to human or socio-cultural communities and/or individuals; or,

(H4) the discipline and theory of writing historical texts.

In this thesis, we shall confine ourselves primarily to (H3) which I shall call ‘history’ and (H4) which I shall call ‘historiography’. History is that discipline which is the object of study in the department of the Humanities. It may cover various time periods and places in the world relative to one’s scholarly interests: ancient, classical, medieval, modern, European, Oriental, Indigenous, and so on. The practitioner of history is called a ‘historian’.

Historiography refers to the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of historical practice, and this is debated among professional historians as an academic community. The objectivity problem in history is a *historiographical* question, and it is this problem we are concerned with in this thesis. Can we be objective in historical inquiry? And if so, what might that look like?

1.1.2 Historical Propositions. A ‘historical proposition’ we take roughly to mean a truth-apt sentence ‘*P* at *t*’ in the past tense, being characteristically a member of a set of like propositions, denoting events or sequences in the world, of either human/agential or natural origin, or both, which are causally related to each other in some way, either as a preceding cause or subsequent effect. Since this description is consistent with both (H2) and (H3), we shall restrict ourselves for the purposes of this thesis to historical propositions relating to (H3).

1.1.3 Truth. With respect to ‘truth’ as a concept, we shall assume that something like a deflationist account of truth as defended by philosophers such as Frege, Ramsey, Ayer, and

Quine et al is correct.⁴ Deflationist theories deny that truth has an essential nature. The main point of the predicate ‘is true’ is simply to the effect of pointing out that ‘snow is white’ is true iff snow is white—or, perhaps in more historical terms, that ‘Caesar crossed the Rubicon at *t*’ is true iff Caesar crossed the Rubicon at *t*.⁵ The argument we shall offer below on the intrinsic worth of truth and true beliefs is not strictly related to this definition. It may be possible to hold to more traditional Correspondence, Coherence or Pragmatist theories of truth and hold to the intrinsic value of truth. We simply mean to clarify what we will by ‘truth’ throughout this thesis.

1.1.4 Knowledge. By ‘knowledge’ we mean something along the lines of a *justified true belief*—Gettier counterexamples notwithstanding.⁶ We take knowledge to be something fitting vaguely along such lines as how Robert Audi has defined it in his celebrated introductory primer on epistemology: “Knowledge is true belief based in the right way on the right kind of ground.”⁷

Having thus clarified some essential terms and concepts, we may move on toward arguing for what seems to be the seemingly rather intuitive notion that truth is something ‘out there’ in the world that is accessible by us.

⁴ We shall not concern ourselves here with the subtle differences between these philosophers’ respective accounts of the deflationary account of truth.

⁵ Daniel Stoljar and Nic Damnjanovic, ‘The Deflationary Theory of Truth’ in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), forthcoming URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/truth-deflationary/>.

⁶ Edmund Gettier, ‘Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?’ in *Analysis* Vol. 23 (1963), pp.121-123. Here, Gettier famously gave two counterexamples to the classical understanding of knowledge as a justified true belief, to the effect that a person may be justified in holding to a belief that is true, but intuitively not count as having knowledge, on account of there’s being something *fishy* (my term) about the justification being by luck, or mistake, or happenstance. A host of discussion has surrounded this. Suffice it to say, for now, that it seems probable that the solution to the problem lies in something to do with clarifying what kind of situations count as genuine justification or not—in which case it doesn’t seem like the ‘justification’ in Gettier’s two counterexamples counts as *the right kind of* justification necessary for knowledge. So Gettier hasn’t showed that JTB is not knowledge; rather, he has shown that certain *kinds* of justification are not sufficient.

⁷ Robert Audi, *Epistemology: A Contemporary Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge* (Routledge, 3rd ed., 2010), p.291.

2 The Absolute Conception

Consider what Thomas Nagel has to say the beginning of his book *The View From Nowhere*:

Objectivity is a method of understanding. It is beliefs and attitudes that are objective in the primary sense. Only derivatively do we call objective the truths that can be arrived at in this way. To acquire a more objective understanding of some aspect of life or the world, we step back from our initial view of it and form a new conception which has that view and its relation to the world as its object. In other words, we place ourselves in a world that is to be understood. The old view then comes to be regarded as an appearance, more subjective than the new view, and correctable or confirmable by reference to it. The process can be repeated, yielding a still more objective conception.⁸

On Nagel's view, we may think of objectivity in a methodological manner in terms of the attitudes of inquirers and their beliefs. One's being objective consists in how clearly one conceives of the external world as it is in itself, including one's own subjective relation to that world. With each added layer of reflection we are supposed to obtain a clearer, more external point of view on ourselves and our world. On this account, one's objectivity seems to consist primarily in one's own reflective engagement with the external world with a cognisance of oneself as a limited, subjective conceiver.⁹

⁸ Thomas Nagel. *The View From Nowhere* (Oxford University Press: 1986), p.4.

⁹ It seems to me that Nagel's theory requires the presupposition of what metaphysicians call *external world realism*. This doctrine is strictly unprovable as any premise in an argument leading to the conclusion will probably beg the question in favour of it. Most philosophers would probably take our belief in the reality of the external world to be a properly basic belief—something grounded in personal, raw experience alone, and not inferred from anything else—and warranted in a properly basic way. In this thesis, we have assumed that realism is true, and therefore that realism about the historical past is true. Michael Dummett, at the beginning of his 'The Reality of the Historical Past' in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series, Vol. 69 (1968 -

2.1 Conceiving a Perspectiveless View of the World. Admittedly, however, it is not immediately clear what Nagel means. Let us therefore clarify some key concepts of Nagel's account, and evaluate an objection to it.

2.1.1 The First Person Point of View. Consider the word 'I'. The word 'I' is a reflexive indexical that picks out a particular person in the world when one wishes as a speaker to refer to oneself in the first person. Intrinsically, 'I' is a relative term. It allows for various speaker-perspectives which various individuals can adopt by referring to themselves. Therefore, it is not singular and univocal, but denotes different speakers, relative to which speaker uses the term. So given any two speakers A and B, when A says "I" A refers to A, but when B says "I" B refers to B. Given the context, the word 'I' may refer either to A or to B and is thus relative according to the speaker committing the speech-act in a context. One way of looking at the world, then, is from within one's own experience as an individual. That is to say, everybody, at least initially, begins with a first person point of view.

2.1.2 The Second Person Point of View. Could it be possible to think further outside of this? Think about persons A and B. When A refers to A, A uses 'I' as a referent for A. When B refers to B, B uses 'I' as a referent for B. But then it would be possible for A to look outside A and to B, and see that B refers to B as 'I' also. So A can behold B from a second person point of view, and A may even refer to B by use of the second person pronoun 'you' as a referent for B. The same is true in B's case; A could imagine B's referring to A as 'you'

1969), pp.239-258, explains the essential distinction between realism and antirealism positions in general. On the realist view, our understanding of the meaning of a statement "consists in our knowing what has to be the case for it to be true" (p.239) conceived of in terms of truth conditions which make true the proposition. On the antirealist view, in contrast, "the meanings of statements of the class in question are given to us, not in terms of the conditions under which these statements are true or false, conceived of as conditions which obtain or do not obtain independently of our knowledge or capacity for knowledge, but in terms of the conditions which we recognise as establishing the truth or falsity of statements of that class" (pp.239-240). We do not have time to analyse a whole case either for or against realism and antirealism concerning statements about the past. But we are assuming across the course of this thesis that historical propositions are made true under a story such as what Dummett has outlined on the realist position.

and A can therefore consider A from a second-person perspective, which is the perspective of B. Thus A moves away from A's merely first person perspective to consider a wider conception of the world which has as its object both A and the outside world, and this conception counts and being more objective in that it accords with seeing the world more widely.

