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Narrativism, Cosmopolitanism, and Historical Epistemology

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For about twenty years, Anglophone philosophical reflection on historical inquiry has been dominated by strategies that William Dray was the first to call "narrativist."¹ Narrativism, most generally considered, asserts that narrative discourse is conceptually essential to the historian's work, and that long-standing epistemological problems about the possibility of historical knowledge can be solved by recognition of and reflection on this necessity.

The first aim of this essay is to review what has been accomplished by following this procedural recommendation. The lesson I draw from this review is that prominent narrativist writers have succeeded better in rearticulating the three most important orientations of nineteenth-century historical epistemology than in resolving the dispute between them. I call these orientations cosmopolitanism, scientism, and aestheticism. Cosmopolitanism is the fundamental paradigm within which modern historiography has worked since its inception. Scientism and aestheticism I treat as opposed ways of resolving tensions inherent in it. Narrativists such as W. B. Gallie and, more recently, Frederick A. Olafson have defended the basic insistences of cosmopolitanism. Arthur Danto and Morton White have produced narrativist defenses of historical scientism. Louis O. Mink and Hayden White, meanwhile, have found in the ineliminability of narrative discourse new defenses for historical aestheticism.

I go on to suggest that a narrativist approach can succeed in resolving the central problems of historical epistemology only if narrativists abandon an assumption they commonly share with their nineteenth-century predecessors. This assumption is that the historian's proper work is to confront received historical stories with new data as a *means* to producing better explanatory narratives. I argue that the essential tie between narrative and history is that historical stories

358 Narrativism, Cosmopolitanism, and Historical Epistemology

are necessary forms of cultural and individual self-recognition. Historical *knowledge*, where it differs from historical *consciousness* ('historicity'), consists of reflection on such self-identificatory stories, rather than the production of revised ones. The improvement of historical narratives is a means of pursuing this reflection rather than an end. Historical knowledge is, therefore, essentially critical rather than positive. On this basis I believe that the central insistences of historical cosmopolitanism can be defended against both scientific and aestheticist deviations.

I. Three Nineteenth-Century Traditions

Since its inception modern historical inquiry has worked within a cosmopolitan framework. Cosmopolitanism was originally the preferred ideology for justifying the Enlightenment project of "universal history," a research program proposing systematically to replace the motley and parochial dynastic and ecclesiastical chronicles that had passed for European history with a connected account of the emergence and beneficence of the European nation-state system.² What was to be eschewed was constituted as "the middle ages," which divided ancient secular rationalism from modern. Cosmopolitanism derived its first inspiration from rationalist neo-Stoicism, which, after Grotius, became the ideology of high-minded international lawyers and civil servants.

The clearest and noblest expression of this program may be found in Kant's "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View." Kant regards history as macroscopically tending, by "Nature's" guidance, toward an international order that finally stabilizes the tensions brought on by man's "unsocial sociability." He does not regard this pattern as a factual claim about the past, nor, strictly speaking, a predictive claim about the future. Rather, he regards it as the sole legitimate expression of an ethical imperative, maintaining that only by acting as if this scenario were true might we play some causal role in bringing about a world consistent with the dignity of man as a moral agent.

In the crucible of revolutionary change—the decisive and formative event of our era—the claim was made that Kant's normative vision of the historical world must be rendered a genuine science if it is to offer insight into the unprecedented events of contemporary history and guidance for the future. This demand was trenchantly made by Hegel and was methodologically articulated and worked out by his students in accord with a variety of opposed social and political programs. On the right we may mention Ranke, in the liberal center, Droysen, and on the left, Marx.³

All of these post-Hegelian cosmopolitans assumed that, given proper methodological techniques and interpretive principles, the micro-narratives established by individual historical inquirers would consistently and comprehensively aggregate into macro-narratives, revealing a definite and rational world-historical order. As the nineteenth century unfolded, however, this optimistic assumption came under increasing fire. Macro-narratives of world-historical order appeared merely to be projections of particular interests, in which some nation, class, or cultural totality would appear as hero in a historical tragedy or comedy or romance while other nations, classes, or cultures appeared as objects rather than as subjects of history. Macro-narratives, rather than becoming progressively commensurate with one another, were perceived as obviously and flatly incommensurate.

Two radically different responses to this perception gained currency. Romantic aestheticists admitted the inevitability of relativism at the macro-historical level, but argued that insight into historical process was not dependent upon any such ultimate commensurability. Historical insight is a function of the historian's peculiar use of the generic conventions of literary narrative to penetrate into the historical uniqueness of nations and cultures. Scientism, however, led by positivists, insisted on macroscopic commensurability if there was to be any historical knowledge at all. Positivists argued that this commensurability could be guaranteed only when historical explanations were shown to be valid inferences from true universal historical, sociological, or psychological generalizations.

