

## CAN HISTORY BE OBJECTIVE?\*

**Prof. Thomas Nipperdey**  
*University of Munich, Germany*

One of the founding fathers of history as a truly modern, scholarly discipline was the German historian Leopold Ranke. In one of his first books, which appeared in 1824, he makes a comment about his intention as historian. He refers to several of his predecessors, historical writers from the tradition of the Enlightenment who passed judgement on the past, on its people, on their actions and intentions, on its main characters, who even claimed to "sit in judgement over the past, pursuing the goal of instructing the present for the benefit of the years to come." With outmoded irony he remarked that he did not presume to handle "such lofty matters," he merely wanted to show "what really happened" (*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*). And in one of his later, classic works on English history, we read, "I wanted as it were to eliminate my own person and only let the things themselves speak, the powerful forces appear." And that which we gain by such a procedure he called objective history.

Today we presuppose that the historical discipline is a part of the sciences. It is a great difficulty that there is no word in English for the German "Wissenschaft." We have an International Congress of Historical Sciences, but this is only a literal translation from the French. This difficulty is connected with the origin of historical writing in the Arts and Letters, the connection with the humanities. In spite of this, historians and historical writing belong to the scientific community. And that means: the historians' statements are scientific statements; they are not subjective, not simply opinions or convictions, but rather they make the claim of being objective, of containing truth about the past. They can be reconstructed, verified and communicated. We test and measure every historical statement on this claim to objectivity. The truth about the past is not an invention or construction of the historian, but rather the historian looks for and finds or discovers this truth. This is also the case now, when we no longer like Ranke only want to know what really happened, but also why it happened that way. We can also express this the other way round: if the historian is not able to make objective statements about the past, then history is not a scholarly or rational discipline; then it is not possible to achieve partial truth let alone *the* truth about the past. But it is precisely this that the layman, the historian's public expects. The term objective has here two meanings. Our knowledge is called objective, because it stems from the object and because it reflects the object. And it is called objective, because it is intersubjectively valid, repeatable and examinable for every participant of scholarly discussion.

The first argument related to our theme is, therefore: history should and can be

---

\*This lecture was given to Honnours students at the University of Pretoria on 15 September 1977 during a lecture-tour of South Africa.

objective; objective truth about the past should be possible. In contrast, the second argument - the counter argument - which is particularly widespread today: history cannot be objective, it is necessarily always subjective; or, it should not be objective; or even, only the person who is partial is objective. I would like to treat both positions in this lecture. First of all, I would like to handle (1) the arguments of the "anti-objectivists", then (2) the problem of value judgements in our discipline, and finally (3) show that objectivity does exist although in a restricted sense. My concluding remarks will deal with the problem of the commitment, the "engagement" of the historian.

1. First of all, I shall confront you with arguments that speak against objectivity. The basic argument is : history is bound by the standpoint and perspective of the historian; the truth about the past can only be found if and because the historian assumes a standpoint. Truth is, therefore, relative. What does this mean? Why is this the case?

a. This principle is first of all a result of the history of historical writing. Historians are protestants, catholics, nonconformists, agnostics and atheists; they are aristocrats, bourgeois, middle class or proletarian, or they belong to the peripheral group we call intellectuals. They are conservative, liberal, progressive, socialist; they are white, brown or black, English, German or Afrikaner. Each and every one is an individual formed by his character, by his biography. The historians are children of their times. This fact - unlike for the natural scientists - is of extreme importance for that which historians do. Historical sentences are dependent on the personality of the historian, on the place and time in which such sentences were expressed; they are *not* objective. And it is of little importance if the historian consciously acknowledges his standpoint or if he is only unconsciously formed by this standpoint (like Ranke, who was after all an enlightened conservative).

The well known fact that every generation writes history anew, writes its own history, results from this situation. And in addition, within each generation there are a number of historians with contrary opinions which evidently result from their varying standpoints.

b. These are facts that we are able to establish. Why is this, however, the case? First of all, the historian's presentation (narrative or analysis) of the past is not a reflection, a reflected image, a reproduction, or a likeness of the past; that would be, philosophically speaking, naive realism. For this there are a number of reasons. That which we possess from the past, through which we are able to know anything at all about it - remnants and sources - is incomplete. There are large areas of human existence that are not available to us in written form, and that have not been recorded by the witnesses we have, and about which we can only make conjectures. In addition, the past, like all things human, is a totality of an endless number of moments. Such a totality, such an infinity is inaccessible and inexhaustible. We constantly discover new sources, and what is even more important we are always discovering new and different things in the sources we already have. This totality is just one reason why

every former world offers a plurality of perspectives with regard to the past. If objective means reproduction of the past, then there is no objective history. History does not reproduce the past. But that does not mean that history fabricates the past. What history does is relate itself to the past.