2.1.3 The Third Person Point of View. But we can go further. Now imagine there are three people in the whole world: A, B and C. Not only can A refer to A as 'I' and apprehend B's referring to A as a 'you,' but both A and B can jointly apprehend there's being some other third person, C, who views both A and B and refers to them by way of the term 'them'. So when we imagine A, B and C altogether, we can see how each person may be signified under a particular referent of 'I', 'you' or 'them' relative to their respective level of conception. With each step by which a person intellectually is able to step out of a narrower conception of the world and move further out into a wider conception the world, one can allegedly reach a place of viewing the world 'from nowhere' whereby that person and all her original objects of conception themselves become objects in an absolute conception of the world—a kind of God's-eye view of all things.

2.1.4 The View from Nowhere. What Nagel seems to mean is this: What would happen if there were a *fourth person* point of view? Could we, by some method of reasoning, come to apprehend a 'perspectiveless' view of the world? Could we view the whole world from that conception? Consider once more person A. Person A has a conception of A as being a particular individual in the world. A also has a conception of being a second person relative to some other person B, and B has such a conception of A likewise. A and B can jointly have still a further conception of their both being conceived of in a third person manner by some other third person C. But then it does not then seem like much of a leap to say that A is able to have a conception of A, B and C as being conceived absolutely,

conceiving each other, in their various interrelations, from some kind of fourth person ‘nowhere’. This God’s-eye point of view would be a kind of a second-tier third person; a perspectiveless way the world simply is in itself, ‘looking down’ upon all the activities in the world. Conceiving the world absolutely, from this ‘nowhere,’ seems intuitively possible *a priori*, and that seems have interesting implications for what it takes to be objective.

2.1.5 The Objective Point of View. However, though it is more likely than not that we can somewhat comprehend the vague notion that A can intuitively have a conception of the world from some kind of forth person perspectiveless perspective from ‘nowhere’, nevertheless it is not *practically* possible. For *every* point of view on the world does in fact come from somewhere. There can be no perspective that is perspectiveless. This seems to be a strike against the absolute conception. Nevertheless, it does not seem that falsifies Nagel’s account. After all, Nagel never says we really can obtain such a perspective on the world. Indeed, “The fundamental idea behind both the validity and limits of objectivity is that we are small creatures in a big world of which we have only very partial understanding, and that how things seem to us depends both on the world and on our constitution.”¹⁰ In other words, we never actually *reach* the absolute conception, according to Nagel, but we *strive* to have the widest, most maximal, all-encompassing conception of the world possible. The project of objective inquiry, then, would be *to strive* towards the absolute conception as a theoretical ideal that is accessible by us.

Nagel says as much:

The objective self is only part of the point of view of an ordinary person, and its objectivity is developed to different degrees in different persons and at different stages of life and civilization... [I]t is simply the step of

¹⁰ Nagel (1986), p.5.

conceiving the world as a place that includes the person I am within it, as just another of its contents—concerning myself from outside, in other words. So I can step away from the unconsidered perspective of the particular person I thought I was. Next comes the step of conceiving from the outside all the points of view and experiences of that person and others of his species, and considering the world as a place in which these phenomena are produced by interaction between these beings and other things.¹¹

We strive toward an absolute conception with the realisation that we always do have a perspective in mind. Everybody begins their enquiries as an individual person in a large world of which they are small part trying to know and discover that larger, outside world. It is therefore imperative, if one is to begin to become more objective than before, to realise that one is indeed a particular, individual person in the world that has limited access to that world. Then by considering that there are other persons and perspectives on things, one begins to take other persons' perspectives into mind, knowing that all legitimate inquirers are striving toward that knowledge and understanding of the world that is represented in the ideal of the absolute conception. One thus removes oneself from a privileged place, so far as one can, all the while keeping the intellectual ideal in mind.

2.2 An Objection

Despite its intuitive appeal, it is important (and problematic) that Nagel takes language such as getting 'outside ourselves' and viewing the world 'from nowhere' as being strictly metaphorical.¹² What sense, then, if any, can we really make of this seemingly quite

¹¹ *Ibid.* p.63.

¹² *Ibid.* p.67.

intuitive idea? And how might it relate to truth and objectivity in historical inquiry?

2.2.1 Any View Comes From Somewhere. Let us recapitulate the thought. We begin with a base conception of ourselves as individual agents, and then, in striving to be objective, attempt to become more detached from our relative standpoint. With each added reflection, we obtain a new conception and understanding of the world, one that is more objective than the last. The more detached from one's own relative standpoint one's conception of the world becomes, the more objective one is. One must first recognise one's own contingency and containment and then seek transcendence from that relative standpoint. This reflective intellectual project is motivated by the pursuit of a sound knowledge and understanding of the world and the absolute truth about the world. Someone may object that this leaves us open to the possible charge of scepticism. But it seems we both can and probably should accept this challenge as objective inquirers.¹³

Nevertheless, it still seems that an absolute conception of the world from some kind of metaphorical, fourth person, perspectiveless 'nowhere' is not ultimately possible. If the aim of objectivity is to form a conception of reality which includes both ourselves and our view of the world as its objects, then it is also true that that conception will not include the thing that forms the conception.¹⁴ There will always be at least one object which cannot be captured by the absolute conception of the world. But that one thing will then serve as a counterexample to the idea that we can have an absolute conception 'from nowhere' which includes all things under it. Any and every view on the world must come from somewhere.

People are subjective conceivers who do not attain unto the lofty God's-eye point of view of the absolute conception. But that does not seem to falsify the general methodological point underlying Nagel's concerns. It seems to follow from this that even if there is an

¹³ Ibid. pp.7-9.

¹⁴ Ibid. p.68.

external, objectively existing world, concerning which one can conceive of oneself as being in a mere part interacting with other conscious parts, it is nevertheless the case that one may know that one is indeed a subjective creature with relativities like having a limited and personal perspective, such as having biases, being ignorant, having particular interests, and so on. Yet one's being an intellectual and reflective creature allows one to pursue a degree of objectivity even given one's relative position in the world. So we might say that subjectivity and objectivity can go together in some way, even to the extent that one must recognise that one has a subjective point of view in order to become a more objective person. Objectivity would then be agential, a matter of degree, and attained unto incrementally. Our goal would then be to be *maximally objective* persons, and there may be various ways to do this. Nagel's doctrine of the absolute conception seems to postulate a strong intuition that we human creatures are small parts in the large world groping at the truth of the whole, even while existing as very limited and contained beings, and perhaps necessarily so, given the kind of creatures that we are. Yet our striving to be objective just seems to fall out of our nature as intellectual and reflective human agents, and that seems to count in favour of trying to articulate an account of how it is that we can be objective people in inquiry, including historical inquiry.

2.3 Plausible Applications of the Intuition

Perhaps the absolute conception has not been attained by anyone. Perhaps it never will be. But it may not matter. It does not therefore follow that the absolute conception as a theoretical ideal gives us no intuitive insights about objectivity at all. Indeed, we intuit a sense in which it does tell us something important about what it takes to be objective. Following on from this intuition, there seem to follow at least two important insights that serve as reasons in favour of supporting an argument in favour of objectivity in historical

inquiry, namely, the reality of the objective truth about the historical past, and our subsequent epistemic duties in order to seek and strive after a sound knowledge and understanding of that past in historical inquiry.

