

## HISTORY EXTENSION

**Compare and contrast Inga Clendinnen’s interpretation of the purposes of history with the views of at least TWO other historians you have studied. Make a judgement about the value of these viewpoints.**

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To define the true concept of ‘history’, the purposes behind such investigations must be discovered. The role of the historian, according to Clendinnen – the purpose as to why they construct history – is to discover “useable truths” in the explanation of the human condition. Historians must strive to “unscramble what happened” and analyse with objectivity the events of the past. Clendinnen is suggestive of the ability historians have to “dispel the mists” of human shortsightedness.

Clendinnen initially states that “humans learn from experience”. She definitively acknowledges that human experience is the only process in which knowledge emerges. And yet she states that history must obtain “objective analysis” – an ideal which, compared to her previous convictions regarding personal experience, seems almost oxymoronic. Leopold von Ranke, the “father of objective writing of history”, strived for objectivity in the 1800s; he did, too, recognise that analysis created subjectivity. Ranke’s desire to “tell what actually happened” formed the basis of his history, but it cannot be assumed that no essence of his human experiences were incorporated into his writings. Religious belief – at odds with Clendinnen’s description of history as “secular” – caused Ranke to be disdainful of ideas or teachings which either rejected or simplified the concept of ‘god’. Ranke’s condemnation of Enlightenment thought, due to its secular nature, proved that his judgement was clouded against the body of work – historical and otherwise – created during that period. Whilst his steadfast aim, to create objective history, was a purpose in agreement with Clendinnen’s ideal, it was nevertheless impacted by another of her beliefs – knowledge through experience.

In a more radical example of this, and again displaying the non-“secular” construction of history, can be found in the beliefs of Bede. Bede’s experiences were solely surrounding religion and the Church, providing no secular examples of history or human progress for him to “learn” from. “Objective analysis” could never have been Bede’s purpose, simply due to the experiences he was exposed to and his utter conviction that his religion was the truth. Yet his “Ecclesiastical History” dealt with a subject matter fitting for the ideals he unashamedly propagated; Bede’s clear purpose was didactic, and by admitting his own fallibility he recognised it as such. Bede’s version of “useable truths” were the evidentiary “miracles” he discussed and extensively acknowledged. In this, Clendinnen’s emphasis on the human experience far out rules the capacity for objective analysis. It also calls into question her thought that “critical engagement with the sources” established enough evidentiary basis to constitute objectivity. Bede was widely recognised for his detailed acknowledgement of sources; his use of miracles, literary distortions and seemingly authoritative evidence was documented heavily, and any individual who gave testimony was similarly introduced to his readership. This did not mean he was, in any way, able to access greater objectivity. The sources themselves were chosen to extend Bede’s evangelical purpose, and each were limited – as sources often are – by their own subjectivity.

Ranke’s “critical engagement” echoed the sentiments expressed by Clendinnen here. Ranke believed that, by accessing and evaluating the most genuine documents available, the “truth” of a situation could emerge. Ranke was driven strongly by his purpose to create objectivity, and used evidence accordingly. He believed that “useable truths” arose from sources of all natures, no matter how “unattractive” they might be. Here Ranke’s process is supported by Clendinnen; both are, however, ignorant in their lack of recognition of sources as a subjective medium. Ranke’s views were largely conservative and pro-monarchical, and there is every indication – again, due to human experience – that the sources he accessed were slanted as such. It is arguable that “useable truths” cannot be reached using the objective analysis of sources, and therefore that, if the historian’s purpose is to truly “unscramble what happened”, then the issue of subjectivity must be acknowledged.

Clendinnen also claims that a purpose of history is to analyse, with recognition of the differences in previous eras, “the fog of mistaken convictions” that have carried through to the present day. “The fog” is symbolic of the uniqueness of past times – not to be judged anachronistically, but on individual terms. Ranke’s beliefs were similar to this. He realised the imperative importance of understanding specific contexts and believed that this would be a way to achieve objectivity. In contrast to his and Clendinnen’s beliefs, the 19th Century historian Macaulay was ignorant of differences due to the past. His work was highly impacted by his status as a Whig politician, believing that the past was an inevitable progression towards the future with irreverence to the differences in social and political contexts. Macaulay could not understand fully “the fog” that Clendinnen describes; his history was, if agreeing with her interpretation of history’s purposes, unable to “dispel the mists” that prevent present understanding of the past.

Clendinnen’s emphasis on objectivity and strong methodology as the purposes of the historian are seemingly at odds with her initial evaluation that “humans learn from experience”.