c. When we deal with the past we make selections. We select first of all a theme, for example imperialism, the Anglo-Boer War or a problem like the question why British policy towards the Boer Republics changed so often, or what meaning the change from an agrar-centered to an urban-centered culture had. We have a particular interest in such a theme, which often is connected with practical considerations. Even the so-called pure scholar is dependent when selecting his theme on that which he considers normal and that which he considers peculiar and, therefore, in need of explanation, and this again depends on his own particular situation. When we then deal with our theme, we most certainly make selections. We select from the endless amount of information about a past object. We select what belongs to this object and what does not, what is important and what is not. This applies already to the fragments of the ascertainment of the facts which we reconstruct out of the sources. This applies all the more the bringing together of certain facts and finally to the question what weight or meaning we ascribe to the facts. This selection is logically unavoidable and depends on the standpoint, the perspective of the historian; it is subjective.

But this subjectivity goes even further. What we ask and what we look for, how we interpret the sources, which answers satisfy us, what and how we tell, analyse, describe or explain, that depends on the concepts, categories and definitions that we use and on a given frame of reference. And both depend on our standpoint, our perspective in the present. We can describe the period between 1933 and 1945 in Germany as the Hitler-period, as the National-socialist, the Fascist or the totalitarian period, and the year 1933 as the dissolution of the Republic, as Hitler's seizure of power, as revolution or counter-revolution. When we speak about intentions and actions of people in the past, we reach back into our own experience. We have always provided interpretations for life and the world, for human existence and community, for social change, for the future and for institutions: we have thought about what causality is, what a function is and what is reasonable and possible, and all this we obviously apply in our concepts and our frames of reference when we deal with the past. Furthermore, we are often concerned in history with events, processes, social formations that involve values. These so-called value references of men of the past belong to the objects of our discipline. Our interpretation of such value references is obviously not independent of our own value system. In this connection it is not so important what the historian consciously sets out to do. Of decisive importance is that the historian is already influenced by his standpoint (at a pre-conscious level); the selections he makes, the concepts and frame of reference he uses are influenced by this.

Truth, therefore, depends on when, where and by whom statements are made. The idea that we can revert back to the so-called facts as objective and

unquestionable things does not hold up. The pure object, the pure reality before which our own person is to be eliminated - as Ranke wanted to have it - does not exist for us.

d. We can also demonstrate this result under another aspect. Historians tell a story. The structure of a story, the main characters, important and unimportant points, the sequence of events, the interdependence and causal connections all are dependent on the ending of the story. The story-teller chooses that which is relevant for the ending of his story, he knows from the outset what the ending will be, and he organizes his material under this perspective. The story does not offer an alleged whole, this is an illusion, but rather it explains a strand of reality retrospectively. The same applies to stories historians tell, but there is an additional relationship. A story told by a historian, let us say the history of the First World War, does not only have its own ending, 1918/19, but it stands in continuity with the present for which the historian tells the story. The fact that we tell the story in 1977 is essential. The actual ending of the story, from whence we pose our questions and choose our perspectives, depends on this year 1977. We cannot disregard our knowledge about the results of the First World War, about the communist and national socialist revolutions, the Second World War, decolonization. Here as well, the perspective of the historian is of decisive importance.

The result of this argumentation is that the historian presents the past through his own perspective; a historian without a standpoint or perspective is not possible. The historian does not simply relate to the past the way the physicist relates to the physical world, but rather his relationship to the past is shaped by his present; the object of the historian is not independent of this connection of the present to the past. The historian himself is a part of the history with which he is concerned.