2.3.1 The Objective Truth in History. Clearly, there must be a particular way that the world objectively *is*, wholly part from how we understand it. And if there is a way the world objectively is, then there must have been some way the world objectively *was*, wholly part from how we understand it. There are all sorts of things—colours, objects, people, meanings, facts, knowledge, and so on—that just exist ‘out there’ in the world at present. Some things depend on us humans. Meanings, for instance, are often fixed by conventional word usage, and we either understand correctly or fail to understand the meaning of a word when we take that word to mean a particular thing in a particular context, and the word either does or does not mean that thing we took it to mean in that context. Similarly, many facts are dependent on us. This is especially true of historical facts. But think of various physical objects in their locations. Many of them existed before our young race entered into this universe, and long will they remain even following our future exodus out of it by extinction or otherwise. There will be planets, stars, trees, suns, moons, rocks, water, flames, and, most of all, truths in relation to them, regardless of what we merely believe to be true.

Taking this line, we can apply it to the truth about the historical past. There either was or was not a Roman Empire. The Holocaust either did or did not happen. That is, there are historical propositions, and those propositions are either true or false. Our intuition should then be to say that inquirers into the histories both can and should strive at achieving maximal knowledge and understanding of the past in increasing degrees, and they count as being more objective insofar as they cultivate attitudes which are conducive to that end. In other words, take any intuitive appeal of the objective reality of an external world of objects presently, then apply it to events or happenings in the historical past. The same principles would apply

to the past as they would to the present, such that all the relevant features will fall out on that past sequence of events just as they would in the present world. Inquirers into the historical past need to do the best that they can to try and discover what really happened, perhaps somewhat analogously to how ordinary perceivers are expected to be competent to see things as they really are. Objectivity in historical inquiry will therefore consist in striving toward a sound knowledge and understanding of historical propositions.

Our intuitions about objectivity are supported by the idea that the truth about the world is independent of and outside of us. If there is an external world of real objects and truths that are not determined by our understanding of the world, but are made true by the world itself, then it is incumbent on us to find out exactly what those truths are, and to do our best to obtain true beliefs in relation to that reality. This point, though seemingly quite basic and perhaps very obvious, seems particularly pertinent in relation to analytical philosophy of history and historiography. For if the truth about the historical past is not dependent on our own understanding, but on the world, then it becomes our moral or epistemic duty to do the best we can to try and cultivate behaviours which make it more probable that we will arrive at a sound knowledge and understanding of the world. Objectivity, then, is constituted at least in the recognition of the objective reality of the external world, and our personal striving toward a sound knowledge and understanding of that world.

Objectivity also serves other epistemological purposes. Being justified in believing in historical propositions is necessary for historical knowledge, and one's being objective lends to one's being justified in believing what one does about the past. For if objectivity, as we suggest, is grounded in the way in which any given inquirer undertakes his or her course of inquiry, then one's character traits and attitudes would be relevant to being an intellectually respectable person. We are suggesting that one's reasons for undertaking a particular course of inquiry and one's way of going about doing that is relevant to one's being objective or not.

So if a person's reason for undertaking any given course of inquiry was for the end of serving some merely utilitarian end, such as its being useful or convenient to hold a particular belief, for instance, then it seems we have reason to say that such a person is not being as objective as they can be, and furthermore that they may have an inherent defeater for any belief they arrive at concerning their object of inquiry. If, on the other hand, the reason a person were to undertake some course of inquiry was directed toward some intrinsically good end—such as obtaining a sound knowledge and understanding of the world—then it seems that such a person is striving to be as objective as possible, and their being objective in this manner leads to their justification in believing what they do across the course of their inquiry.

2.3.2 Seeking and Striving. Being objective in historical inquiry therefore plausibly includes seeking and striving after the objective truth about the historical past in a certain manner. Virtue Epistemology is that branch of knowledge theory which attempts to make sense of how a person is justified in holding any given belief, on an analysis of the various attitudes and characteristic traits that are possessed by a person. It is also a normative study, deciding between attitudes and characteristic traits a person both ought and ought not to possess. Proposed virtue epistemic theories are various, as well as the proposed virtues that ought to be taken by agents in assessing knowledge claims. Yet each virtue theory is also united under two assumptions. First, that epistemology is a normative discipline. Second, that intellectual agents and communities are the primary source of epistemic value and the primary focus of epistemic evaluation.¹⁵ This lends itself to something we will make clearer later in relation to the agential nature of objectivity under a dialectic conception. For inquiring agents can also be described as being objective to various degrees in accordance with the degree of the truth-conduciveness of the attitudes and characteristic traits possessed

¹⁵ John Greco; John Turri, 'Virtue Epistemology' in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2013/entries/epistemology-virtue/>>.

by those inquirers. And if seeking and striving after the truth about the past in historical inquiry is a worthwhile thing for intellectual agents and communities, and some kind of virtue epistemic process is the means by which we may come into an understanding of the objective truth about the historical past, then it will make sense of how being objective will be agent and virtue orientated. Perhaps objectivity consists in the consistent application of the relevant epistemic virtues, in the right way, and to the relevant degree.

But we have a while to go before we can get to identifying just what those virtues might be. In the following sections, we will talk about just what such an agent-orientated virtue account of objectivity might consist in, particularly with reference to truth and truth-seeking. Let us therefore turn to Bernard Williams' important work on the subject of the intrinsic value we human beings place on truth and true beliefs.

3 The Genealogical Conception

Even if there are truths 'out there' in the world, why should we care about them? Bernard Williams has undertaken the task to provide a *genealogical* account of how it might be the case that truth is important to us in general, and therefore why it should be important for us in inquiry both to acquire and disseminate true information. Our intuition should then be to say that if truth is important to us, then a person is more objective than not if he or she seeks whatever is true and tries to obtain true beliefs through the right truth-conducive methods. The question will then surround what kind of behaviours are characteristically truth-conducive in this way, and more precisely just what truth-conductivity itself consists in. These shall be clarified later.

3.1 Genealogy and the State of Nature

Williams' work *Truth and Truthfulness* is a discussion about why we humans value

truth and being truthful people, and what that consists in.¹⁶ It is founded on what Williams calls the ‘genealogy of truth’ which is represented in his hypothetical ‘State of Nature’ story. These are taken implicitly both to illustrate Williams’ two proposed ‘virtues of truth’ and to motivate our intuitions concerning our consequent epistemic duties to ascertain and practice the said virtues in our seeking after truth, knowledge and understanding.

3.1.1 Genealogy and Four Kinds of Genealogy. On Williams’ account, a genealogy functions as a kind of thought experiment which takes itself to describe how a certain phenomenon such as the way in which we value truth may have come about. Williams says, “A genealogy is a narrative that tries to explain a cultural phenomenon by describing a way in which it came about, or could have come about, or might be imagined to have come about.”¹⁷ So a genealogy may be a real story, a hypothetical postulation, or a useful fiction. According to Edward Craig, a genealogy admits of two kinds: *subversive* or *vindictory*. These each, in turn, can be either *intrinsic* or *accidental*.¹⁸ Essentially, intrinsically subversive genealogy presents an account of certain attitudes, beliefs or practices in such a way so as to undermine those attitudes, beliefs or practices; accidentally subversive genealogy is an account of how things are that just happens to conflict with some widely held account of how things are (Evolution vs. Creationism, for instance); intrinsically vindictory genealogy recommends or justifies some set of beliefs, attitudes or practices by way of showing how it solves a problem we have, assuming that the problem is a problem we would want to solve; and accidentally vindictory genealogy boosts the prestige of some set of beliefs, attitudes or practices yet only in such a way that is relatively local and temporally limited.¹⁹ Keeping these technical

¹⁶ Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton University Press: 2002).

¹⁷ Ibid. p.20.

¹⁸ Edward Craig. ‘Genealogies and the State of Nature’ in Alan Thomas (ed.). *Bernard Williams* (Cambridge University Press: 2007), pp.182-183.

