

The Will to Truth: A Reply to Novick

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ABSTRACT: This article challenges Peter Novick's claims that truth and objectivity are not proper goals for historians to strive after. The author argues that, on the contrary, these ideals are morally and intellectually indispensable. The argument consists of an attack on several fundamental claims Novick makes: that history and fiction are barely distinguishable; that although there are such things as facts, it is easy to get them right and it is possible to construct whatever theory one likes around them; that historians should be honest not in the sense of being faithful to the truth (which, he believes, does not exist) but only in the sense of admitting that what they do is make up stories.

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PETER Novick does not believe that truth and objectivity are proper goals for historians to strive after, and he is not sorry about it either. In earlier times, he tells us, a consensus existed among professional historians that the aim of history was "to discover and record the objective truth about the past" with the ultimate goal of painting "a true and complete picture" of it. From this lofty goal or "noble dream," as he has elsewhere described it (Novick 1988), two "ethical norms" followed: "first, assiduity in determining and scrupulousness in reporting the facts," and "second, . . . freedom from bias, partisanship, 'special pleading,' preconceived notions, utilitarian purposes, or other interferences with neutrality and objectivity" (Novick, this volume, 27-28).¹ But for a variety of reasons both political and philosophical, Novick argues, the consensus has collapsed.

I would not begin to argue with Novick's account of the *history* of the decline of the ideals of truth and objectivity, among professional historians and much more widely in our culture. Indeed, Novick's book *That Noble Dream* (1988) offers much insight into the reasons these ideals have lost their attractions for so many people. (I could say he helps us understand the truth about these developments—although, presumably, he would reject the compliment.) My aim is instead analytical and normative: it is to ask what it means to abandon the ideals of truth and objectivity and whether we can coherently do so. By looking closely at some of Novick's own disturbing pro-

nouncements, and drawing out their implications, I hope to show that these ideals are indispensable both intellectually and morally.

HISTORY AND FICTION

Let us begin with Novick's claim that the words "true" or "truthful" apply only to "rather narrowly defined 'brute-factual' statements, singular or statistical," not to "synthetic historical accounts." It follows, he believes, that it makes "no sense to say of two accounts, assuming neither was filled with egregious misstatements of fact, that one [is] truer than the other" (35).²

How, then, do we compare and evaluate historical works? If Novick were right that history and fiction are barely distinguishable—he finds no good reason to separate them except "to save librarians a massive job of recataloguing" (38)—then it might seem that better histories differ from worse ones on purely aesthetic grounds. A better work would be simply a more beautiful, internally coherent work. But Novick argues that what historians are and should be doing is "making up interesting, provocative, even edifying stories about [the past] as contributions to collective self-understanding(s)" (37). In so doing, he suggests that the criteria for evaluating historical works—as well as artworks—are not simply aesthetic but also moral, political, and ideological. An "edifying" history may instruct its readers morally or elevate their sense of themselves; a "provocative" work may challenge their preconceptions.³

Now, clearly, we do judge historical works according to such criteria. Other things being equal, a work that "edifies" is better than one that does not; a "provocative" work that challenges old pieties is better than one that reinforces our preconceptions. And who would not prefer "interesting" stories over dull ones?

What is wrong with Novick's view is not the criteria he endorses as much as the one he rejects. In the history-as-fiction model he presents as an ideal, historians "would make no greater (but also no lesser) truth claims than poets or painters" (37). It is here that he runs amok.

Novick is right that, in praising a historical or biographical or journalistic work, we do not ordinarily shower on it the encomium "It's true!"⁴ We say instead that it is insightful or that it enhances our understanding or that it sheds new light on the events in question. But to provide insight or illumination is to shed light *on* something. In praising historical works, we mean that they make sense of, explain, fit with *events that happened in the world*. We cannot understand these ascriptions without appealing to the ideal of fidelity to truth.