e. Alongside this logical argument, there is also a moral argument: no matter how one assesses the impossibility of objectivity, objectivity is not at all worth striving after. A contemporary of Ranke, J.G. Droysen, called Ranke's objectivity eunuch-like. It is, he said, not possible to be neutral amidst the conflicts of the present. Commitment for one's own values, one's own society is a moral duty. Since history is connected with the conduct of our lives, since it should guide or legitimize our actions, and since historical science in fact always has an influence on our actions the historian bears a responsibility. He must present the past on the basis of his commitment not *since ira et studio*. but rather *cum ira et studio*. The past which is portrayed in a neutral and impartial way is bloodless, irrelevant and meaningless for the present. The historian is the political tutor of his community. That was his proper role in many cultures in the 19th century; his commitment for his own group was rated higher than the quest for an objective picture of the past. And today in the Western world there is a tendency among certain historians to adopt the same approach, only in a different direction. They no longer want to praise particular aspects of the past in order to justify the present. Instead, they indict the past, which is always seen to have been bad; they conduct a trial on the past in which they are public prosecutor and judge at the same time. The past is nothing but guilt and

failure - and this is measured according to a so-called progressive ideal. The perspective is that of an absolute criticism. But this is apparently also only one perspective.

f. There was of course one argument with which the attempt was made to reconcile commitment and objectivity. One wanted to derive a law from history and wanted to prove that one's own aims were the aims of world history: the national state, the liberal constitution, democracy, imperialism or socialism. There is, so the argument runs, an objective progress in history and the historian is the partisan for this progress or the spokesman for practical reason. One's own perspective and objectivity were then identical. This still applies today for orthodox Marxist history. The class struggle and the victory of communism are supposedly the laws of world history. That person is objective who takes sides with the communists. Partisanship and objectivity are identical. For the majority of historians in the West, of course, there is no identity of one's own standpoint with the alleged objective course of world history. We are relativists. The value systems of our predecessors are bound to their time. Even if we share their values, for example with a national or democratic perspective, we cannot thereby explain other periods and other societies. The entire assumption that we can construct a law and a goal, a purpose, for world history has become untenable. Our momentary perspective and the principle of objectivity can therefore not be identical.

g. The result of our considerations so far is: Historians view the past through a particular perspective or from a particular standpoint. This is factually the case and it is logically necessary. The attempt to set up one particular perspective as the only objective perspective has failed. The past cannot be reproduced. The past in itself, that which it actually was, can apparently only be seen in a plurality of different perspectives.

Historians, however, draw differing conclusions from these generally accepted arguments. Some stress only the aspect of perspectivity and say, the perspective of the historian constitutes or even constructs the past, the object of the historian. This is a kind of epistemological idealism; the past merely provides the material, it is the historian, however, who forms it. "To select and affirm even the simplest complex of facts is to give them a certain place in a certain pattern of ideas and this alone is sufficient to give them a special meaning... it is ...not the indiscriminated fact, but the perceiving mind of the historian that speaks. The special meaning which the facts are made to convey emerges from the substance-form, which the historian employs to recreate imaginatively a series of events not present to perception" (C. Becker). This view leads to a historical relativism, like the American so-called Presentism of the thirties and forties. Then objective statements about the past do not exist. And the radical conclusion of total scepticism and subjectivism was not far away - everyman his own historian (C. Becker). Of course, most practising historians shun such a logical conclusion; it would destroy their profession. But they not often want to argue against such consequences.

Other historians draw from the fact that all historians are bound by value-laden perspectives, the conclusion being that a norm ought to be made of this - historians should consciously take the side of the good and the just - even if there may be differences of opinion as to what is objectively good and just. On the one side the Relativists, on the other side the Moralists.

