

LIMITS OF HISTORIOGRAPHY
AIMING AT TRUTHFULNESS WHEN INTERPRETING THE PAST

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Philosophers have pointed out that the historians' narrative sentences "refer to at least two time-separated events though they only describe (are only about) the earliest event to which they refer" (Danto). Therefore it has to be concluded that any interpretation concerning a specific historical event is bound to be replaced, sooner or later, by a new interpretation. Generally speaking, reinterpretations of historical events take place when 1) new documents become available, 2) additional questions provide new insights, or 3) later generations ask different questions. However, any historical interpretation will certainly be replaced, some time in the future, because 4), as time moves on, the second of the two "time-separated events" will give way to a more recent event.

These changing perspectives need not really bother the philosopher, as it is up to the historian to be aware of the perspectives and conceptions used when writing history. However, as works of history are being replaced by new interpretations, the question arises how it then remains possible to find truth among conflicting historical accounts and to achieve truthfulness when describing the past.

"The 'objective' conception of the past" (Williams) has helped historians in their understanding "of what it is to tell the truth about the past". However, can this method of trying to tell the truth about the past still be applied? Do the unavoidable changes in viewing past events interfere with "the 'objective' conception of the past" considering the fact that the desired truthfulness of historiography seems to be obtainable only within a certain period of time? This question needs to be examined carefully. It is the purpose of this paper to give a precise description of the problem and to explore the achievable solution, as there may be "a considerable amount of progress even within the field of historical interpretation" (Popper).