Now, clearly, poets and novelists also provide insight and illumination. We may say of a novel or a play or a film that it "gets at the truth" about some human condition or that, in depicting a familiar kind of character or situation, it "gets it right." If, as I have admitted, edification and the like can be virtues of history as well as fiction, it might seem that I

am agreeing with Novick that the two are barely distinguishable.⁵

But this would be a serious mistake. The truths to which "insightful" or "illuminating" fictional works must be faithful are general truths about "the human condition" or about various human conditions. And it is enough if the individual characters or situations depicted in fictional works, which we may describe as "real" or "realistic," are instances of *types* that exist in the world. We do not assume, however, that the particular individuals or situations depicted in fiction exist in the world, nor is it the case that successful fiction must contain characters or situations that are realistic even in this limited sense. Realism and truth are not indispensable virtues of fiction.

History, however, is different. The characters and situations that form its subject matter are not merely instances of types that may exist in the world; they must themselves have actually existed. Moreover, whereas it seems plausible that in fiction the particular individuals and situations depicted are vehicles—archetypes—for the transmission of general truths, in history it is the other way around: in the end our theories and our explanations are servants to the hard reality of fact.

As a good working historian respectful of the ultimate data of his craft, Novick shrinks from the posterous conclusions it would be natural to draw from his conflation of history and fiction. He admits what to most of us is obvious: a realm of "brute facts" with which historical ac-

counts must be compatible. Unlike the novelist, the historian cannot simply make up any old interesting or edifying story. Alongside the criteria Novick announces for judging historical works, we must add another criterion that can be called epistemic: fit with the facts. In contrast to fiction, in history the epistemic is the criterion *sine qua non*.

Yet Novick takes back with one hand what he gives with the other. A realm of brute facts exists to which historians must be faithful, he admits, but the realm is very narrow. Brute facts are obvious facts, it seems, facts no sensible person would dispute. As examples, he mentions "The cat is on the mat" and "On 7 December 1941, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor" (37). He singles out two characteristics of being accurate about such matters of fact: "it's not hard to do, and it's not at all inconvenient: with minimal ingenuity you can construct a narrative of almost any imaginable shape, drawing whatever moral you wish, without getting facts wrong" (38).

So just as we might have relaxed, suspecting Novick's wild pronouncements would be tamed by the constraint of facts, he condemns facts as frail, feeble things that are essentially impotent. Facts, he says, are easy to establish. In addition, they are "not at all inconvenient": almost any facts can be rendered compatible with almost any historical account.

Is it so easy to get the facts right? Are facts so accommodating to the stories historians wish to tell? These are the questions that demand answers.

FACTS AND INTERPRETATIONS

It is useful to begin by making explicit a distinction on which Novick's account relies. This is the distinction between a realm of facts (perhaps we should say "brute facts") and a realm of interpretation, which encompasses theories, narratives, stories, and generally the larger accounts that the historian (or other interpreter of events) sets out to tell. Two questions immediately present themselves. One is where facts end and interpretation begins. The second is how interpretations are to be assessed and compared.

That the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941 is a fact. How that fact should be understood, what its causes were, seems to be an interpretation. That millions of Jews and others died in Nazi concentration camps during World War II is a fact. The explanation, or explanations, of the fact—the larger story in which it is embedded—appears to be a matter of interpretation. Novick claims that interpretations are not significantly constrained by facts; thus his belief that the historian can "construct a narrative of almost any imaginable shape . . . without getting facts wrong." The criteria for assessing interpretations, in this view, are aesthetic, moral, and political, rather than epistemic.

Novick would be right if he had said merely that facts *underdetermine* interpretations—in other words, that a given set of facts is compatible with more than one interpretation. This is perhaps tautological, for we might say that an interpretation of a given set of facts just *is*

something that is compatible with, but not entailed by, those facts, thus that a given set of facts can support multiple interpretations. Just as clearly, however, facts *constrain* interpretations: not *every* interpretation is compatible with every set of facts, and some interpretations better fit a given set of facts than others.

Here is a simple model for understanding the relationship between facts and interpretations. Imagine a given set of facts *F*. Imagine also several possible interpretations of *F*: *Int1*, *Int2*, *Int3*, and so forth. Assume that two of these interpretations, *Int1* and *Int2*, are equally plausible. But now suppose that new facts come to light and are added to the set *F*. These new facts (we shall assume that the original facts in *F* have not been discredited) may enhance the plausibility of some interpretations of *F* and reduce the plausibility of others; perhaps some interpretations can be ruled out altogether. The new set may, for example, render *Int1* more plausible than *Int2*.