2. In a brief second section I would like to first of all consider the problem of value judgements before returning to the problem of objectivity in general. To begin with, one must clearly distinguish between descriptive judgements, that refer to the way things are, and prescriptive judgements that refer to the way things ought to be. Value judgements in history always imply statements about what ought to be or about what ought not to be. In history we of course deal with the fact that the lives of persons in the past were oriented around values. We have called this value reference. But statements about value references are not themselves value judgements. I can refer to the high value that pilgrimages or crusades had for medieval man, without thereby making a value judgement about pilgrimage or crusades. The difference just stated between value references and value judgements is, of course, not as simple as it first may appear. When we say that Gladstone's conduct was right or wrong by the occupation of Egypt in 1882, we do not usually mean that it was right or wrong in an absolute sense. We rather mean that if Gladstone was following the political goals which he followed, then it was right or wrong, that is, clever or foolish, to occupy Egypt; either right, because this action led to his goal or at least did not contradict it, or wrong, because it did not lead to his goal, or because the unintended results of his actions were counter-productive for his goal. We could also say, for example, that democracies were better suited to solve conflicts peacefully than nondemocracies; or that they were less suited to solve the problems of the modernization of society and the economy than paternalistic dictatorships. In all these cases we make an if-then statement; we say something about the appropriateness of means with regards to reaching certain ends, about the compatibility of various ends with each other or, finally, about the unintended consequences of certain intentional actions. But we make no statement thereby about the highest values or goals. The problem with the objectivity of science, however, deals precisely with the question of whether we are able to make scientific statements about the highest political and social values, for example, about the concrete realisation of freedom, equality and justice, and about the right kind of society and the right course of politics. Here, I share the position of Max Weber and Sir Karl Popper. Science is not competent to solve ethical or ethical-political problems, it cannot decide on ultimate values, judge the truth of value systems or substantiate value judgements. Science cannot solve what Max Weber called the conflict of the gods, the conflict regarding the correct course of politics, it cannot relieve the citizen of making a decision with regard to the most just form of government or society. Whoever wants science to tell him what he ought to do, will unfortunately be disappointed. The claims of science are more modest: it tells us what is and what was. Political and moral decisions are matters for human responsibility. Faith, a philosophy of life, or political commitment cannot be replaced or confirmed by science. All attempts at setting up ultimate goals for humanity from history are false, they presume in

advance those values that they wished to originally discover in history. And even if we were all today in agreement with regard to value judgements, we would still realize that we cannot judge foreign societies and former times with our values. It is anachronistic to apply our values to different times, to measure the past with our own values. If, however, science cannot substantiate value judgements, then such judgements are not scientific judgements; they are subjective not objective. If our knowledge of the past claims to be objective, then it cannot start from value judgements, it must even abstain from such value judgements. Here, of course, three qualifications are necessary.

*a.* First of all, although we know that different societies at different times held different things to be the good, there is still a basic consensus on ethical matters common to all people. This consensus corresponds not only to our religious or human convictions, but it can also be scientifically substantiated. There is an ethic of science that follows from the logic of science. Every scholar must want science to exist. Science is not possible without the community of investigators, which analytical philosophy since Peirce has demonstrated. Every scholar must also, therefore, want the community of investigators to exist. That means, however, that there are ethical rules, for example for discussion among scholars. Arguments, if they are to be substantiated, must be dealt with independently of their being expressed by catholics, jews, marxists, women, blacks, whites, burghers or proletarians. Here there can be no discrimination. A fundamental ethic, therefore, follows from the logic of science. Unusual phenomena of history like Hitler cannot be handled without moral judgement; I consider this scientifically justifiable because here we have a violation of the fundamental consensus. But this fundamental ethic is a minimal ethic. From it does not follow, as a leftist school will have it, that the scholar must advocate an egalitarian society without authority ("herrschaftsfreie Gesellschaft"). The conflict regarding the correct form of society cannot be decided by a group of scholars in favour of a radical or a conservative idea.

*b.* One objection to an impartial, value-free, objective science is that it is in reality apologetic, it justifies the past, it is affirmative towards the victors, in truth it is partisan. The principle of objectivity is in reality conservative. What is needed instead were a critical history in place of this affirmative history which would measure the past using the yard-stick of a better future; this I have already mentioned. To this argument I would reply that there is a danger: a presentation of the past that orients itself on the ideal of objectivity could take on an apologetic character. The expression to understand everything is to pardon everything makes the historian aware of this danger. But every apology of the past implies again value judgements. An apology therefore, is not a logical result of a value-free historical science or of objectivity. Value-free historical science can avoid the danger of apology.

*c.* If science cannot decide definitely what we ought to do, it is nevertheless not without practical value. History clarifies the alternatives between value systems, clarifies the relationship with regards to means and ends, clarifies concretely the relationship between equality and freedom, equality and terror, nation and state.

Thereby, it helps us to orient ourselves in life. And the debate about the rational ordering of our political and social situation does not go according to convictions of faith or interests, but - even if science cannot decide matters for us, - rather according to arguments of plausibility; practical reasonableness resulting from knowledge of history has here a great importance.

In spite of the restrictions the ideal of historical science is the ideal of objectivity and that means the ideal of value - freedom.