¹⁹ Craig also mentions a fifth kind of genealogy, which he calls *neutral* genealogy. Neutral genealogy might give a history or story about something without having any impact on the status of that thing. But we shall leave that aside.

distinctions in mind, we may call Williams' genealogy of truth a form of intrinsically vindicatory genealogy. It seeks not only to say that we do value the truth, but it also tries to make sense of why we value the truth in such a manner that would motivate our seeking after and obtaining true beliefs. Williams' genealogy of truth and truthfulness is represented in his State of Nature story.

3.2 The State of Nature

Imagine a small community of human beings. It is not very technologically advanced, but it is comprised of people who share a common language that we could more or less understand if we applied ourselves the effort to learn it. In such a community, language would be essential in order for the community to function properly. This community shares beliefs which are expressed in the things that they say, and these beliefs contribute to a shared pool of information. Any given person within the community may contribute to the pool of information by making assertions or truth-claims. That person can be held accountable for their contribution to the information pool on the basis of whether or not any given assertion is true or false. The person will be blameworthy if it is false, and praiseworthy if it is true. Any given person making any given assertion will therefore have a disposition, first, to obtain true beliefs, and second, to transfer those beliefs in a reliable form to the pool of information in a way that helps the community to function properly. This process weeds out opportunities for deceit and concealment within the community, and that, in turn, makes the community more truthful. The idea is that the community, qua community, has an intrinsic value for the truth, and everyone in that community should be concerned about seeking and finding the truth.

3.2.1 The Virtues of Truth. Think about the disposition of any particular person in the State of Nature when making an assertion. One would want both to acquire and disseminate true beliefs throughout community, so as not to be held blameworthy and

perhaps be subject to punishment by the community. This distinctively *natural* human disposition forms the foundation for what Williams calls the ‘virtues of truth’, namely, ‘Accuracy’ and ‘Sincerity’. Accuracy pertains to the intellectual quest leading oneself to the acquisition of true beliefs. Sincerity pertains to the will of one to disseminate clearly what one believes to be true. As Williams says, “Each of them, at the most primitive level, gets its point ultimately from the human interest, individual and collective, in gaining and sharing true information.”²⁰ Therefore, we should be interested in these virtues only if we are interested in truth and truth beliefs, and we should be interested in truth and true beliefs only if we are interested in being objective—and that ought we also to be.

Williams tries to show that there is in human discourse some kind of *essential need* to get to the truth. This need is not merely instrumentally useful for Williams, but is *intrinsic* to human discourse. This does not seem entirely obvious on first glance. Williams himself notes that there is what he calls an ‘unstable condition’ in contemporary thought. On the one hand, there is an intense commitment to truth and being truthful by not deceiving others, as well as not being deceived. On the other hand, there is much confusion about what ‘truth’ actually is: whether or not there can actually be such a thing, and whether or not it can be anything other than subjective. Interestingly, historical inquiry is a paradigm case cited by Williams. History is a discipline that suffers from problems such as bias and self-serving ideology, among others. This actually motivates historical relativism. But these are incompatible with truth and truth-seeking. As Williams puts it, “[T]ruth is a virtue that is embarrassingly unhelpful to a critic who wants... to tell us that at the end of the line there is no historical truth.”²¹ If the virtues of truth are indeed intrinsic to being truthful, then we must take them to be intrinsic goods. Something counts as an intrinsic good, under Williams’ stipulation, just in case (1) it

²⁰ Williams (2002), p.126.

²¹ *Ibid.* pp.1, 2.

is necessary for human purposes and needs to treat it as an intrinsic good, (2) humans can treat it coherently as an intrinsic good, and (3) our concept of it is stable under reflection. Saying only what one believes to be true, not deceiving others, and being committed to information-acquisition along with sophisticated reflection and right interpretation of the information seem to satisfy these conditions for being intrinsically good things. They seem conducive to obtaining true beliefs, and belief in the truth should be important to us since the truth itself is important to us. As Williams says, “Truthfulness implies a respect for the truth. This relates to both of the virtues that... are the two basic virtues of truth, which I shall call Accuracy and Sincerity: you do the best you can to acquire true beliefs, and what you say reveals what you believe. The authority of academics must be rooted in their truthfulness in both these respects: they take care, and they do not lie.”²²

3.2.2 The Virtues and their Instrumentality. However, a problem seems to arise for Williams’ genealogical account of the virtues of truth when we consider that, on the State of Nature story, the motivation for the person who makes an assertion to make a true one rather than a false one seems to lie solely in that person’s desire not to be held blameworthy and potentially subject to punishment. Furthermore, the community only seems to desire true information in its information pool because that makes it possible for it to function properly as a community. So both truth and being truthful seem only *instrumentally* useful on two counts. First, the individual desire to avoid blameworthiness and potential punishment; and secondly, the communal desire to function properly. Neither of these is truth related. But that seems to reduce the value of truth and being truthful to non-epistemic motivations, and this seems to undermine our account of truth and truth-seeking as intrinsic epistemic goods. The most obvious *prima facie* response to this objection seems to be to say that it does not matter if there are instrumental purposes in acquiring and disseminating true beliefs. What would

²² *Ibid.* p.11.

matter is if it were the case that the *only* reason for obtaining true beliefs was that it was instrumentally pragmatic. On second glance, this seems to be what the objection is getting at after all: there just is no reason to think that true beliefs are valuable in any intrinsic way. For we can imagine a world where a pool of false information that is acquired lazily and is protected by lies brought about the most functional and prosperous human community there could be. That would serve as a counterexample to the foundation for Williams' virtues of truth as being intrinsic goods.

Williams is therefore rightly anxious to distance his virtues from mere utility. He wants to argue they are basic to human nature. And if we agree with him, then we have to defend the notion that the State of Nature story shows that there is something essential to behaviours like being accurate and being sincere that make it the case that true belief acquisition and proper communal functionality depend on just those kinds of behaviours, and not their opposites. One way to argue in favour of this notion is to make the observation that all propositions are asserted under the assumption that they are true. For *assertion* is a form of belief-communication, and communication depends on an investment of effort and trust between persons. Often various individuals and groups of people are invested in the project of understanding one another. Instances of such a project is a relationship of *trust*, and trustworthiness is essential to the notion of cooperation. If A tells B that *P*, and B trusts A, then B has a particular reliance on A's keeping her word that *P*. One might, however, think the value of trustworthiness could be reduced to mere utility if it could be shown that the value of trustworthiness can be reduced to more primitive values and needs, such as securing cooperative activity between human creatures. If trustworthiness were to lose the ability of securing this kind of cooperation, we could get rid of it for whatever obtained it—perhaps forced subservience under a political tyranny.²³ But it is not obvious, at least to us, that

²³ *Ibid.* pp.89-92.

trustworthiness can be reduced in this way. But we do not have the time to pursue that line of thinking here.

3.3 Explication of the Virtues

Let us then make more explicit the virtues of truth Williams is interested in: what they are, and in what they are taken to consist.

