

Dray's Problems of Historical Objectivity and Causality: A Rankean Approach

Elizabeth Ashkinazi

The problems of objectivity and causality are underlying problems which exist in the realm of philosophical thought when understanding history. Different thinkers subscribe to differing notions of ways to explain and describe historical accounts. Historian Leopold von Ranke provides the most comprehensive view regarding how one should approach the illustration and elucidation of history. The historicist view is an all-encompassing one, favoring the archive and emphasizing “good faith” on the part of the historian. In Ranke’s view, using historical records or primary sources could be used to support an understanding of universal history, thereby amounting to some larger scheme or “big picture” concerning world history. I take Ranke’s view to be the most conducive to the determination of historical objectivity and causality from the perspective of thinker William Dray, because of its ecumenical and all-encompassing (yet historiographically insistent) nature in forming an adequate conception of historical events (as adequate as one can hope for).

William Dray illuminates different problems of outlining history in his writing. For one, there exist the problems of selection and valuation in dealing with the problem of objectivity in providing historical accounts. For Dray, selection need contain memorable events in history. Interest on the part of the historian is too a consideration that should be taken into account in the formulation of historically objective narratives and interpretations -- “This is the question to the extent to which historians can legitimately claim the status of “objective truth”...whether they can claim, in the oft quoted words of Ranke, to reconstruct the past *exactly as it was*” (Dray, p. 21). Ensuring that our selection is as objective as possible involves selecting a factor with the greatest amount of causal fertility and in our assessments of valuations. Directing our focus to the “worthy of notice” can help to generate causal inferences. Our judgments of significance as they pertain to events are shaped in part by the values that we carry with us as directed by our interests in conducting historical analyses and descriptions. The incorporation of different values into a totalistic explanation is in Dray’s view

is a way to best ensure objectivity. The reconciliation of objective and non-objective views provides a degree of fairness on the part of the event. Objectivity also includes the openness to alternative possibilities. Explanations arise from objective values, but it is up to the historian to determine how correct these values are -- “How can the historian write about *anything*, unless he is able to recognize its nature; and how can he grasp such objects as study as these without placing a value upon them?” (p. 25). The issue is that it is hard to glean objectivity from value-laden historical judgments and interpretations. The imposition of values on the historical record by the historian can render the account less impartial than is necessary. Accounting for values that may have existed within previous eras within the historical record helps to cast a wide enough net so as to encompass a valuational totality, which results in a greater degree of objective explanation. On the problem of causality, Dray believes that the making of proper causal attributions includes considerations of the motives behind actions by actors (through what is rationally required) or of situations, conditions, reasons or dispositions that give rise to acts, as well as causal chains of events and breaks within them. Breaks in causal chains can be used to explain events that transpire, through voluntary actions or by means of abnormal occurrences. It is difficult to parse out explanations for causal relationships when there are so many factors at play -- “There is the work-a-day historical *problem* of identifying at least a few of the conditions without which the effect would not have occurred” (p. 42). When values enter into discourse regarding how agents influence events, accounts may be rendered less objective because of the value judgments being imparted onto determinations of responsibility, which can involve the attribution of blame.

I posit that Ranke’s historicist theory is most conducive to the achievement of historical explanation, due to its success in accounting for values, its reverence for the historical record, and its multifactorial and “freer” approach in handling questions of both historical objectivity and causality. The context-dependent nature of the theory provides the theory with a greater degree of plausibility and potential for acceptance because it is not as reductive as other modes of historical explanation,

like some of its positivist, idealist and materialist counterparts are guilty of doing. It emphasizes historical context and a case-by-case analysis of historical events over blanketing theories which seek to piece together a particular narrative concerning historical description and explanation. Ranke believed that history provides its own means of interpretation. To use theories and philosophies to denote events is erroneous, in his view. History, if to be taken seriously as a professional discipline, would require separation from philosophy, because the philosopher “fails to grasp the concrete living reality of those who compose history” (p. 1). History is fact-centered and this centeredness is only made possible through the examination of documents and archives, which awards interpretations with a degree of objectivity. This approach is a sensical one, and it seemingly deals with the problems of objectivity and valuation fairly well, because the historian is better able to distinguish historical fact from one’s own imposed value judgments which may translate into the description of history. According to Ranke, “We judge the past too often by the present situation” (Ranke, p.14). The archive, according to Ranke, speaks for itself. Having reverence for it is a fruitful way of obtaining historical objectivity, because the values reflected in the record are merely a representation of the values shared by those producing the record. Consideration of such values of epochs past can result in a valuational totality or completeness -- an idea which Dray believes lends itself to the idea of historical objectivity -- “It is not up to us to judge about error and truth as such. We merely observe one figure (Gestalt) arising side by side with another figure...Our task is to penetrate them to the bottom of their existence and to portray them with complete objectivity” (p. 14).