Historical aestheticism can most readily be understood as a radicalization of Ranke's claim that historians should give themselves up utterly to the historical material on which they are working, taking little critical distance from the world of which it is the legacy. For they may be sure that God, who is even more cunning than Hegel's *Vernunft*,⁴ is bringing about an overall order in both the historical world and among the work of different historians that is not antecedently known to anyone. In giving themselves up completely, if carefully, to the particulars of their work, historians will become transparent vessels whose products automatically become palimpsests of God's coherent design.⁵

This doctrine of immersion became central to the tradition of Romantic historiography, as practiced by such writers as Carlyle, Michelet, and Parkman. Romantic historians replaced Ranke's "methodological" immersion with the view that the route to historical penetration of particulars was emotional commitment to and empathy with their subject matter. Emotional identification would reveal the sublime dramas of historical process to the genuine historian-genius.

360 Narrativism, Cosmopolitanism, and Historical Epistemology

Tutored or untutored, such a genius could, under the influence of emotional empathy, so bend the rules of the received generic forms of narrative structure from their neoclassical stereotypes, that he could become a vehicle for transmitting in narrative form deep and novel insights about historical particularity and individuality. The Romantic historian was thus brother to the Romantic artist. In this view, then, the admission that narrative structure is tied to generic patterns of emplotment—that the beginnings, middles, and ends of a followable story are held together by variants on such stereotyped plot patterns as the comic, the tragic, and the romantic—constituted no objection to the requirement that historians find what is unique in each historical situation. For the doctrine of Romantic genius provides assurance that prerational identification will appropriately subvert the conventions to find this uniqueness. In this matter, the epistemological defense of Romantic historiography follows closely strategies for subjectivizing knowledge common in the Romantic tradition, where knowledge is analyzed as intuitive insight, and where feeling and imagination, rather than reason, are its cognitive instruments. One effect of Romantic historical epistemology was thus to blur the line between the historical and fictional artist. This blurring produced the great tradition of the nineteenth-century historical novel and gave rise to the view that the novelist might conceivably write the history of a certain period with greater fidelity than a historian. Another effect was to let lapse the importance of the assumption that the successive historical periods are in any way parts of a coherent, single world-historical order, rather than of some sublime, chaotic tumble.

What happened in practice, though, is that Romantic history became more and more a vehicle for the competing nationalistic chauvinisms that eventually destroyed Europe. As the nationalist implications of Romantic aestheticism worked themselves out over the course of the century, the scientific alternative advanced by positivists gained greater currency. The positivists were most basically committed to the claim that successive breakthroughs in physics, chemistry, biology, and economics since the seventeenth century were entirely due to the development, by the community of inquirers in these fields, of strict methodological principles for formulating and testing their hypotheses. Any field of inquiry wishing to enter the high road of science, including history, must do likewise. Fundamental to the positivists' "scientific method" is the principle that all phenomena must be regarded as instantiating empirical laws that can be inductively discovered, deductively ordered, and brought to bear on various particulars, whether past, present, or to come. It is only when this last step has been achieved—when facts have been displayed as instances

of predictive laws—that we can speak of genuine explanations. To explain an occurrence it is sufficient to show that it instantiates coherent patterns of regularity that nature, and society because it is part of nature, can be presupposed to exhibit. For the *point* of explanation is to rebut the claim that some occurrence is unique, rather than law-governed, and so to blunt the possibility that events show the interruption of God's will and power, or some vague substitute for it, into a world governed by inviolable laws of nature. Thus the illuminations afforded by Romantic narrative historians about the supposed uniqueness of events must be regarded as psychological thaumaturgy rather than as explanation properly so called. The accounts proffered by Romantic narrative history are, for positivists, "pseudoexplanations," as indeed must be any explanation or interpretation that explicitly eschews the effort to ground itself in empirical law, and so makes a virtue out of mere subjective conviction.⁶ Positivists were especially appalled by the tendency in Romantic history to project onto the intentions of agents historical outcomes favored by a given historian as a transcendent *telos*. The "method" of empathy was seen as excusing and encouraging such retrospective projection. Historians who felt themselves under an obligation to ground their analyses of past human behavior in known empirical laws would presumably not fall into this trap.

Early positivists like Comte, and to a lesser extent even J. S. Mill, thought that historians might eventually discover laws proper to the historical process itself, a view they shared with Marxists. They could then produce macro-narratives explicating this process. But as the century wore on it became evident to positivists, though not to Marxists, that no respectably empirical laws of this type and on this scale could be found. Rather, particular events, or at best sequences of events, could be seen to instantiate psychological and/or sociological regularities apart from any larger law-governed process. With this development, positivists increasingly came to reject altogether narrative organization for historical analysis. By the turn of the century, a positivist historian like Teggert could urge historians to abandon narrative form to Romantic artists, since narrative form, with its arbitrary and nonempirical patterns of plot organization, was inherently inconsistent with any cognitive import.⁷ Chronological organization might be kept as a bookkeeping device for law-covered historical explanations, but had in itself no explanatory function.

