The witness and the judge – why judgement, and not truth alone, is the true goal of the historian.

The study of history is important, not just academically, but as a cultural force in itself. As part of the self-image of nations, peoples and institutions, historical writings can influence events and inspire change that can have consequences as significant as they can be diverse. For example, works such as Vincenzo Cuoco’s *Plato in Italy* that emphasised the past glories of Italian civilisation helped inspire the nationalist feeling that would later lead to unification, while Thucydides’ history of the Peloponnesian Wars was used by American political scientists to help explain the “polarisation” of smaller states towards their neighbouring superpowers. The range, breadth and detail of the past—from the British and Roman Empires; to the Bengal famine and Stalin’s gulags and including the thoughts and deeds of figures such as Cicero—makes our shared history an immensely valuable and unique resource that has been exploited constantly through-out history for every conceivable purpose. Consequently, whether or not a historian allows anything other than pure “truth” in their writings is a question that must be resolved, as a historian’s opinion could attain real-world relevance in the event of its publication—a question made especially important by the very variety of the past which makes it relevant to so much of our modern existence. In this essay, I aim to define the limitations of what we can call truth—limitations present due to the necessity of judgement when building up a picture of the past that is anything more than a mere chronicle of events. However, I go on to argue that in order to be both relevant and to contribute to society, historians must break these barriers of “facts” and “events” in order to make judgements and address significant questions, which is key to both general historical understanding and to the purpose of the historian himself/herself.

Firstly, in the context of historical study, the idea of ‘truth’ requires definition. If we take truth to be information that accurately describes the past, to my mind there are two types of truth the historian must deal with; the first being statements of fact such as dates, names and statistics. Providing the foundations for all serious works of history, such facts can typically only be challenged by contradictory facts from other sources, e.g. private correspondence stating that Stalin knew of the atrocious conditions present in the Gulags being contradicted by the modern Russian media stating that he did not. These attempts to describe the physical events of the past—who did what where, and so on—and while we will never reach a comprehensive list of past occurrences, the events that did occur in the past give us a clear criteria to assess such facts and produce what truth we know about such events. Using my earlier metaphor, from a myriad of other studies we know Stalin did indeed know about conditions in the Gulag, the vocal accounts are factually incorrect and so are discarded, to leave as truth the fact that Stalin knew about conditions in the camps. While there is still space for this fact to be incorrect—all the documents, accounts, statistics and studies still have the potential to be wrong—the fact is confirmed far beyond reasonable doubt, and so can be said to be “true” as far as we are capable of saying something being true. Even when the data available has no such clear outcome for the validity of a statement, the historian can still either set out the rough likelihood of it being true using other facts or conclude they can say nothing about the statement using techniques of source analysis without conjecture, provided said historian sticks rigorously to their analytical techniques. This truth is the nearest we can get to objective description of the past; a list of names, dates and numbers of known validity, imitating as best as possible the list of names
and dates and numbers that make up the past itself. This can be called factual truth – a set of statements about the past either known to be accurate or seen as being highly likely to be accurate.

The second type of truth, however, is harder to define, but can be generally described as “interpretation” – the causes and effects of facts, e.g. how far the actions of an individual caused other events. These are typically measured by extent, rather than being yes-no questions with facts being true or not, but can be said to be built from facts and so gain the relative certainty of factual information. Theoretically, if we had the ideal list of true facts listed earlier, from this we could deduce the one true interpretation relative to which every other interpretation would be judged. Using Schama’s argument in *Citizens* as an example, imagine if the argument that it was purely the old regime’s policies and not its structure that brought doom was the only valid interpretation supported by the past; this causational argument could be said to be true in the same way that Stalin knew about conditions in the Gulags. However, to reach interpretations and find causes and effects for events, judgements must be made through deciding which of a few given factors are most important, which are unsupportable from the factual truth we have at our disposal.

Telling only the factual truth would prevent judgement because firstly, in a historical context, judgements can be highly difficult to extrapolate. For instance, most western historians agree that the work of the Bletchley Park codebreakers significantly shortened the war by approximately three years. However, to reach this conclusion requires, as stated by Hinsley, the use of counter-factual history; or imagining the possible consequences were history to follow a different course. As this clearly steps beyond the bounds of simply telling the truth, we must ask what there is to gain by employing such methods. The simple answer is that they are key to Hinsley’s final assessment of the usefulness of cracked Enigma and Lorenz transmissions; pure analysis is limited by how most of the effects of Ultra intelligence cannot be wholly limited to Ultra itself but, in terms of merchant shipping losses in the Atlantic, for example, can also be partially explained by changes in U-boat tactics, improvements in submarine detection technology, the availability of escort destroyers or the sea cover allied aircraft could provide and so on. Consequently, in this case counter-factual history is essential for finding meaning where such a wide range of factors prevail, and thus requires stepping beyond the bounds of pure truth for judgement.