A historical example can flesh out our bare-boned model. With the case of the American Revolution, Raymond Martin has demonstrated how progress in historical understanding can take place. Over two centuries, the two main competing interpretations of the Revolution have been the Whig and the Progressive. The Whigs told the story of the Revolution from the point of view of the revolutionary elite, accepted that the Revolution was fought over principles, and justified the break with Britain. The Progressives, on the other side, emphasized the socioeconomic under-

pinnings of the Revolution. Historical accounts on each side developed in a dialectical process: the first Whigs begat the first Progressives, who begat the neo-Whigs, who begat the neo-Progressives.

Each new school of interpretation seems to have taken what it could from the interpretations it superseded, both from those in its own and in the opposing tradition. By the time we get to the "Neo-Progressive" the two schools are so intertwined that it is questionable whether there still are two schools. (Martin 1998, 29)

More generally, Martin argues, we understand the Revolution better today than we did in previous times, for a variety of reasons. A lot more "has become known about early American history." Interpretations have "become more accurate because previous factual and explanatory mistakes have been corrected and the corrections have tended to be cumulative." Interpretations have become more comprehensive and better balanced as "more sorts of causal influences have been taken into account" and more subjective perspectives have been portrayed. Interpretations have become less partisan. They also have become "better justified because the sheer quantity of evidence on which interpretations are based has grown enormously" (27-28).

Returning to our model, Martin's analysis helps us see that the distinction between fact and interpretation is not sharp: it is hard to say where one ends and the other begins. This is a point often made by opponents of truth and objectivity—who like to remind us that facts are "theory-

laden"—but the point cuts two ways. Interpretations are also fact laden: the uncovering of new facts renders some interpretations more plausible and others less. Progress in our understanding of the Revolution came about partly because we know a lot more about the Revolution than we used to. Historians have been able to correct "factual and explanatory mistakes" (27) uncovered by other historians, including those with whom they disagreed over interpretation. Later histories have included "more sorts of causal influences" and more "subjective perspectives" of people involved in the Revolution (27).

Some putative facts turned out not to be facts; some new facts came to light. Later explanations benefited from this new knowledge. Having at their disposal the works of earlier historians, as well as a wider range of sources, later histories were able to see events from more points of view, and could subsume earlier historical accounts within their own more comprehensive ones.

Now, of course, Martin examines only one case, and he acknowledges that consensus about how to understand the Revolution is limited in important ways. Two further points are worth noting. First, the goal of painting "a true and complete picture" of historical events is implausible and naive. If earlier historians thought otherwise, as Novick implies, they were misguided. There is not a single Truth or even a single truth about a given set of events. It is obvious, too, that more than one interpretation can explain or illumi-

nate the same events.⁶ The point is not that there is only one way to look at the facts, but that some ways of looking at them do not stand up to scrutiny. One can tell several stories, perhaps many stories, about the same set of facts, but some stories will not fly.

Second, interpretational consensus becomes a more attainable goal as time passes and passions and biases subside. We are more likely to agree about the causes of the American Revolution than about the causes of the Persian Gulf war. That means, of course, that many of the historical issues most interesting to us will remain controversial, thereby reinforcing the sense of relativism that Novick describes.

The question, however, is not whether we encounter radically different ways of understanding the same events. Clearly, we do. The question is, rather, what our response to such different understandings should be. Should we simply accept and even embrace the clashing perceptions as the end of the matter, or should we instead try to adjudicate between them? Novick suggests the former. I urge the latter, both as a prescription for what we ought to do and as a description of what we actually do. We would not be disturbed by conflicting perceptions of events in the world unless we believed that some versions are more accurate—closer to the truth—than others. Truth functions for us as an ideal that we must embrace if we are to attain understanding of the world.⁷ Compelled by our natures to seek un-

derstanding, we experience a will to truth.