II. From Neo-Kantianism to Language-Analytic Narrativism

By forcing a choice between cognitive respectability and narrative

362 Narrativism, Cosmopolitanism, and Historical Epistemology

meaning, the nineteenth-century conflict between aestheticism and scientism nearly destroyed the cosmopolitan historical paradigm. What rescued the paradigm was the rise of neo-Kantian philosophy. Academic humanists, including historians, philosophers, and philologists, were threatened both by Romantic intuitionism and by an increasingly materialistic and reductionistic scientism. The former subverts the rationalist credentials of academic inquiry; the latter delegitimizes any inquiry other than natural science. With the battle cry "Back to Kant!," the German professoriat, beginning in the 1880s, rather successfully waged a counter-attack by attempting to elicit the epistemological and conceptual *presuppositions* that underlie each of the various disciplines, including the humanities. Reflective awareness of these presuppositions, they alleged, legitimizes each of these disciplines—including history—and guides progress in them.

Neo-Kantians attempted to save from reductionism and irrationalism what was left of the decomposing Hegelian sphere of *Geist* by redistributing it into various "human sciences" or *Geisteswissenschaften*. Fundamental to this project was the desire to produce a "critique of historical reason" that would complement the critique of natural science that they had offered by responsoring Kant's phenomenalism against materialists. This critique would guarantee the autonomy of cultural inquiry. What was actually sought, however, was a way of defending the old cosmopolitan presupposition that "the historical world" is an internally consistent and potentially coherent "unity." Historians would thus be free to continue producing historical monographs whose truth would be, in part, tested by their integrability with other monographs, and to effect as much (and *only* as much) narrative integration of this material as was possible and justified by research *at any given moment*.⁸

To achieve this end, two philosophical points would need to be established. First, it must be shown that the intentions under which historical agents perform actions could be reconstructed faithfully, without imposing onto them the projects of later agents or of the historian himself. This must be achievable without subverting the ontological status of these actions themselves by reducing them, as positivists were increasingly inclined to do, to instances of non-intentional processes governed by laws. Second, it must be shown that it is possible to presuppose and to pursue ultimate historical commensurability as a *formal* idea of reason, without identifying the point and principle of unity with the particular projects, ideology, or myths of any one historical entity or process. The basic strategy was to treat Kant's notion of a "regulative idea of reason" as *cognitively*, rather than merely morally, normative—as a principle, adherence to which

generates new knowledge without ever completing itself in some actual historical time and place.

Neither of these points was easy to establish, given the unstable history of nineteenth-century historical epistemology; nor, over the period of a century, has any one defense of them proven definitive. What has happened is that the project of producing such a “critique of historical reason” has become a standing research programme in university culture. The prosecution of methodological quarrels about the boundaries of the various sciences has thus become a gesture *defining* the activities of and relations between various disciplines. In this light it should not be hard to see why attempts to defend or attack the possibility of an autonomous historical knowledge under cosmopolitan presuppositions tend to follow changing fashions in philosophical method. Thus the entire quarrel has been replayed, during the last quarter of a century, in the language-analytical argot of contemporary philosophy. It is in this context that overtly narrativist approaches to the problems of historical epistemology arose and in terms of which their upshot should be assessed.

Linguistic philosophy was first used by Logical Empiricists such as Hempel in defense of a positivist view of historical knowledge.⁹ The efforts of Dray and von Wright to defend the non-nomological nature of explanations of intentional action—to justify, that is, an autonomous status for “rational” explanations of intentional actions—were aimed at undercutting this analysis.¹⁰ They did so by using the methods of “ordinary language philosophy,” in both its Oxford and Wittgensteinian forms, to reanalyze the Aristotelian practical syllogism as having an explanatory, and not just practical-moral, import. This work was not without impact. Quentin Skinner, for example, tried to wrest intellectual history, and in particular the history of political thought, from its exceedingly Whiggish orientation by showing that beliefs and action could very well be understood and explained in terms that would be recognizable to their agents, and that historical explanations, where successful, largely consist in following sequences of such intentional activity.¹¹

A more difficult task, however, would be to defend the possibility of progressive accumulation of the results of historical inquiry so construed into *ever more* comprehensive and commensurable macro-narratives. The first linguistically oriented defense of this thesis was proposed by W. B. Gallie in his *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding* (1964). Gallie’s argument was also fully and explicitly narrativist—in fact the first of this sort. Gallie claims that the neo-Kantian program would have carried the day long ago had a narrativist approach been taken to the problem by such figures as Dilthey, Rickert, and Weber.¹²

364 Narrativism, Cosmopolitanism, and Historical Epistemology

His argument consists of eliciting what is presupposed by the historian's social role as the "official" medium by which it acquires a story about itself. This function, in Gallie's view, lies at the origin of history as a field of inquiry, and continues to underpin history even in modern societies. Gallie holds that this role *analytically* implies in the historian, as storyteller, the sort of curiosity that propels an unceasing search for gaps and inconsistencies in received accounts, and between the accounts told by one people and those "on the other side of the mountain." It also implies a drive to cure these defects by telling a wider, truer story to both his own and other communities. These presuppositions, on Gallie's view, do not flow from any contingent psychological or sociological facts about historians, but formally, from the very nature of their narrative medium. Narratives not only contain explanations, but are themselves forms of explanation. Narrative unity is achieved precisely by producing explanatory coherence and closure through a sequence of events. Thus, whoever sets out to tell a story must, by the very nature of the linguistic structures with which he or she is working, alleviate explanatory incoherence by filling in gaps and producing a followable, i.e., an *intelligible*, narrative.