This problem of multiple factors is also present in, for example, assessing why Britain lost her empire. There are various pertinent reasons for this. One prominent cause is the rise in local nationalism typified by figures such as Gandhi that increasingly demanded that Britain gave up her colonies as, having gradually been introduced to limited government such as control of domestic social policy, the colonies in question proved they could rule themselves. Another such argument is based around the massive financial losses suffered by Britain due to two world wars and its consequent eclipse as a trading and financial power by the USA, leading to a reduced ability and will to support such a vast overseas trading network; this is aided by worldwide distaste for imperial activities typified by the Suez Crisis of 1956. These two arguments in themselves show the limits of simply telling the truth as, by measure of the truth, both can be used to explain the gradual secession of home government to much of the Empire. However, which one is the “truth”? Both are arguably correct, while it is possible that both contribute in equal parts. Furthermore, there may be other factors not covered in these that also heavily contribute towards the final outcome. In fact, judging which is more significant would firstly require phrasing the question in such terms as “factor A, factor B, which is more significant?”, a task involving systematic bias in choosing the factors A and
B, which in turn would depend on current conventions of what influences history. For instance, in *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Gibbon emphasises the role of Christianity as a pacifier of peoples due to the notion of the “spirits” of nations that ultimately cause their fate. Modern historians, however, are more likely to identify underlying economic and social factors due to the increased apparent significance of these in the modern world.

Furthermore, the questions a historian asks and the judgement they are likely to reach is partially dependent on the style of history they write. For instance, a comparative historian examining the similarities and differences between the British and Roman empires may be more likely to phrase aspects such as US competition as an ‘outside threat’ to compare it with the analogous barbarians, while a revisionist historian may instead examine previously unconsidered aspects as Mr Churchill’s melodramatic and hasty speechifying against Indian independence and decolonisation in general as an element that abetted his cause. Consequently, judgement here necessarily requires stepping beyond the bounds of factual truth as it involves making a statement that cannot necessarily be wholly correct in the strictest sense as even setting out the arguments for each side, let alone coming to a final conclusion, is dependent on the context and style the historian is writing in. These problems are widespread throughout most historical writing; no historian can claim to be without outside influences that may affect his or her work and the vast majority of historical issues worth discussing have more than one answer. Indeed, the field of academic discussion is built on contentious questions that cannot be easily and conclusively answered, and if an issue can be easily resolved then the question must be asked of whether or not a judgement is necessary. This means that in making a judgement a historian is not so much telling the truth as telling their own truth, i.e. overstepping the parameters stated in the question.

Should we therefore do away with judgements, instead letting the reader of history books make conclusions as they see fit and sticking purely to observed facts not alterable by personal opinion or context? The problem with this is that there are many marked benefits to be gained from judgement. Firstly, and purely professionally, it severely hinders histories of empires, nations, political movements and other large-scale phenomena that can span tens of years and millions of people, which rely on making small-scale conclusions such as on individual people or specific battles to discuss their wider context. Taking Cicero’s prosecution of Verres in 70BC as an example, we see an event critical to Cicero’s rise to power as, amongst other things, it gained prominent support in the Equites class; made Cicero the established premier lawyer of Rome which led to cases where he protected and gained the support of prominent Roman elites and established his name as a notable “character” in a climate in which political and social competition for recognition and popularity was extensive. For a standalone book on the trial itself, an assessment of its importance to Cicero’s rise to the consulship would be required but it would also be possible for the author, in a purely factual manner, to leave its significance as an open question for the reader to answer with the information within the publication.

However, biographies cannot be built on open questions of this nature. The root of this is the vast volume of historical source material that must and should be consulted to reach an accurate conclusion, especially so given Cicero’s often changing aims and circumstance. Even from 1st Century BC Rome, for which few written sources still survive, a comprehensive view of events requires knowledge and analysis of many of the 800+ letters Cicero wrote; the writings of commentators such as Plutarch or Vellius Paterculus for background knowledge on the workings of the Roman legal
system; archaeological evidence for the relative wealth and prosperity of the province of Sicily so their gifts in gratitude to him could be put into context and historical works on said elites so we can understand why they supported him would all be useful if not necessary. With Early Modern/Modern events meanwhile, for example the Siege of Sidney Street in 1911, sources proliferate to the extent that a historian might consult hundreds of different journals/newspaper articles, statistical tables from a government ministry to observe crime rates, several different sets of political memoirs and dozens of eyewitness accounts to answer one question. The authority historians currently to some measure possess over the past is typically gained not only from source material analysis techniques learnt at University, but also hard-won through years of reading archival material, working through and critiquing existing historiography on the subject and vigorously debating the issue with other similarly specialised academics. For the reader to learn about such events, either they must be given this glut of information raw – which would be impractical – or some degree of summarisation must be necessary, which would deny the reader the opportunity of making up their own mind.