NOT ENOUGH FACTS

Another example sheds further light on the relationship between facts and interpretations. Consider the storm of controversy surrounding the publication of Daniel Goldhagen's book, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. Goldhagen denies that the extermination of the Jews was carried out by a relatively small number of fanatics or Nazi Party faithfuls, or that it resulted primarily from coercion, peer pressure, or a habit of obedience; he argues that "Germans' antisemitic beliefs about Jews were the central causal agent of the Holocaust" (Goldhagen 1996, 9).

The ordinary person's response to Goldhagen's theory is to ask if it is right. But Novick's view of history does not allow this question. From Novick one would conclude that every imaginable set of facts equally supports Goldhagen's explanation and those of his critics. Of course, historians who disagree with Goldhagen do ask if his theory is right, and they have beliefs about what is relevant to answering it. Ruth Bettina Birn, for example, one of Goldhagen's sharpest critics, argues that Goldhagen's

assertion that German antisemitism was unique can only be made by comparing it to other forms of antisemitism. If one claims that only Jews were treated in a special way, one has to analyse the treatment of other victims; if one claims that

only Germans committed certain deeds, one has to compare them to the deeds of non-Germans; if one claims that all Germans acted in a certain way, one has to compare the behaviour of different groups in German society. (Birn 1997, 196)

Goldhagen's interpretation will become less plausible if it is found that many non-Germans treated Jews as badly as did Germans, or that Germans often treated non-Jews as badly as they treated Jews, or that different groups of Germans treated Jews differently. And these propositions can be confirmed or disconfirmed by the uncovering of certain facts.⁸

Novick's denial that facts can be inconvenient suggests that no such comparative data could even be *relevant* to judging the merits of Goldhagen's interpretation. He is right, of course, that facts taken in isolation or even in context do not *entail* a particular interpretation. But Novick appears to maintain that evidence showing that Germans sometimes treated non-Jews as badly as they did Jews, or that some non-Germans treated Jews as badly as did Germans, would have no bearing on Goldhagen's thesis. Such a view is absurd as well as reckless.

The idea that facts constrain interpretations will seem to most people like common sense, but it has a subtler aspect as well. We might put the point by saying that the gap between fact and interpretation is filled partly with undiscovered facts: an interpretation that is plausible given a particular set of facts *F* will be less plau-

sible or perhaps not plausible at all with set $F + n$, where n comprises certain additional facts. This is just another way of saying that as we learn more, what was once interpretation becomes fact.

Ignorance of facts, then, produces more interpretational disagreement than we in our armchairs, spinning our theories, like to admit. Theories are fine and grand things, we think, with their own internal logic, beauty, and necessity. Facts, on the other hand, are small, contingent, inaccessible, recalcitrant. The past is past and may leave few traces. Evidence is partial, conflicting. The motives of witnesses, as well as chroniclers, may be suspect.

Ignorance of facts is sometimes curable, sometimes not. But one thing is clear: if we had more facts, we would have fewer theories.

TOO MANY FACTS

One problem historians face, then, is not having all the information that is relevant to assessing their interpretations. But the other side of the coin is having much more than they can possibly use. Herein lies a key to interpreting Novick's claim that "with minimal ingenuity you can construct a narrative of almost any imaginable shape . . . *without getting facts wrong*" (38, emphasis added). Novick is almost certainly right. Without ever saying anything false, and never being strictly inaccurate, one can make an implausible view seem plausible if only one leaves out certain crucial facts. It is for this reason that telling the truth and nothing

but the truth is not enough: one has to tell the whole truth.

A central task confronting historians, biographers, journalists, and others who chronicle events is the problem of selection: deciding which, among the vast supply of facts out there in the world, to include in their narratives and which to exclude. Earlier, during the research phase of their projects, they must decide which roads to follow—which documents to examine, whom to interview—and which to close off. For these tasks the investigator needs criteria of relevance to sort among the myriad facts actually and potentially available. Clearly, aesthetic and pragmatic criteria play a role here. A work of history must be of finite and manageable length; if it is readable and even pleasurable as well, so much the better. But such considerations must not compromise a work's intellectual and moral integrity. Suppressing inconvenient facts to make an interpretation more pleasing or more plausible violates the standards to which historians, biographers, and journalists are bound. (Novick's denial elsewhere that facts can be inconvenient will come as news to experimental scientists and criminal defense attorneys.)