The claim implied by this account that narrative historians are themselves preeminent agents of cultural and world unification is, I think, counterintuitive on its face. Stranger still is the notion that the historian's self-conscious taking up of a storyteller's role hastens cosmopolitan progress. I find it difficult to see how an historian in pursuit of narrative closure would be able to put up any resistance to the conventional generic plotting that papers over explanatory gaps by stereotyped tropes much more readily—and convincingly to an audience—than does any new research into facts and their relations. Research more frequently produces unsettling puzzlement and anomaly than a renewed sense of narrative intelligibility. Moreover, of such puzzlement, social communities are extremely intolerant.

These considerations explain why it was so easy for latter-day proponents of what I have called aestheticism to turn narrativist arguments to their own advantage. In his important book *Metahistory*, Hayden White demonstrated vividly that all the nineteenth-century cosmopolitans fell into, or jumped into, conventional forms of emplotment: comic, tragic, romantic, and ironic.¹³ The lessons of White's tale were made explicit by the late Louis Mink. Mink argued that cosmopolitanism depends on the totally unlikely assumption that there is "a single story which is simply there in actual 'historical process' waiting to be told by someone."¹⁴ For the fact that all historical work, if intelligible, follows conventional forms of narrative emplotment can be consistent with cosmopolitan assumptions just in case the unlikely

possibility obtains that the implied chronicle of world states unambiguously arranges itself into just one pattern of intelligibility—which just happens to correspond to one or another of our emplotment conventions. Mink argues that the utter implausibility of this harmony need not imply historical scepticism, even if it makes history and fiction move more closely together than most historians (and their audiences) want to believe. For historical narratives are, Mink holds, “instruments of cognition” in the pragmatic sense that they orient us in the flux of experience and help us to get around in the world. Historical knowledge is how-to knowledge, and artistic form in historical narratives is constrained more by the utility that a coherent image gives our behavior than by the constraints of facts.¹⁵ Pragmatism of this sort, it should be mentioned, is the historical successor of late nineteenth-century Romantic aestheticism. The transition can be found in Nietzsche, who argues in *The Uses and Abuses of History* that the historian’s art is to be judged by its utility in provoking heroic activity on the part of its audience, that is, by the interesting lies that it tells rather than by the boring truths of historical pedants.

So far, then, it would appear that the narrativist procedural recommendation will tilt one’s historical epistemology toward the aestheticist pole. For the very nature of narrative seems to imply that non-empirical, typological principles, in the form of emplotment patterns, stand at the root of narrative unity. Positivists such as Teggert had long suspected this. Thus it will come as some surprise that several latter-day positivists, sponsoring mitigated forms of Logical Empiricism, have themselves produced narrativist defenses of the core principles of the positivist historical epistemology.

Both Morton White and Arthur Danto¹⁶ set out to give answers to problems confronting mid-twentieth-century positivism by using narrativist strategies. In the last half of the nineteenth century, failure to discover any specifically historical laws—laws governing the developmental sequence of history—had given way to renewed hope that social scientists would turn up enough solid empirical regularities of a sociological and psychological sort to ground historical explanations of particular events and middle-sized event-sequences. By mid-twentieth century, however, two problems had developed to thwart this expectation. First, whenever empirical laws governing human affairs had been adduced, they were stated at such a high level of generality (“frustration leads to aggression”) as to render all the instances they were to cover descriptively identical. Thus application of social-scientific laws as premises to historical events seemed to produce not *historical* explanations, which have a certain specificity even if not total uniqueness about them, but their *replacement* by social-

366 Narrativism, Cosmopolitanism, and Historical Epistemology

scientific explanations. Second, the *ad hoc* explanations of particular historical episodes offered by working historians seemed often to have a greater *prima facie* explanatory content than the laws ostensibly offered to justify them. Laws parasitic upon proffered explanations, or tailored to fit proffered explanations, can hardly be said to justify those explanations.

White and Danto seek to respond to these problems. Developing Hempel's notion of "explanation sketches," White argues that the adequacy of an explanatory account of any event or sequence of events need not await the actual discovery of the well-founded generalizations on which such accounts ultimately rest. Rather, we may *presume*, on general epistemological grounds, that the progressive adequacy of explanatory accounts, measured in quite ordinary and intuitive ways, rests on laws that may remain forever incompletely articulated. Danto's approach is different. He thinks that sociological and psychological laws, formulated under relatively abstract descriptions, might still cover historical cases, without turning them into social-scientific explanations, if we allow them to cover them loosely rather than deductively. Thus we might never be able to predict a given historical event from a known law, or be able to elicit laws from the direct inspection of historical cases, since the relation between the two permits "creative opportunities" in the way laws are instantiated. Social science, for quite different purposes, gives up descriptive specificity for a tighter fit between event and law. In both White's and Danto's views, then, history more or less as practiced can go on without calling into question the general validity of positivist epistemology and explanation theory.