In addition to the emphasis placed on the historical record, Ranke places much significance on the idea of universal history. His methodology concerning the study of history is the gleaning of a spiritual apperception which makes the description of an event possible. Ranke’s commitment to the understanding of universal interest is a laudable one -- “Herein lies the freedom from prejudice which we mean. It is not a lack of interest, but rather an interest in pure cognition undulled by preconceived notions” (p.13). He rejects the Hegelian practice of cherry-picking certain historical events the

historian deems significant in the furtherance of the ideal of freedom, or freedom's realization of itself. This reconciliation of the archivally specific and the special attention it requires with the generality of universal history I think perfectly encapsulates Ranke's notion of "the Love of Truth". Ranke is sympathetic to the idea that history can never be understood in full -- this is why he invokes the idea of God's omnipresence and faith in the totality in the text, stating "Since, moreover, there is much that we do not know, how are we to understand the causal nexus everywhere, not to mention getting to the bottom of the essence of totality?...God alone knows world history" (p. 15). But he still maintains faith that it somehow all fits together in one less-than-cohesive universal history (ideally). This subscription to a concept of totality is a way to successfully glean objectivity and account for causality. Because nothing escapes the realm of the absolute or the whole, Ranke's historicism acknowledges that the possibility of answers or reasons for the goings-on in history is non-exhaustive, but it is the historian's due diligence to represent events in an impartial way. According to Ranke, "Every epoch is immediate to God" -- meaning that every facet of history holds the same amount of import, none takes priority over the other (p. 21). All of this amounts to history being imbued with a sort of autonomy--it progresses as it may, without granting the writers of history too much of it. This ties in nicely with Ranke's preoccupation with existence -- lived experiences and histories -- rather than the opinions of historical agents and writers. In some ways, I think that Ranke's "God" is a metaphor for the unknowable and the indiscernible in history -- we can merely hope to outline it the best we can, paying heed to the special nature and causal nexus of each era, approaching valuations as they may have been in the recent past, and by striving to be as objective as possible in doing so.

The problem of causality existing in Dray's interpretation of historical explanation in part involves a hyperfocus on historical, situational, and individually-motivated nuance, yet as a result, the essence of the "bigger picture" is lost. Ranke's theory is successful in combating this preoccupation with explaining away certain events as subsumed by a certain theoretical framework.

Fundamentally, Dray acknowledges these problems of objectivity and causality as arising out of an overabundance, a plurality, of factors. Placing weight on any one *modus operandi* excludes other equally valid ways of engaging with the mess that is history. This is where other theories of historical explanation fall short, because they ascribe too much to a single explanatory mode. This is true for Collingwood's idealism, which narrows its focus to individual actions and motives, Hempel's positivism, with probabilistic and/or universal "laws" which supposedly govern human and historical operations, and Marx, with situations and material conditions giving rise to conflicts which are acted upon by actors. This is to say that perhaps with the commitment to any one theory, objectivity is lost. The contextuality inherent to Ranke's method lays a groundwork for synthesis. Echoing the tenets of historicism, the record speaks for itself -- events are to be "pragmatically determined" by the historian -- "Although this causal nexus is not designated by dates, it exists nevertheless. It exists, and because it exists we must try to recognize it." (p. 13). There are no "winners" or "losers" -- impartiality should trump all other values. Sometimes passions, or interests, or actors, or dispositions influence actions -- it depends on the case. While it may be hard to elucidate absolutely everything pertaining to history, Ranke would perhaps agree that "everything" holds equal weight -- we must "...view every existence as permeated with original life..." (p. 14). The distinction between Dray's notion of voluntary actions and abnormal events which represent breaks in causal chains is an arbitrary one. Even abnormal occurrences could be voluntary in their own right. Ranke does not pledge his allegiance to any one form of reasoning -- when confronted with questions regarding who did what and for what purpose, he would likely retort with, "it depends". Dray's enumeration of things that prompt causal processes seem to be both all-inclusive yet non-definitive enough -- but in reality, plurality and context are inextricable from complete and rich explanations of events, amounting to life as we know it -- something that Ranke seemed to be acutely aware of.