It is impossible to explain both which facts count as relevant, and why omitting inconvenient (and hence relevant) facts violates widely accepted standards of scholarship, without employing concepts such as fairness, objectivity, and truth. Some facts support a particular interpretation, and others tend to undermine it. To know how good an interpretation

is—how well it explains the events in question—we must be aware of the evidence against it as well as the evidence for it. (A criminal lawyer who neglected such guidelines would ill serve his clients.) As John Stuart Mill put it, “Three-fourths of the arguments for every disputed opinion consist in dispelling the appearances which favor some opinion different from it” (Mill [1859] 1956, 44). *Of course* a credible story can be told without getting facts wrong, if those facts that do not suit the theory are left out.

Implicit in the demand for fairness and balance and the acknowledgment of inconvenient facts—demands that we all understand perfectly well—is the idea that there is a reality independent of our interpretations, a reality that our interpretations are aiming to explain or illuminate and to which they must be faithful. As I have argued, it does not follow that there is only one plausible interpretation of a given set of events. But this idea of an independent reality means that our interpretations are not self-contained and that they, and we who do the interpreting, must strive for fidelity to that which they are about.

Of course, every historian, when engaged not in abstract metadiscussions about the nature of historical work but, rather, in the practice of history itself, understands this. Goldhagen passionately believes that anti-Semitic conviction was the central reason ordinary Germans participated in the Holocaust; his critics deny it. That the parties to a historical debate believe there is a truth

about the matter does not, of course, mean that there is a truth about the matter. But, as I argued earlier, appealing to Kant, it does mean that people cannot take causal or historical explanations seriously—cannot take interpretations seriously—without a commitment to the existence of truth.

THE HONEST HISTORIAN

Novick wishes to replace the old-fashioned standards historians used to live by—the ones that presupposed the existence of truth and the possibility of objectivity—with a new code of ethics. One element of this new code would require accuracy about matters of fact, which, as we saw earlier, he thinks is easy. (As a result, he says, “I am not fully persuaded that this is a truly ethical requirement,” because he thinks that “a really *ethical* decision must be painful and difficult” [38].) The other ethical requirement—the one Novick seems to take more seriously—is honesty.

There is something amusing in Novick’s unembarrassed endorsement of honesty after he has dumped truth and objectivity. The ordinary meaning of honesty, after all, is truthfulness. What is it to be honest but to tell the truth as best one can? What is left of honesty if truth is an illusion?

What, then, could Novick mean? He thinks historians would be honest if they admitted that they do not tell the truth and that what they do is make up stories. He deplores the dishonesty he believes is implicit in tra-

ditional historians' claims to truth and authority.

Now Novick is right to suspect those who insist on their own objectivity and proclaim themselves as truth tellers. We are wise enough to know, as perhaps our forebears did not, that complete objectivity and freedom from bias are impossible. People who are sure they know protest too much: they are likely to be arrogant, overconfident, or self-deceived. Those who acknowledge their fallibility are often more trustworthy. Certainly we want readers and audiences to approach texts skeptically, aware of the many obstacles standing in the way of knowledge.

But fallibilism—the recognition that we can be wrong, the humility to suspect we might be—does not mean there is nothing to be known or understood. Quite the contrary, it reflects a deep respect for the factuality of the world and the difficulty of penetrating it. It is honest to admit one might be wrong. But claiming there is nothing to be right about is dishonest, unless it is simply dumb. It is honest to acknowledge one's biases, but that is only the beginning. One acknowledges them, and then one tries to overcome them or compensate for them as best one can, knowing that complete success will never be achieved. But to acknowledge one's biases while complacently accepting them—"You're right, I don't like black people, but that's just the way I am"—is the mark of a person who refuses to think.