For both White and Danto, moreover, historical explanations, where they differ from social-scientific explanations, take the form of narratives. Narrative is in itself a 'form of explanation' in which a sequence of events is explained by the generation of a linked pattern of sequential episodes. Narrative structure is essential in giving an account of any such sequence.

About precisely *how* narrative structure provides such uniquely historical explanations, however, White and Danto again disagree. For White, each event in a narrative is the causal antecedent of its successor, so that the form of a narrative is that of a linked chain of causal statements that additively yields an account of the development of an entity from an initial to a final temporal point. For Danto, on the other hand, each event in a narrative is itself a mini-narrative in which earlier events are redescribed in terms that are true only after the occurrence of a later event. Danto says that such episodes are marked out by "narrative sentences," such as "Petrarch's birth opened the Renaissance." Explanatory accounts of the episodes marked

out by narrative sentences are made by breaking them down into component narrative sentences and embedding them into larger ones that explain them by contextualizing them. This explanation-by-embedding has the general pattern of a Chinese puzzle box, so that the pattern of relationships among the elements of a narrative is more that of part to whole than of cause to effect. While the explanations of “basic” events are ultimately anchored in causal regularities, however “loose-ly,” the explanation of *a unified sequence of events* is for Danto a function of *narrative* contextualization into parts and wholes.

Finally, Danto and White both argue that the ineliminable subjectivism of narrative selection and integration does not in itself threaten historical objectivity. White asserts that different investigators, with different interests, commitments, and points of view, may very well choose different causal routes through an indefinite number of chronologically sequential events without thereby compromising the truth or commensurability of their narratives. For choosing one rather than another chain does not logically entail that one has chosen a false chain.

It has been well-said against this view, however, that it would be a miracle if one’s interests and biases normally led one to pick out a set of events between which there actually did obtain an unbroken set of causal links.¹⁷ Moreover, even if this were true so much room is allowed by White for alternative chains that any one historian may have proved very little, since few, if any, alternatives would have been eliminated.

Meanwhile, Danto’s approach to the problem of selection is, if anything, even more latitudinarian than White’s. The mere fact that selection can go on in accord with a pattern of loose law-instantiation is, for Danto, sufficient to obviate any objection to permitting the historian maximum freedom. But we may wonder whether the looseness of Danto’s laws coexists with free choice of narrative structuring only in an uninformative way. The notion of lawfulness may have been so mitigated by Danto’s notion of loose instantiation as to render the consistency between narrative structure and covering laws an empty one—just as, in White’s case, the notion of a lawfulness unconstrained by requirements of stateability has the same effect.

More generally, it is likely that the concept of narrative has been too weakly formulated by both White and Danto to let the conflict between law-governed structures and narrative ordering appear as stark as it actually is. Surely, White’s notion of a causal chain fails to capture with sufficient precision the very notion of a narrative. Second, narratives are not about just any sort of temporal processes, not even the subclass of processes that require a retrospective account rather

368 Narrativism, Cosmopolitanism, and Historical Epistemology

than a prospective and predictive one, as Danto implies. Narratives are centered on how *intending agents* make their way into a future that shapes and modifies their aims and thus forces them, and/or the audience, to find a *meaning* that congeals behind them, a meaning that reconciles agents and their aims to what contingent circumstance has thrown up against them. To understand a narrative is to follow these patterns of intentional activity and response.¹⁸ The meaning-structures in terms of which this occurs are, at root, the generic plot structures that provide common ground for character, narrator, and audience. One may minimally grasp the logical sequence of a story without knowing the generic conventions which, by being modified, are also being invoked. But one cannot be said on that account to *understand* the story in the sense relevant to narrative explanation. That is why it takes so long, to understand the narrative art of cultures other than one's own to the extent that they rely on different conventions. Thus White's and Danto's juggling between law-governance and narrative patterning is likely to be swamped by the robust requirements of narrative structure. What White and Danto concede to the residual subjectivity of the historian is likely, in fact, to turn out to be fundamental to narrative structure itself. One can find White's causal chains and Danto's nested molecules of narrative only in a story already structured in terms of the generic forms of emplotment through which we understand ourselves and others. These are, to put the matter in Kantian terms, conditions of the possibility of narrative sense. They are antecedent to any causal regularities that may attend a story. Thus we may conclude that the neopositivist deployment of narrativist ideas fails even more badly than cosmopolitanism does against the neoaestheticist argument of Mink.