Additionally, lives, especially the significant and eventful lives led by senior politicians of the time, contain many such key moments. For Cicero, such moments include his exile in 59BC, the defeat of Pompey in 48BC and his doomed attempt to return Rome to a senate-led republic in 43BC to name just a few. Again, for such a biography to be conclusive and a succinct and accurate overview of Cicero’s life, judgements must be made on the relative importance of these events and what they can tell us about the man’s character and views in order to maintain the structure of cause and effect vital to works of history. Otherwise, the prospective reader (whom we must assume is entering from a position of relative ignorance) is faced with similar problems in being left with an account containing multiple unresolved arguments which they must interpret for themselves however insignificant they might be; a problem writ large by the degree to which uncertainty clouds the finest detail of historical events. Indeed, as the very choice of what to include in such a work requires the historian to judge a piece of information’s utility to the whole – e.g. the need to decide which if any of Cicero’s many and varied travels across Italy and the Mediterranean should be discussed – an utterly judgement-free work would need to include all information at all relevant to the subject regardless of usefulness. This approach would greatly reduce the ease with which the period could be interpreted by the reader and so almost completely bar from them contemplation of larger and more significant questions, such as how much personal influence Cicero actually had, for example. Writers of history therefore need to come to their own conclusions on individual topics in order to even address larger, more ground-breaking questions.

In turn this leads us to another question – if attempting to answer fundamental questions that require assessment of whole periods and peoples precludes just telling the truth, should we attempt to answer those questions at all? This leads me on to my second argument; that answering such large questions is in fact the historian’s primary task. Firstly, there is the academic argument that understanding is the goal of research, not knowledge alone. This is seen in the sciences, where the fundamental goal is to both explain and understand the universe; in mathematics, where a computer-generated proof is treated with intense suspicion as the mathematicians behind it cannot read and work through the logic of all of it. These goals make up much of the justification behind these fields – for instance scientists, through their understanding of the world, go beyond established knowledge to make new hypotheses and create new machines such as the cathode ray oscilloscope that; in the form of devices such as the television; benefit the rest of society.
As for history, we must ask ourselves, why would people want to read a history book? The answer lies in the human content – works of history are fundamentally stories of people, how they lived and what they did. Such stories therefore derive their value both from their accuracy and empathising with past lives but also from what they tell us about the world we live in today and humans in general. For the latter two aspects understanding is key; for a full picture of a society, institution or person an understanding of the way different factors affect it/them and the net product of these is crucial, while learning lessons from the past requires knowledge of why what happened, occurred and how events could have gone or diverted to different courses. Questioning the efficacy of legislation aiming to assist the poor, asking whether a general’s battlefield decision was a mistake and observing the consequences of disobeying marital constraints in 18th century England are all questions which have parallels with modern-day dilemmas, and so can teach the reader something they can use themselves, with for example marital constraints providing abundant evidence of the necessity of not taking legal rights for granted. Furthermore, they also require understanding of the past as only an assessment of all influences and their relative importance can come up with an answer that fits the evidence and so accurately reflects events – understanding that consequently requires judgement of factors both large and small, and the answering of overlying questions that transcend facts alone. Therefore, this brings us to my second line of argument – that the study of history derives its significance and use from the understanding of history it engenders; that this understanding is one of the reasons why history is written and enjoyed; and that such understanding both requires and is demonstrated by judging and answering the questions history is surrounded in.

Consequently, we can see that limiting a historian to simply telling the truth would greatly diminish both the substance of their work and the enjoyment and use that can be derived from it by its readers. This is because, by pledging to only tell the factual truth, the writer removes from their remit the ability to look at history not as a series of isolated events, but as a complicated web of reaction and interaction where judgement can and must be used to disseminate the important factors from the inconsequential and find overarching meaning. This judgement cannot be done on the back of facts alone, because judgement oversteps the remit given by “telling the truth” and so by that argument any assessment of greater debates or controversies (e.g. why did Churchill at first forbid and then limit aid to relieve the Bengal famine of 1943?) should be considered unnecessary and distracting from the main narrative. However, judgement is key to two of the three reasons people in general read history – empathy with the past (it would be difficult to understand Churchill’s thoughts in this case if his reasons were not understood) and learning for the future (what should Churchill have done and why?). Consequently, the primary goal of the historian must not be to tell the truth, as this would give too little time to these two goals of history, but instead it must be to understand and answer questions about the past. Of course, it is worth noting that the facts and evidence used to make these conclusions must be firmly grounded in truth; ignorance and perversion of this accuracy could only lead to misleading or false conclusions that would give the reader an incorrect version of what happened. Evens uses as an example for this David Abraham’s book *The Collapse of the Weimar Republic* which was shunned by the historical community for its errors and distortions, and which had fundamental discrepancies in its description of the past. Such practices if commonplace would be a serious abuse of the trust placed in the historian by the reader, as they (perhaps unknowingly) veer close to outright deception. However, telling the truth must be seen as a (vitally necessary) means to the ultimate end of understanding history and imparting that understanding to the reader.
Bibliography