3.3.1 Being Sincere. One counts as being sincere just in case one conveys belief in only and whatever one believes to be true, and one does not intentionally speak in such a way so as to deceive one's listeners into thinking that one believes something else other than what one does believe. One's assertions, which are belief-communicating truth-claims, ought to convey what one actually believes in a conversational context. Being sincere is required to avoid miscommunication or deception. Miscommunication implies one has made an accident, and is thus in general technically not morally responsible for any misconception that may arise. But deception implies some intentional activity to mislead someone else to believe a false thing. A lie is "an assertion, the content of which the speaker believes to be false, which is made with the intention to deceive the hearer with regard to that content."²⁴ This implies that being sincere is incompatible with a form of conversational implicature manipulation, whereby the speaker seeks to deceive a hearer by way of some speech-act, the content of which is technically true, but which causes the person who hears that speech-act to believe something that is actually false—all under the full intention and design of the speaker. For instance, if the History teacher asks the student, "Did you do your homework?" the student may well respond, "Yes, I did my homework." This seems perfectly natural. But suppose the teacher was referring to the student's *History* homework, but did not say so explicitly. Now suppose the student knew this. But, taking advantage of the unspecified

²⁴ Ibid. p.96.

phrase ‘your homework’, the student decides in his mind to talk about any old homework whatsoever. Perhaps he did his *English* homework but not his *History* homework. So when the student says, “Yes, I did my homework,” the student is technically telling the truth, but is also, for all intents and purposes, lying to the teacher, who, perhaps being gullible, now believes that the student did his History homework. The student is clearly leading the teacher astray and causing her to believe a false proposition. If more questions were asked by the teacher of the student, it would become quite clear that he was not talking about what she was talking about, and that he deceived her. This kind of strategy of deception is effective since we the hearers ordinarily take the meanings of speech-acts to correspond to the truth-conditions of those statements. But implicature manipulation takes advantage of the hearer’s lack of knowledge, and uses words which imply one thing in the mind of the hearer, which are nevertheless technically true with respect to the true intentions of the speaker.

So if the speaker is not being sufficiently clear so as to convey the right information, it is possible that he is either miscommunicating or deceiving his listeners. Sincere speakers will always express what they take to be true beliefs, and will communicate them in such a way so as to make it unambiguous as to what they are saying, so as not to mislead others.²⁵ Sincerity is not a law governing speech-acts. Sincerity is a virtue of truth. Conversation invites an ethical commitment to “a central expression of the ethical disposition to sincerity,” when we have reason “to sustain this relation of trust and to speak in a way that is appropriate

²⁵ At this point it seems important to note that there are many speech-acts which convey true information but which are nevertheless not literally true. These do not fall under the criticism of being manipulative, provided they are used in the right context, in the right way, and with the right intention. Metaphor, for instance, is a kind of speech-act which, though literally false, intends to express something that is taken to be true by the speaker. It is literally false to say, “It is raining cat and dogs.” There are no cosmic canines; nor are there any felines falling from the heavens. But it may still be true if the rainfall is heavy; the speech-act refers metaphorically to the rain. What is needed in such cases as this is a kind of Cooperative Principle whereby there can be expectations of efficient language exchange conducive to a maximally efficient exchange of information between parties. Charity in interpretation may be intrinsic to trust in sincere communication as Paul Grice has apparently noted; cf. Paul Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge University Press: 1989), cited in Williams (2002), p.100, n.22.

to it.”²⁶ And if a person is sincere, they are more likely to disseminate true information into the information pool, provided what they believe really is true, and they want to communicate it.

3.3.2 Being Accurate. To obtain true beliefs, one must also put in the hard work to acquire accurate information through sophisticated reflection on and interpretation of empirical evidences and reasonable arguments in relation to them. But there are obstacles to this activity. Such obstacles may be internal, external or both. An internal obstacle may include some psychological features or characteristic traits of a person such as having a mental impairment, or being biased in such a way that the person simply cannot bring himself charitably to interpret the data in a fair and level-headed manner. In the former case, the person may not be blameworthy for their epistemic impairment; they did not choose to have the mental disability. But in the latter case, the person does seem blameworthy for their biased behaviour. An external obstacle would be just some concrete thing in the external world which physically impedes research, such as lacking of the latest field technology. Maybe you just cannot get your hands on a critical source which would serve as powerful evidence for your theory, for which there is only one copy, locked up in some super high tech security vault placed under the sea. Both kinds of obstacles impede our being accurate, and it is characteristic of the virtue of Accuracy both to identify and to overcome such obstacles as these as best as we can, so far as it depends on us as inquirers. Williams makes an important point in relation to these obstacles:

The fact that there are external obstacles to the pursuit of truth is one foundation of our idea of objectivity, in the sense that our beliefs are answerable to an order of things that lies outside of our own determination. There is also

²⁶ Williams (2002), pp.110-111.

another sense of ‘objectivity,’ in which it is a virtue of inquirers, and in this sense it is connected rather, with internal obstacles to discovery and true belief. Self-conscious pursuit of the truth requires resistance to such things as self-deception and wishful thinking, and one component of the virtue of Accuracy... lies in the skills and attitudes that resist the pleasure principle, in all its forms, from a gross need to believe the agreeable, to mere laziness in checking one’s investigations. The virtues of Accuracy include, very importantly, dispositions and strategies for sustaining the defences of belief against wish, and against one of the products of wish, self-deception.²⁷

It therefore need not impede one’s being accurate that there are such internal and external obstacles to our inquiries. Those problems which are characteristic of the virtue of Accuracy try to overcome just these kinds of obstacles, and this requires the cultivation of certain characteristics in one’s life that are objectively truth-conducive, or, more likely to bring about true beliefs. It is difficult to see how one could plausibly identify and overcome *all* the difficulties there are in the world to acquiring accurate information. Individual agents and groups of people will always be situated in contexts and subject to limitations which are less than optimal for research. But it seems that it not a defeater for Accuracy. When people do the best that they can to cultivate such a character and mindset so as to be seeking after the most accurate information possible with the aim of believing what is true, then it seems those people are being as accurate as they can be. Indeed, this whole attitude may be a paradigm example for what it takes to be objective in a dialectic manner.

3.3.3 Summation of the Virtues. There are thus two interrelated things relevant to one’s being truthful on Williams’ account. First, one’s desire to do all one can to find out

²⁷ Ibid. p.125.

what the truth is; and secondly, one's being committed to communicating what one actually believes to be true. Accordingly, one's method of inquiry should be truth-acquiring. One's method is truth-acquiring only if the inquirer is committed to this principle: if *P*, to believe that *P*, and if not-*P*, to believe that not-*P*. Truthfulness requires an inner resistance to self-deception about what one both thinks and believes to be true, and that implies that our methods of investigating and expounding what is true should not be motivated by what we merely desire to be true. Just because one wants it to be the case that *P* does not count as a reason in favour of the view that *P*. Nor does it justify any favourable disposition on our part in favour of believing that *P*.²⁸ All inquirers must resist non truth-acquiring dispositions, mindsets and methodologies. This does not mean that the inquirer may not have personal interests or motivations for inquiring into her subject. It would just mean that her interests must not be *merely* personal. All inquirers will have starting points and beliefs they will seek to justify. We do desire some things to be true. But that desire simply cannot feature as a *reason* for holding that belief; it does not justify a person's holding that belief to be true.²⁹ The suggestion is that the inquirer needs to be sufficiently factual and methodical in his internal attitudes and external methods to count as being truthful and virtuous. And being virtuous in this sense motivated by a desire for truth-acquisition: a desire to know and expound the truth as an essential feature of what it takes to be objective on our account.

Accuracy and Sincerity are intrinsically worthwhile virtues, as they orientate an inquirer to seek the truth and to be truthful, which we as a human society value as intrinsic goods. How may such virtues add to one person's being more objective than another person? Our intuition should be to say that objectivity is virtue and agent-orientated, and that it lies in

²⁸ Ibid. pp.133-140.