III. Narratives and Social Reality

In the preceding section we have seen that narrativism has been used to defend cosmopolitanism as well as its aestheticist and scientific deviations. Moreover, it would seem that we may award the palm to aestheticists like Mink for most successfully wielding the conceptual resources narrativism offers. For both cosmopolitanism and scientism, having admitted narrative structure as essential to history, will find it hard to defend themselves against the plausible claim that narrative structure is a function of generic emplotment. The room for subjectivism thus opened seems to conflict with any but the most pragmatized conceptions of historical knowledge.

The inability of positivists to exploit more successfully the resources of narrativism derives in part from their assumption that the historian, if his discourse is to have any decidable truth value, must confront

isolated bits of data and then try to find the proper rules for integrating them. Where epistemically significant, these rules are, for the positivist, empirical laws. From this perspective the toleration of pre-existing narrative conventions can serve only to threaten an epistemically successful account. For such conventions will induce closure into the historian's material prior to, and quite independently of, any more substantial nomological connections, on the basis of prejudice and convention. Danto and White can remain optimistic about combining narrative history with positivist epistemology, then, only because both authors seriously underestimate the constitutive role of emplotment conventions in narrative discourse. This underestimation is a function of their defectively weak conceptions of narrative itself.

Mink has driven this argument home. Yet Mink himself is not entirely immune to the same picture of the historian's relationship to his material that we find in positivist empiricism. In Mink's picture too, the historian confronts a manifold of data and introduces significance into it by the proper use of general connections. The connective patterns are, however, those of the artist rather than the scientist. They are generic forms of emplotment rather than laws. Thus Mink writes that "Narrative form in history, as in fiction, is an artifice, the product of individual imagination."¹⁹ For, he says elsewhere, "Stories are not lived but told. Life has no beginnings, middles or ends."²⁰ The result is that histories become expressions of private visions imposed on an indeterminate, and always underdetermined, mass of data.

These consequences might, however, be avoidable if it turns out to be false that historians confront a heterogeneous manifold of data on which they impose narrative meaning. It is possible, in fact, to think that social reality may already be inherently constituted of stories. These structures are not imposed on an atomized collection of data. This is because, in the first instance, language is, for social reality at least, "the house of being," as Heideggerians put it. We can also say, in Wittgensteinian terms, that "language games" are the constituent elements of "forms of life." Alasdair MacIntyre has, for instance, argued that:

Conversation is so all-pervasive a feature of the human world that it tends to escape philosophical attention. Yet remove conversation from human life and what would be left? . . . If I listen to a conversation between two other people, my ability to grasp the thread of the conversation will involve an ability to bring it under some one out of a set of descriptions in which the degree and kind of coherence in the conversation is brought out: "a drunken rambling quarrel," "a serious intellectual disagreement," "a tragic misunderstanding of each other,"

370 Narrativism, Cosmopolitanism, and Historical Epistemology

“a comic, even farcical misconstrual of each other’s motives,” “a penetrating interchange of views,” “a struggle to dominate each other,” “a trivial change of gossip.”²¹

Note how tightly bound such characterizations of little stretches of social reality are to what I have called generic forms of emplotment. MacIntyre himself goes on, in fact, to remark:

The use of words such as ‘tragic,’ ‘comic,’ and ‘farcical’ is not marginal to such evaluations. We allocate conversations to genres, just as we do literary narratives. . . . For conversations have beginnings, middles and ends, just as do literary works. They embody reversals and recognitions; they move toward and away from climaxes. . . .

MacIntyre draws from these reflections the very conclusion I am hinting at:

. . . I am presenting both conversations in particular, then, and *human actions in general* as enacted narratives. Narrative is not the work of poets, dramatists and novelists reflecting upon events which had no narrative order before one was imposed by the singer or the writer; narrative form is neither disguise nor decoration.²²

This view contrasts vividly with that of Mink, who is an explicit target of MacIntyre’s argument. What it asserts is that narrative is constitutive of social reality itself—the object of the historian’s study—and not imposed on it *in principle*.

Frederick Olafson²³ has used arguments like these to revise Gallie’s narrativist defense of cosmopolitanism. Olafson has noticed that Gallie too retains vestiges of the impositionist and individualist conception of narrative form that MacIntyre has criticized in Mink. Gallie’s historian-hero notices anomalies in received stories and tries on his own recognizance to create an interpretive framework that absorbs these anomalies into renewed narrative intelligibility. He then retails his revisions to his audience. Olafson argues, however, that it is not the historian as such who bears the weight of pushing an interpretive community forward to accommodate new circumstances and knowledge. Rather, he is at most the agent of the community as a whole, which, by its very status as a speaking and interpreting community, is continually involved in transforming its account of itself to itself after the pattern that Hans-Georg Gadamer calls *Wirkungsgeschichte*.