3. The historian and the members of the scientific community are incompetent at dealing with almost all controversial questions regarding value judgements - such value judgements are not objective. The historian, as I have shown in the first part of this lecture, are bound to their standpoints. Is objectivity, therefore, impossible? I would like to prove now, that, in spite of perspectivity, there is objectivity, even if in a restricted sense.

a. First of all, it is clear that objectivity is not a fact, but a norm, an ideal. Even Ranke knew and said this. The empirical fact that historians are not objective does not mean that the validity of this norm is annulled. That we as human beings do not fulfill the norms of religion or an ethic, says nothing against the validity of the norms, at least in societies that are not totally libertarian. The anti-objectivist argumentation traces all statements about the past back to the standpoint of the historian; all statements are, therefore, relative (every man his own historian). Absolute validity, however, is claimed for the reduction of historical statements to the social position of the historian. Relativism intends to be absolute: this is a circular argumentation. Nevertheless, we shall not spend more time on this, but rather come to the main arguments.

b. The argument that history is bound by its standpoint (perspectivity) is based on an investigation of the process which leads to scientific statements. One must, however, distinguish between the context of discovery and the context of justification of validity; between the genesis of an historical statement and the statement itself. The question whether a statement about the past is true is different in principle from the question of how it came to be. The same conclusion, for example, can be reached from totally differing motives: from a dogmatic creed, political commitment, critical polemic, pure scholarly intention, or from a certain degree of fantasy, and this is perfectly legitimate. Historians with different political goals use the same concepts, historians with the same political views come to different results. Political conservatives may be progressive as historians, political progressives may be scientifically conservative. The motives and interests, the value concepts and the perspectives of the historians are, of course, important for the process by which they reach conclusions about the past. The statement about the past itself, however, is completely independent of this. The commitment of a historian, let us say that of Marx or Hobson, can be decisive for his making discoveries. But whether his results are true or not is independent of his commitment. Newton in his astronomical and physical research wanted to prove the goodness of God who had arranged the cosmos



so rationally. When we today say that Newton's laws are true, his motives are irrelevant to us; the truth of his laws is independent of their motivation. In order to find a sentence of Marx correct, I need not be a Marxist. The theory of the atom is independent of whether the researcher intends to produce weapons or energy sources. The sociology of a scholarly discipline is something completely different from its logic.

c. Discussions and criticism are essential elements in the work of the scientific community. When we discuss with one another we presuppose that there is an ideal of objective statements about the past. Otherwise we could not discuss differing opinions, but would rather have to recognize all of them as equally valid perspectives. When we criticize a historical book, we again presuppose that there is an ideal of objective truth on which we judge the attempts of the historian. Only this way can we distinguish between good and poor historical books. We bring forward objections in discussions and critiques because we assume that the community of investigators will go forward on the way to truth.

This assumption is confirmed by a glance at the course of historiography. To be sure there is a sequence of differing, irreconcilable perspectives. But there is a progress in our knowledge of the past through the sequence of these historical perspectives compared to former ones; but rather they stand in relation to them. No historian can disregard what has previously been said about his topic, he must come to terms with this. He critically takes in previous research and attempts to improve it. It is not simply a matter of setting up a new perspective next to an old one, but rather of better and wider knowledge, of correction, revision or extension of our previous knowledge. A large part of our new knowledge, new interpretation and new perspectives does not result from new interest in a new present, but rather from the immanent development of the discipline, that historians' previous answers are not satisfactory. Historians are provoked by previous explanations and challenge the previously prevailing opinion with a new thesis. The course of historical science proves anew that there are not simply different perspectives, but rather historical writing that is better and that which is less good, and that our age has not another kind, but rather better knowledge about the past. This better knowledge that we are concerned with and which we can also to a certain extent achieve, is a more objective knowledge.

Even in view of antagonistic perspectives, there is a progress of knowledge, or of objective knowledge. Fifty years ago protestants and catholics held completely opposing views with regard to the Reformation. Today - in the age of ecumenical understanding - these differences have been considerably reduced, there is a more objective assessment. The same applies to English imperialism, now that it is no longer current. And I think that the different perspectives of Afrikaners and English could be reconciled today, whereas the different perspectives of white, brown and black historians will still need many decades until a reconciliation might become possible.