²⁹ Ibid. pp.141-142. Williams records how apparently the famous geneticists, James Watson and Francis Crick, unabashedly admit how their desire to win the Nobel Prize motivated their study of human DNA. Well obviously this may seem distasteful. But it is neither a reason for or against the result of Watson and Crick's research; the DNA molecule really has a double-helix structure, regardless of the motivations which went in to using just those kind of methods which revealed that structure to these two scientists.

the assumptions, goals and attitudes of a person or group of people in acquiring objectively existing true beliefs about the external world in such a fashion that everyone may be held accountable to the standards of the truths of those assumptions and the intrinsic worthwhileness of the goals and attitudes in question. If Williams' virtues have intrinsic value in the way we have suggested they do, then it follows that everyone should be accountable to behaving in such a manner that is in accordance with them. The virtues of truth have relevance to one's being more objective over another, or less so, in accordance with the constancy and consistency with which a person not only strives to implement the virtues, but in how that person really does implement them. A person may be said to be more objective than another person if that person is both sincere and accurate as we have described, and conversely not so if otherwise. Applied to the discipline of history, that historian who attempts to gather and assess as much relevant source evidence as possible, striving to understand the information contained in it to the best of her understanding, and to formulate an historical theory in accordance with the most accurate conclusions she draws from the information found in that evidence in such a way as to communicate her findings in the most sincere manner will count as a maximally truthful historian, and this virtuous truthfulness will serve as the bedrock upon which her objectivity as a historian inquiring into the historical past is built.

This raises another thought about objectivity. It is simply part of being human that we are limited in the way that we are. If being human counts as a defeater for one's being objective, then objectivity is not even potentially attainable. But objectivity is, we think, at least potentially attainable. Being disposed to be objective would not only consist in the cultivation of the virtues of truth, but also in the recognition of the subjectivity and contingency of one's own situation and epistemic limitations in terms of obstacles. Objectivity does not just consist in arriving at true beliefs. Being objective is a desirable thing

that consists in the maximal virtuousness of inquirers in being truthful. Objectivity is therefore surely related to the attitudes, beliefs and desires people have in finding out the truth by any and every means possible. Thus the cultivation of virtuous attitudes and characteristic traits in a dialectic context will feature as key parts of what it takes to be an objective inquirer. Objectivity then becomes methodological/procedural, and agent-orientated. And to this we now turn.

4 The Dialectic Conception

So perhaps there is truth ‘out there’ in the world in the world and perhaps we human beings really value truth or true beliefs as something really and intrinsically worthwhile. If truth is out there in the world and is valuable to us human beings, then we ought to have some kind of interest in striving to find out what the truth is in any relevant domain of inquiry we find ourselves in. What might such striving look like? Perhaps some kind of agent-based virtue-account of objectivity could make the most sense of this. For if intellectually and ethically virtuous behaviour is *truth-conducive*, in that it is more probable that we come to acquire true beliefs through it, then being virtuous must be related to the means according to which the acquisition and dissemination of true information becomes more probable. But how does truth and how do true beliefs relate at all to an account of objectivity in historical inquiry, as we have sought to argue? We suggest how in just this way. In that if truth and true beliefs are intrinsic epistemic goods, then those methods or attitudes which go into acquiring and disseminating truth and true beliefs are also objectively good. For they would then have as their end an intrinsically good end, and would therefore be intrinsically and objectively worthwhile things in themselves. This is the link we perceive between methodology, truth and objectivity: that by so practicing some methods or having some attitudes as inputs in our mode of inquiry, we have truth and true beliefs as a more likely outputs and thus the

acquisition and dissemination of true information as outputs.

4.1 Methodological/Procedural Objectivity

But in what does such a method consist? If being objective is somehow linked to the method or process by which we undertake inquiry into any given domain, and this includes virtuous characteristic traits, then being objective must be linked to a person's characteristic traits in some way. But not just any characteristics will do. For not all characteristics are relevant to the kind of inquiry we are interested in. Take, for example, the virtue of being gracious. Being gracious is an objective moral good. But it has nothing to do with one's being objective or not in inquiry. Or take a moral vice, such as being sexually deviant. That also says nothing about inquiry. So not just anything will do. We therefore need to justify just what being objective in the way outlined may look like. Recent research into the Philosophy of History may shed light on this.

4.1.1 Striving Towards the Truth. Guy Axtell has argued that in *historical* inquiry this methodological process may consist in character-based epistemological features which may be exemplified in the practice of personal or agential virtues. He presents what he calls a 'dialectic' conception of objectivity, on which he associates the process of objective inquiry with the character of a certain kind of person who seeks after truth regardless of whether or not one arrives at truth itself. On Axtell's account, one's being objective or not is grounded on one's personal desire and willingness to carry out a systematic mode of inquiry that is aimed at arriving at the truth, irrespective of whether or not one actually arrives there in the end. For we are fallible beings, and being fallible, it is always possible that any given belief we arrive at, regardless of the means by which we came to arrive at it, may in fact be false. If being objective depended on actually arriving at the truth then it seems it would be harder to be objective than it needs to be. Nevertheless, we always strive to do so, and it is in this

striving that we become more objective people. Such an account of objectivity may include *subjectivity* as a necessary condition for objectivity in inquiry.

According to Axtell, the dialectic conception sees objectivity as a process of inquiry whereby individual persons investigating the world are responsible for being fair and rigorous in the way they approach their data sets for analysis, and in how the output of their studies exhibits sufficient comprehensiveness, consistency, progression and fruitfulness in research, and also in how they express a sufficient humility and openness to being wrong and changing their point of view. On this view, objectivity consists in inquirers' personal ability to be intellectually and epistemically virtuous in a matter of degree, such that one's objectivity lies in oneself, not in *what* one believes, but in *how* one comes to believe what one does. Whether or not we can properly call someone objective, and to what degree that is so, depends therefore on the means by which they came to hold the beliefs that they do.³⁰

4.1.2 Truth-Conducive Virtues and Crazy Possible Worlds. On Axtell's dialectic account of what it takes to be objective, then, it turns out that it counts in favour of one's being more objective than somebody else in that one's mode of inquiry takes place in a certain manner that counts as being more truth-conducive than the other's. Some attitude, behaviour, or method of inquiry counts as being 'truth-conducive' just in case, by virtue of practicing it or possessing it, it is more probable that we arrive at true beliefs. Now we say that being virtuous is conducive to one's being more objective than not, and that these two things—truth-conducivity and being epistemically or morally virtuous—are connected in some way. For virtue, if it is anything, is the cultivation of admirable attitudes and characteristic traits that are epistemically or morally beneficial by virtue of the role they play in bringing about some particular moral or epistemic output that is desirable. Virtues such as

³⁰ Guy Axtell, 'The Dialectics of Objectivity' in *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 6 (2012), pp.343, 349, 351-352.

being sincere and being accurate have just such traits. Furthermore they imply there is a desire and ability on us both to acquire and to disseminate true information.

But there is an objection to the connection between truth-conducivity and virtuousness. For there are crazy possible worlds that we can conceive where *vices* and *not virtues* are truth-conducive in the way being sincere and being accurate are. In the actual world, given some true proposition *P* and its false opposite *not-P*, being both as accurate and as sincere as one can makes it more likely that we believe that *P*, and is therefore truth-conducive under our stipulation. But we can imagine some other crazy possible world where being the opposite of accurate and sincere—consistently sloppy in research and continually lying to one's colleagues or whatnot—actually makes it more probable that we believe that *P* and do not believe that *not-P*. In that world, being accurate and being sincere would actually make it more likely that we hold the false belief that *not-P* rather than its true opposite. In that world, having such virtues as being sincere or being accurate would not be required for truth-conducivity; indeed, they would be counterproductive to it. From this it follows is that there is no necessary connection between being epistemically or morally virtuous and truth-conducivity and, thus, objectivity.