Wirkungsgeschichte, very roughly put, is the idea that a history is a modification and redescription of the past in the light of subsequent events, where the modification and redescription are themselves products of the very past that is being redescribed.²⁴ Gadamer takes this activity of self-understanding and self-interpretation to be an essential aspect of what it is to be human in a human world. It is his gloss on Heidegger’s idea of the ‘historicity’ of man, who lives his life within

a framework of temporal 'exstases' in which orientation to the future implies a constantly changing reordering of the past. Olafson argues that all individuals who inherit, transmit, and come-to-be-themselves within a given tradition are, by that very fact, continually transforming that tradition, and *can be counted on to do so because human self-identification, at its most basic, ontological level, is constituted in and through the narrative medium*. We are thus, as MacIntyre has put it, "story telling animals" in the same sense that Aristotle thought of us as speaking animals, or Marx as socially producing animals.²⁵

From this general conception Olafson draws several consequences. First, like MacIntyre he argues that plot structures are not imposed by the arbitrary *fiat* of private individuals on fragmentary and arbitrarily selected, or noticed, bits of data. Mink's claim that "narrative form in history, as in fiction, is an artifice, the product of individual imagination" is just not true. Instead, the stylized canonical formulations of epic and drama are distillates of enormously complicated processes of conceptual patterning already present at every level of social reality itself. It is just for this reason that their self-conscious deployment in public art can be a mirror of the lived experience that historians try to capture at less stylized levels of articulation.

Second, our practical reasoning and intentional action (themselves inseparable from one another) go on only within this deep narrative context, so that distinctions between story-patterning and an independent stratum of "rational explanation" of activity are misconceived. Dray should not have argued that narrativist strategies are only contingently related to the defense of his rational explanations of action. The premises of our practical reasoning recede into, and are fused together by, indefinite horizons of socially mediated meaning, itself constituted by narrative form. This is, I believe, the most persuasive argument yet offered for the claim that narrative patterning is a condition of the possibility of practical reasoning and rational explanation rather than a result of adding together pieces of such reasoning. On this account narrative structuring makes possible the explanatory work called "rational explanation" by Dray and others.

We have here, then, a sophisticated philosophical argument that undermines the modernist subjectivity of pragmatic aestheticism no less than it does White's and Danto's mitigated scientism. It thus leads Olafson toward renewed defense of cosmopolitanism. In the end, however, this theory appears to signal only a weightier relativism. For what is to prevent each cultural unity from acquiring from its point of view a coherent and changing account of the whole of historical reality, but one still grossly incommensurable with that of other cultural totalities? To answer this question, Olafson tells us that the urge for

372 Narrativism, Cosmopolitanism, and Historical Epistemology

mutual recognition and narrative self-identification that operates *within* cultural communities can also be presumed to operate *across* them. Olafson goes on to give us a slightly Hegelianized conception, centered on a “dialectic of recognition,” of the postulates that define cosmopolitanism generally.²⁶

In my view Olafson, by moving toward a more adequate ontology of human individuation and social reality, and of the role of narrative discourse in it, has produced a narrativist defense of classical cosmopolitanism that can stand up better than Gallie’s to both aesthetical and scientific objections.²⁷ Despite this success, however, we may continue to feel some scruples about Olafson’s conception of historical integration. Although cultural traditions might not be as regressive as Marx thought when he proclaimed that “The weight of all the dead generations lies like a nightmare on the brain of the living,” still they only sluggishly accommodate themselves to new conditions and appear never to rise to a level of reflection that reveals the real circumstances within which shared life is situated. To achieve the sort of illumination we expect from the best historians, do we not need to look behind our traditions rather than through them? In the final section of this paper I will try to outline an account of the relation between narrativism and cosmopolitanism that addresses these scruples by drawing a different conclusion from the constitutive role of narrative discourse for social and individual self-understanding than Olafson has.

IV. A New View of Narrativism—And of Cosmopolitanism

Narrativists of all stripes have been right, I believe, in insisting that there is a deep conceptual tie between the historian’s work and narrative discourse. It does not immediately follow from this, however, as most narrativists have assumed it does, that the *point* of the historian’s work is the production of new and better narrative histories. If Olafson and MacIntyre are right in saying that narrative consciousness is constitutive of social reality, then cultures can always be counted on to generate constantly changing narrative accounts themselves of their past and their prospects. Without doubt, historians are agents of this historical consciousness. But so too, it seems obvious, are many others who occupy different social roles—critics, artists, journalists, and politicians are obvious candidates. So are ordinary people. Why should the historian have primacy? It seems, in fact, that Gallie commits the genetic fallacy when he tells us that history emerged out of tribal storytelling and remains today still defined in terms of that function. Even if we grant that history did emerge from

the role of bard—a somewhat dubious proposition—the nature of modern history as a cognitively respectable discipline need not necessarily play that role. Plenty of other people are around to do so. Yet, Olafson does not question Gallie's assumption, and that of other narrativists, that the historian's *purpose* is to tell revised stories, even when he revises Gallie's account of the generation of stories in such a way that the historian appears far from the exclusive source of such stories.