We measure, therefore, historical statement by the rule of an ideal objectivity. This applies also to perspectives and to the frame of reference itself. When we discuss

and criticize, when we argue the works of our predecessors as well as those of our contemporaries, then we also judge their perspectives, their frames of reference. When we judge, then we also assume that there are better and worse perspectives, that perspectives are not subjective and arbitrary, but that they correspond better or worse to the past. To stress the meaning of religion is obviously more important for an interpretation of the Middle Ages than it is for the twentieth century. That is not a perspective that depends on whether the historian is a christian or a Marxist or whatever, but that is determined by the nature of the Middle Ages. When a historian chooses a new perspective which has previously not been used or was considered unimportant, he gives reasons for or justifies this perspective. And the rest of us discuss whether these reasons are correct, whether this new perspective unlocks the past not only in a new way, but also in a better way. We confirm the validity of a new perspective or we refute it. A perspective which has been confirmed, such as the economic approach of Marx or the approach of Max Weber which looked for the religious preconditions for economic behaviour, must be integrated by all later historians into their own perspective. Only then can their results claim validity in the community of historians. We do not simply change perspectives or paradigms, as Thomas Kuhn thinks to have proved for the natural sciences; when we develop a new perspective, we contradict a part of previous perspectives, we correct in some their one-sidedness, and we carry on the well-confirmed perspectives of our predecessors. A modern explanation of imperialism is a pluralistic synthesis of previous near-confirmed explanations. The history of a society in a particular period is the sum of true accounts about this past which have not yet been falsified. Perspectivity does not hopelessly lead to non-objectivity and relativism as much as it first appeared to.

When we analyse scholarly discussion, we find that we necessarily always assume the ideal of objectivity and that we approach this ideal more closely when we distinguish between better history and history that is not so good, without, of course, reaching this ideal. What we reach is not objective history, but a more objective history.

*d.* And now to another main argument. All historical statements are tested by us according to a particular method: we compare them with the sources, the remnants and reports we have from the past. We attempt to determine whether a historical statement is confirmed by the sources or not: We decide accordingly on its truth and objectivity, whether it relates itself to a past reality and has interobjective validity, we distinguish accordingly between better historical judgements and those that are less good. The test questions to which historical statements are subjected, are, for example: does the historical presentation of a complex correspond to the amount of sources that are known to us regarding this complex? Has the varying and contradictory information in the sources been taken into consideration and accounted for? Can the selection and perspective be justified with the help of the sources? Do the sources contradict the decision of the historian regarding what is important and what is less important, or regarding an alleged hierarchy of causes? The sources disclose, for example, that there were causes and motives for imperialism that were of a purely economic or nationalistic or power-political-strategic or domestic-social nature.

Using these findings from the sources I test every explanation of imperialism. Or when it is said that the cause of imperialism was monopoly capital, then I must test by using the sources whether there was monopoly capital in a certain imperialistic country and what influence it had. One historical statement is better than another one when it is confirmed by more sources or by differing sources, when it can resolve the contradictions between sources, when it enables us to find new sources. Referring to the sources does preserve history from subjective relativism: it makes the distinction between greater and lesser objectivity possible.

*e.* The third main argument. It is part of the procedure of historians that they skilfully and critically distance themselves from their own presuppositions and perspectives, a fact that is overlooked by the theory of the perspectivists. What does this mean? When we deal with more remote periods of history, we do not get very far with our practical experience, our foregone conclusions, our views regarding causes, ends, and means, or rational action. Ancient, medieval or pre-modern man behaved in a way that was completely different to what we are inclined to think on the basis of our own experience. The reality of such concepts as honour, or fame or family was principally different from that which we associate with these concepts. The history of the investigation of such remote periods shows us that historians have been able to free themselves from the biases of their own age in an ever increasing way, and have at least been able to give up a part of their attachment to a standpoint. And the same applies when we treat a world that is strange to us, say India or China. Scientific investigation has destroyed a naive viewing of past and foreign societies, the opinion that similar principles apply there as do with us. We can free ourselves of our standpoint, or at least make our standpoint more relative. This also happens when we deal with our own history. At first our relationship to our own past is prescientific and immediate, consisting of common recollections and a common tradition. This binds the historians to their contemporaries. But scholarly history distances itself from tradition by its critical-rational procedure and by its scepticism towards handed-down truths. By a skilful procedure we show how different the world was 100 years ago in order to take cognizance of the otherness of the world and its distance from us in time. The historians dethrone the power of tradition, they no longer sing the heroic epic of the past. They stress the changes in the world and thereby transform the pre-rational relationship of society to tradition into a rational, distanced relationship. One may welcome or regret this: in any case it shows how historians free themselves of a given perspective.