There are at least three things to say in response to this. First, simply showing there is no *necessary* connection between truth-conducivity and virtuousness does not show there is no connection whatsoever between them. At most what it could show is that we need to know if this world is the world where being virtuous is, in fact, conducive to the acquisition and dissemination of truth and true beliefs, in which case our account will go through on this world we are living in. Secondly, in relation to the first point, given the *actual* world that we live in, it does appear that there is indeed a connection between being sincere and being accurate and acquiring and disseminating true information and beliefs. So it still counts towards being objective, on this account, if in fact one's being accurate and being sincere in

the way we have outlined is conducive towards our intellectual and epistemic goals. Third and last, however, it is not at all clear that such crazy possible worlds really could exist after all. Just think of what Accuracy and Sincerity are. They just are those activities and behaviours which, by virtue of being practices, make it more likely than not that one acquires accurate information, and then faithfully disseminates that information in such a way that everyone else understands one's actual point of view. But being inaccurate and insincere just seem intrinsically to lead people astray from the truth. If there were fifty sources, the inaccurate and insincere person might glance over one, and then make up a garbled presentation based on that one source. But the accurate and sincere person—so far as she can—would find as many sources as she could (say, twenty), read them in depth and then give a careful presentation giving clear reasons for her conclusions based on evidences. So it is not obvious that such crazy possible worlds are really feasible, if they are possible at all. In any event, they most certainly are spooky.

4.2 Philosophy of History, Subjectivity and Objectivity

Let us step back for the moment, however, simply to consider the kind of epistemic situation the working professional historian actually finds herself in.

4.2.1 The Problem of Selection. Take one example of a problem for historical inquiry. Historians are inquirers into past human cultures. Therefore, they often work with a great multitude of various physical artefacts and conflicting written or spoken source document testimony from different perspectives about some past event or set of events concerning those cultures. To write the histories that she does, the historian must therefore *select* what sources she, in her professional judgement, ought to take to be most relevant and important for her particular investigation of interest, then, utilising them, make some justified inference to a valid conclusion. She then must present a particular *interpretation* of said

sources to her academic or student audience as she does history, and this will be in the form of a narrative, a theory or some kind of historical explanation to garner an understanding of the event or set of events. Whatever she did along this process, it will be contingent on certain human feature such as interests, purposes, biases, basic human limitation and ignorance, and so on and so forth. But perhaps from all the set of sources she utilised, there could have been another set that could have done the task just as well. Or maybe another interpretation is just as likely. Problems such as this are often taken to be good reasons in favour of historical relativism.³¹

4.2.2 The Problem of Selection Not a Problem. But a problem like the problem of selection only poses a problem only for those who think there cannot be, in any sense, any subjectivity at all if there is to be objectivity in inquiry. This does not seem true. Indeed, Herman Paul has suggested that being objective in historical inquiry very plausibly even *consists* in one's recognition of one's own subjective historiographical situation, yet whilst simultaneously consciously practicing intellectual virtues as inputs with the goal of certain intellectual goods as outputs. Take a historical proposition such as 'The Normans invaded England in 1066.' On Paul's account, intellectually virtuous behaviour in investigating whether or not this is true contributes to a better understanding of it, in that being virtuous contributes to the degree of epistemic justification one has in accepting or rejecting it.³² As Paul says, "The issue at stake is not beliefs about the world, but intellectually virtuous behaviour."³³ That is, a dialectic account of objectivity can accommodate certain subjectivities if the inquirer still does the best that she can to practice truth-conducive behaviours to the maximum degree.

³¹ See for example Ian. S. Lustick, 'History, Historiography, and Political Science: Multiple Historical Records and the Problem of Selection Bias' in *The American Political Science Review* Vol. 90 No. 3 (1996), pp.605-618.

³² Herman Paul, 'Weak Historicism: On Hierarchies of Intellectual Virtues and Goods' in *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 6 (2012), pp.369, 371.

³³ *Ibid.* p.373.

4.3 Explicating Virtuosity

Virtues, then, are important for a dialectic account of objectivity. But just what kind of virtues are we talking about? We already talked about Accuracy and Sincerity as foundations. But it may be possible to expand our account of good and desirable characteristics inquirers ought to have to count as maximally objective truth-seeking persons, especially in the context of historical inquiry.

4.3.1 Hierarchies of Intellectual Virtues and Goods. Just what set of virtues does Paul suggest, and how do we determine what to emphasise over the others? Inter alia, accuracy, courage, humility, empathy and charity are the kinds of character-traits required by any inquirer into historical subjects in order to be accounted as credible. The ‘historiographical situation’ of an inquirer, which is determined by the *genre* of history (cultural, biographical, etc.), the *question* under consideration, and the *state of scholarship* on the issue will all determine how one emphasises one virtue over another. So for instance, if there were some historical fact, concerning which the scholarship had suggested two rival explanations, where the field were split fifty percent each side, then one should perhaps emphasise virtues such as *humility* and *charity* in addressing the question. On the other hand, were there almost wholesale agreement on some question, it may yet behove the critical historian to readdress the evidences and explanations, and look for weaknesses and engage in that criticism. A virtue such as *courage* might then be important. The historiographical situation is not often determined by the inquirer, and are thus objective in that it lies outside her control and is imposed on her, shaping the way in which she ought to conduct her research: her emphases, her source-selections, and other historiographical concerns. Even here, there may indeed exist subjectivities like selection. Maybe there can be a historiographical situation where there are two virtues, A and B, there just is no way to tell

which one to emphasise in that situation. If a historian chooses to emphasise A, she may just as likely might have chosen B, and there is no basis on which to determine which virtue A or B she ought to have chosen to emphasise. But in general, there will be a clear emphasis, depending on the historiographical situation, such that by practicing the right virtues with the right emphasis as inputs in the right way, the critical historian is more likely to obtain a sound knowledge and understanding of the truth about the past as an important epistemic output, and can therefore be said to have truth-conducive characteristics, which is an objectively good thing. Then, following on from the virtues, there will be hierarchies of intellectual goods. An intellectual virtue is an agent's input of epistemically virtuous behaviours. An intellectual good would then be a favourable output from such virtuous study, such as justification in believing some historical proposition, and historical knowledge.

4.3.2 The Virtue Dilemma. But if we say there are intellectual virtues which lead to some intellectual goods like having justification for believing some historical proposition, then that implies either there's being a relativism about virtue-standards in which case exactly what virtues one should take would be undetermined, or that past historians who did not practice our virtue standards today must have somehow been unjustified in saying what they said; that there was some inherent defeater in their own methodology as past historians. But neither seems right. We have already dealt briefly with the first horn of the dilemma. The historiographical situation will generally (but not always) determine clearly which virtues we ought to emphasise. As for the second horn, it seems there are two plausible *prima facie* responses. First, it does not seem at all clear to me that we are able to know what past historical writers such as Tacitus, or Josephus or Pliny the Elder held to be important virtues of historical inquiry. How can we know, apart from a general look at the kinds of virtues their general cultures perhaps valued, what they valued? Even our knowledge of their cultures at large mostly comes from them, anyhow. So it just seems hard on this to even establish the

horn. But let us say we can determine what they held as virtues to emphasise, and that those particular virtues under that particular emphasis are wrong. Well in that case it does not seem at all incorrect simply to *bite the bullet* and say that they were mistaken about being objective; they were not virtuous. But that does not say they did not know anything at all. Perhaps they had overwhelmingly good empirical reasons justifying them to say the things that they did, even if their objectivity was undermined by employing the wrong virtues.

As for those who believe that this is a rather terse and unacceptably ad hoc response to the dilemma, one would commend Paul's own suggestion that there must be some hierarchy of intellectual goods which come out of an intellectually virtuous historical inquiry, regardless of the set of virtues chosen. As is in accordance with our previous arguments concerning the intrinsic epistemic goodness and worthwhileness of truth, truthfulness and truth-seeking, the most obvious intellectual output at the top of any hierarchical list of intellectual goods would be truth itself, of course. Holding true beliefs is always epistemically worthwhile. Actually believing the true thing after all would be the supreme intellectual good. What other intellectual goods could there be? It does not seem necessary to list them. But Paul suggests some: justifying a religious theodicy, preserving the past for cultural or didactic purposes, learning, justified judgement, instruction and understanding, and so on. What an intellectual good is may be clarified by contrasting them with what are obviously not intellectual goods: monetary profit, personal recognition or prestige, career-enhancement, and so on.³⁴ These may be incidental consequences of inquiry. But they are not the kinds of ends *intellectually virtuous* research actually seeks after, qua research.