What would it mean to accept Novick's novel understanding of hon-

esty as the cardinal virtue for historians?: "I am a historian and I don't tell the truth." If we believe the historian's disclaimer, we can discount his version of events. After all, he *told* us historians can make up almost any story out of any facts, so we need not take him seriously unless his story happens to suit our purposes. If we do not believe him, his disclaimer has no effect, except perhaps to bolster our confidence in someone so honest as to tell us he is not.

There is another way to understand Novick's commitment to honesty, one that confirms our suspicion that even a sophisticated postmodern historian cannot deny the reality out there to which his interpretations must be as faithful as they can be. I believe that part of the reason Novick uses the old-fashioned term "honesty" is because he values old-fashioned honesty. The reason he values it is that no nonfiction writer worth his salt can manage without it. He can *say* he does not believe in truth and all that, but he cannot *mean* it. If he dismisses values like truth out one door, he will just have to admit others, like honesty, that serve the same function: to ensure the distinction between fact and fiction. Honesty—fidelity to truth—might be the best policy for a novelist. For a historian, nothing else will do.

Notes

1. Citations to "(The Death of) the Ethics of Historical Practice (and Why I Am Not Mourning)" are given by page number in parentheses. For extended discussion and defense of the concept of objectivity, see Lichtenberg 1996.

2. Novick makes his case against truth and objectivity coyly, not by direct argument but as a putative historical account of the development of their declining fortunes. Thus he speaks of the belief of "people" that the words "true" and "truthful" applied only to narrow "brute factual" statements, and he writes that "it seemed to follow" (to these people) that it made no sense to say that one account was truer than another. Only well into the article does he acknowledge what is, of course, obvious: that these beliefs are his ("is it necessary to add that on the whole I share them?" [36]).

3. Interestingly, in this view, a valuable work can be one that makes its audience feel good (the work that enhances a group's identity) or one that makes its audience feel bad (the one that challenges its preconceptions). Indeed, the same work is likely to enhance the image of one group while demoting another: by challenging conventional historical accounts, it may "afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted," to use a phrase journalists sometimes employ to describe their role. This is, of course, precisely what happens when new historical accounts tell stories from the point of view of previously marginalized groups.

4. Novick focuses on historical works, although much of what he says applies to biography, autobiography, journalism, and more broadly to the realm of what used unproblematically to be considered nonfiction. In general, I shall use the example of history, although the same points often apply to these other genres. Of course, there are also differences between them.

5. Novick, after all, has said that historians should "make no greater (*but also no lesser*) truth claims than poets or painters" (emphasis added). For all we know, he thinks novelists' claims are chock-full of truth value. Arguments that X (history) is like Y (fiction) are always ambiguous: is X more like we thought Y was, or is Y more like we thought X was? Clearly, Novick means to downgrade the truth-content of history, but just how far he intends to empty history of truth depends on how truth-full he believes fiction is.

6. There are two kinds of cases: first, where we have multiple incompatible interpretations of the same set of events; second, where we

have multiple yet compatible interpretations. The second kind of case poses no problem: we can imagine two historians, say, looking at the same set of events from different points of view and highlighting different aspects. Here we might think in terms of the meaning or significance of a set of events; it is plausible to think that meaning and significance are relational concepts that make reference to individuals or groups *to whom* events have meaning or significance. (See Martin 1998 and Lichtenberg 1996 for some suggestions along these lines.) Can there be multiple incompatible interpretations? Clearly, there can be in one sense; the question is only whether the equal plausibility of more than one interpretation is a function only of our lack of information. In that case, if we knew more, one of these interpretations would become less plausible. The alternative is to countenance some ultimate indeterminacy or ambiguity in the world. I do not deny that there is such indeterminacy or ambiguity in humanistic studies like history; I claim only that this view is a last resort to be admitted only when all avenues to truth have been exhausted.

7. Kant called such ideals "regulative principles." They "supply reason with a standard which is indispensable to it, providing it, as they do, with a concept of that which is entirely complete in its kind, and thereby enabling it to estimate and to measure the degree and the defects of the incomplete" (Kant [1781] 1965, 486 [A569 B597]).

8. Not possessing adequate evidence, I make no claim here one way or another about the merits of the debate between Goldhagen and his critics.

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