

Alternative accounts of lives: an argument for epistemological relativism.

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Alternative Accounts of Lives: An Argument for Epistemological Relativism

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Abstract

How are we to interpret the fact that so many different biographical accounts can and have been given of individual lives? This article examines the history of biographies of Jesus, Shakespeare, and Lincoln in order to identify the conditions and processes leading to such diversity, and to argue that this diversity is not necessarily a sign of inadequate scholarship, but may reflect different yet supplementary perspectives on the same central figure.

WILLIAM MCKINLEY RUNYAN **Alternative Accounts
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One of the problematic issues in the biographical enterprise is the diversity of accounts that are often given of individual lives. For example, Adolf Eichmann has been described as a man with a dangerous, perverted personality, obsessed with a desire to kill, and as "a cold-blooded scheming plotter, one of the gang of hardened Nazis set upon clambering over pyramids of corpses to the pinnacle of world conquest."¹ Alternatively, he has been described as a man whose "whole psychological outlook, his attitude toward his wife and children, mother and father, brothers, sisters, and friends, was 'not only normal but most desirable,'"² and as a man whose actions in World War II were merely those of a conscientious and unremarkable civil servant following assigned orders.³

A more detailed example of divergence in biographical accounts is provided by the life of Lenin. One view is that Lenin was "the son of a poor schoolmaster who proclaimed himself a revolutionary at a very early age and was thrown into jail and sentenced to the living death of hard labor in Siberia. Then he escaped from Russia and led the life of an impoverished exile in Europe until in 1917 he returned to Petrograd and led the workers in an armed uprising against the Tsar. Thereafter, living calmly and modestly, a detached scholar with no vices, he ruled over Russia as the acknowledged dictator until his death of a cerebral hemorrhage in 1924."⁴ An alternative account is that Lenin

was the son not of a poor schoolmaster, but of the superintendent of education over an entire province, a landowner and hereditary nobleman who was addressed as "Your Excellency." Arrested and sent to Siberia, Lenin lived there comfortably, quietly, in the seclusion necessary for his





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