*f.* One final argument. The historian tells a story, the ending of the story, that which shapes its structure is conditioned by the standpoint, the perspective, the present of the historian. The history that we narrate is therefore the pre-history of the present, it stands in a specific continuity to the present. But we by no means content ourselves with this when we write history, or criticize historical writing. The present is not the result of a singular pre-history, but of an abundance of pre-histories, a network of continuities. And the other way round: the history of a past moment does not only have one ending, but many endings; the history of a past moment is more than pre-histories. In the case of German history, for example, I can regard Bismarck

and his Reich as a piece of the pre-history of National socialism, but also as the pre-history of the modern welfare state, or of the state in which the peaceful co-existence of the religious confessions is ensured, and in the final analysis it is something more and different than all such pre-histories. We historians take into account the plurality of such continuities, and we must take into account that the past is more than a piece of pre-history. History is more than the history of the victors of the past, but it is also more and different from the history of the victors of today or the history of the possible victors of tomorrow. Ranke held that every epoch stood in an immediate relationship to God, that it was not mediated by the perspective we have from the present. We can no longer speak in such a religious tone, but we can demythologize this sentence. History is more than the pre-history of the present, every past period was also only itself, it had an open future which we historians must give back to it. The noble dream of the historians remains to comprehend the past in terms of its own possibilities and not in terms of our possibilities or our perspectives. By taking into account on the one hand a network of pre-histories and continuities, and on the other hand the fact that every past moment is more than just a piece of pre-history, we free ourselves from our own perspectives, from our standpoint, we make our standpoint relative, we move on towards the goal of greater objectivity.

Our findings can be expressed as follows : Historians are bound to their standpoints, to their perspective. But historians are members of the community of investigators, this is a condition for research, in this community they discuss and criticize, they necessarily presuppose the ideal of objectivity. Historians have a test procedure at their disposal, the comparison with the sources, and this ensures a certain degree of objectivity. They recheck their own perspectives, they distinguish between perspectives that are good and such that are less good. They are able to distance themselves from their own perspectives. It is a fact that there is a greater or lesser degree of objectivity, thus there is objectivity in a restricted sense. History can be objective in this sense, that is, it can have a greater or lesser degree of objectivity. The historian relates himself to a past reality, he does not draw up pictures, but rather he attempts to come closer to this reality.

For a long time the attachment of the historian to a standpoint was often stressed. The danger here is to make a norm out of a fact and to prevent that which is possible, namely the progress towards greater objectivity. I believe that the principle of objectivity, the regulative idea of objectivity as the norm for our conduct as historians must be accentuated today. Only so can a movement of the intellect be set in motion which can lead to greater objectivity in comparison with the natural attachment of historians to their own presuppositions. The assertion that all historical knowledge is bound to a standpoint often has serious consequences for the ethics of science. It has the result that historical research in reality actually becomes bound to a standpoint, it is a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is suited to justify a partisan position and to undermine a possible degree of objectivity. History can, however, be objective in this restricted sense, it can relate to the past as it actually was and achieve intersubjective validity.

4. In conclusion, one last question. Does not this postulate of objectivity destroy

the commitment of the historian? Is not a value-freedom the bloodless and irrelevant doctrine, of nonresponsible and boring scholars? What purpose can history have at all? How can it as collective memory contribute to our identity and to the solution of our political and social problems when we impose on it the task of striving for absolute, non-partisan objectivity? Is objectivity then a value for society? I would answer these questions positively. History should doubtless also serve society. But when it does this beyond objectivity, in other words takes sides with particular interests of society, the present, the prevailing value system, or also with a revolutionary value system, then it actually only repeats existing prejudices. It states what society already knows or at least feels. And it fixates and cements a particular present or its expectations for the future. It does violence to the future. What society can expect from history is not mainly such a pragmatic usefulness. It is rather the case that history is an instance which takes on an open and critical position, and which from this position takes up the needs and requirements of society and addresses these problems. When history is free from having to serve societal goals directly, it can fulfill its proper task, the pursuit of the undistorted truth about the past. In just this way it serves society. It instructs society, namely, about the real reasons why the present came to be what it is, how it is, and what is possible in given situations, what the probable results of our actions will be, which values are compatible with each other, what the relation of ends to means is, what a nation is, what is involved in identity and the identity crisis, stability and the stability crisis of our society, and the finitude of man. Partisan history is a weapon that will soon grow blunt. History that strives towards objectivity gives our will and being a footing in our experiencing the past, not in a fabricated or constructed experiencing, but in the real experiencing of the past. This is the real, the true responsibility of the historian for society.