4.3.3 Moral Virtues vs. Epistemic Virtues. Anton Froeyman takes issue with Paul. He suggests that our virtue approach to objectivity in historical inquiry should be characterised not in *epistemic* terms but in *moral* terms. Any virtue theory, he says, places an

³⁴ Ibid. pp.382-383.

emphasis on the person as a responsible agent. But epistemic virtues are truth-conducive, in that they have as their end goal justified true beliefs, so as to make it more probable that any given belief arrived at is true and known. This epistemic virtue approach to historiography, Froeyman says, runs the risk of moving away from agent-orientated form of objectivity we have been interested in. It therefore seems to run aground of the kind of dialectic conception of objectivity we have been interested in. Perhaps, then, our focus should move away from historiographical *epistemology* to what makes a morally good *historiographer*.³⁵ A virtue ethical approach to historiography, says Froeyman, will depend on the Uncodifiability Thesis (UT): “[I]t is a priori impossible to formulate a general rule or a set of rules the application of which guarantees the morally right choice in every situation.”³⁶ We can craft an analogical conception of the UT on historiography (UTH): “[T]here is no relation between the world or the historical facts and representation, and that a subjective factor is necessary to create historical representation.”³⁷ If we accept either UT or UTH, then it will be difficult to see just what virtues should be listed in the hierarchies of intellectual virtues and goods suggested by Paul. What might being a ‘good’ historian consist of, on a virtue ethical theory? Froeyman believes we can draw an analogy between an *ethically* good person and a good historian.³⁸ Froeyman suggests that the good historian should be fair, empathetic and pay attention to detail. She should pay attention to the modern day relevance of her inquiry, should be conscious of her own point of view, and she should strive for originality.³⁹ In any event, on Froeyman’s account, historical inquiry will be marked will be marked with a kind of *humility in judgement* that is morally admirable in such a way so as to provoke moral praise with respect to the inquiry and count as good history.

³⁵ Anton Froeyman, ‘Virtues of Historiography’ in *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 6 (2012), pp.416-419.

³⁶ *Ibid.* p.421.

³⁷ *Ibid.* p.422.

³⁸ *Ibid.* pp.428-429.

³⁹ He also suggests she be ‘objective’ in this, but this seems to be another, moral, sense of the term compared to what we have been discussing.

At least two problems arise. First, it is not obvious that some of the virtues that Froeyman elects as paradigm cases of ethical virtues really are intrinsically *ethical* at all, but are, rather, *epistemic*—which is supposed to be his object of attack. Take for example ‘paying attention to detail.’ This implies there is some set of data which needs to be looked at in a precise and careful manner such that one obtains the right *beliefs* about the *information* contained there. It does seem true to say that ethical virtues like being fair, being honest and being empathetic are all plausibly morally relevant characteristics in historical inquiry. But then it is not at all obvious that these virtues are incompatible with the epistemic ones. Indeed, they may be complimentary.⁴⁰ Nothing Froeyman has suggested undermines the general point Paul has already made about the determination of one’s own historiographical situation in determining the hierarchy of intellectual virtues and goods. Paul is surely right when he says that history as a discipline has to do with what is true about the past and is therefore a discipline which should favour the pursuit of epistemic goods, such as a sound knowledge and understanding of historical propositions, over moral good such as being kind and fair. And this is surely correct.

This is not to deny the importance the emphasis of virtue ethics in historiography: “Virtue ethics do not say ‘Be objective!’ but rather: ‘Try to be objective as well as you can.’ This implies that objectivity in virtue ethical terms, is not a state of mind that historians either succeed or fail to achieve; it is rather a regulative ideal that historians are called to pursue to a degree that the profession recognizes as sufficient.”⁴¹ Solely ethical virtues on a virtue theory of historical inquiry may undermine what the overall dialectic conception of objectivity is seeking to establish, namely, a character-based methodological objectivity that is agent-orientated. Indeed, on reflection, it may even be the case that, of the two virtues of truth

⁴⁰ Herman Paul, ‘Virtue Ethics and/or Virtue Epistemology: A Response to Anton Froeyman’ in *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 6 (2012), pp.432-446.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* p.442.

outlined earlier, Accuracy plays the epistemic role, and Sincerity plays the ethical role in seeking truth.

4.3.4 Practical Wisdom. So it may be possible to agree with both Paul and Froeyman to some extent. If being as objective as one can is based on maximal virtuousness in terms of truth-seeking and truth-conducive attitudes, then there does not seem to be any reason to negate any potentially desirable characteristic trait or virtue which may be helpful in this regard along the way, be it moral or epistemic. Both Froeyman and Paul agree that some kind of practical wisdom—or *phronēsis*—is required to determine what the most appropriate and relevant virtues to have at the relevant time and in the relevant situation.⁴² One can be both intellectually and ethically virtuous at the same time, in differing degrees relative to one's needs and historiographical situation, and both epistemology and ethics may be able to cooperate in making a person more truth-seeking and thus more objective on our account. It may therefore be that a blend of both ethics and epistemology is unavoidable on the final analysis of it takes to be an altogether maximally virtuous inquirer who is objective to the highest degree, committed to intrinsic epistemic goods as truth, truth-seeking, and being truthful by both truth-acquisition and truth-dissemination.⁴³

5.0 Conclusion

Let us cast our minds back to Peter Novick's characterisation of the traditional view of the objective historian in the quotation found at the beginning of this thesis. From it we noted four discernible features. The objective historian has typically been cast as the kind of person who, first, has a certain method of inquiry; secondly, practices certain virtues in

⁴² *Phronēsis* is an Aristotelean meta-virtue by which a scholar comes gradually to recognise just what virtues are needed most critically in any given situation. It is understood to be a necessary and sufficient condition for both possessing virtue and being virtuous.

⁴³ "Possessing virtues, therefore, is all about finding the right balance. Simply being honest is not enough. Rather, one should be honest in the right measure, at the right time, to the right person, at the right place." Anton Froeyman, 'Virtues of Historiography' in *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 6 (2012), p.425.

accordance with that method; thirdly, thinks of himself as having particular responsibilities to the discipline; and, finally, is, above all, committed to the objective historical truth.

If we compare this summary to the dialectic account of objectivity we have been defending, it turns out that being objective is a very real possibility in historical inquiry. More than this, it may be every historians' moral and epistemic duty to be as truth-seeking and objective as possible. We discussed Thomas Nagel's account of the absolute conception, which leads to the intuitive conclusion that truth is something 'out there' that is accessible by us, including the objective historical past. We then saw from Bernard Williams' work on the genealogical conception of truth that the truth is something we ought to value, and that particular virtues of truth such as Sincerity and Accuracy follow from this as foundations for virtue-based objectivity. Following on from this, we derived the third and final step, namely, that a dialectic conception of objectivity, whereby both the absolute and external nature of truth and the value we place on truth and its virtues implies that we need to do the best that we can to strive to find out what the truth is, and a person counts as being more or less objective according to the relevant degree to which he or she employs particular truth-conducive virtuous characteristic traits in his mode of inquiry. Under the arguments presented here, this turns out to be plausible. Historical inquiry can be objective, and it can be objective in just this manner: dialectically. Further research into the dialectic conception of objectivity in historical inquiry should be pursued, with a special emphasis into epistemic and moral virtues and their relation to the professional practice of historians working in research and teaching in the discipline of history and historiography.

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