There are, moreover, other cognitively important things for the historian to do. If historical consciousness, indeed social reality itself, is constituted by narrative understanding, and if, as history itself shows, the stories that communities tell themselves are constantly in danger of falling into provincialism, ethnocentrism, and false objectification, then the very activity that gives a community a coherent conception of itself can lead it to a false estimate of its own importance. This will remain true even where a community is trying to improve and broaden its narrative self-understanding. For this reason it would seem that a critically self-aware society will grant legitimacy in its social dialogue to a practice the *point* of which is to break down the false totalization that is inherent in the historical consciousness of all communities. The purpose of such an enterprise would not be to produce new, better, more comprehensive stories, but to counter the false totalization implicit in whatever stories are currently being told, that is to blunt a tendency inherent in narrative discourse itself. A Thucydides would not, then, be an epistemologically and methodologically cleaned-up Homer, as Gallie seems to think, but a thinker whose purpose is to get under the skin of the latter-day Homers who have led Athens into such dire straits. On this view, history is essentially a critical discipline and the knowledge it generates is critical knowledge. Investigation of new data, and the criticism of existing accounts, is not, then, *essentially* a means to the production of a new story. What is proper to the historian, *among other cognitively oriented disciplines*, is an ongoing assessment of the narrative history of the community to which the historian belongs, and of other communities whose story is related to its own story. The aim of the historian's work is to block or blunt the potentially destructive effects that accompany all such stories as a result of inappropriate narrative closure.

From this conception three important points follow. First, the narrativist strategy is useful in articulating this conception of historical knowledge because it asks us to look for an ineliminable connection between history and narrative. We now find this tie between narrative and history to be made in the *object* of historical inquiry, rather than in the inquiry itself. It is because the *object* that the historian reflects

374 Narrativism, Cosmopolitanism, and Historical Epistemology

on is *narratively constituted social reality*, and not because the historian is himself a teller of tales, that we may assert, with narrativists, that the problems of historical epistemology can be solved only by attending to narrative structure and its ineliminable role in historical work.

Second, we should note that narrativism so construed does not imply that the historian's work should be dominantly expressed in the narrative mode. Many historians have misunderstood narrativist philosophical work as seconding the call that has been raised in the profession itself for a renewed commitment to narrative history.²⁸ This has never, in fact, been the main purport of narrativist philosophy of history, though it is easy to see why readers of Gallie, for example, might have thought so. Though narrativist reflections on historical epistemology can be used to give support to such calls, narrativism as such might just as easily produce an argument that strengthens the hand of analytical historians. On my own account, in fact, the critical mode will be central to professional history, that is, to the kind of history that wishes to present itself as a cognitively important discipline. Yet even my own view does not imply that the writing of narratives should be left to others, or to members of the profession who serve as agents of the community's self-understanding. It implies only that whatever narratives are produced by critical historians function as means to the critique of current self-understanding. Narratives as macroscopic as Braudel's, for example, should not be construed as intermediate summaries of accumulated knowledge (as Acton conceived of the Cambridge histories), but as critiques of traditional self-understanding. By reconstructing the *longue durée* of the peoples who have lived around the rim of the Mediterranean, and looking only at the end of his very long book at the little narratable dramas that the political men of early modernity took so seriously, Braudel achieves a remarkably deflationary effect on the pretenses of European self-importance.²⁹ This serves to show up, in a contemporary Rousseauian vein, the narcissism and emptiness of the great theses of institutionalized European history: the rise of nation states, of capitalism, of socialism, of science, of bureaucracy. All such themes are shown to have about them a blindly willful and vulgar quality, and to be fraught with danger. In general, narratives that revise received narrative understandings do their work by showing up inadequacies more than by serving as stepping stones toward some more comprehensive product. And if professional historians devote much time and ink to assessing contradictions between two critics of the same subject, it is not to enter what is sound in both into a revised story—though this does happen—but to carry on the critical work itself.

Finally, in this conception we have the makings of a modest

defense of the cosmopolitan paradigm that has been so central to modern historiography. Narrative consciousness, with its inherent tendency to create closure in its material by way of generic emplotment patterns, automatically creates in any society a tendency to declare itself at the 'end of history' or on the way to it. Narrative consciousness brings with it, therefore, a peculiar kind of epistemological liability that must be compensated for in any society that prizes knowledge as a good. Historians, in carrying out this critical function, seem to me to serve the essential aims of cosmopolitanism by the mere fact of their critical activity—and not because they adhere to, or implicitly serve, any ideal of world-historical unification, no matter how formal. The "unity of the historical world," taken as a formal Kantian idea of reason, is too empty to serve as an informative underpinning for a positive research program. If, on the other hand, the idea of historical unity receives too concrete an articulation—in which the historian or the community of historians advocates world-historical unification *on some definite plan and under the aegis of some definite power or agent*—it loses its cognitive worth, becoming merely an ideological accessory to the acquisition and exercise of power. Positive cosmopolitanism must oscillate uncertainly between these poles. Cosmopolitanism, then, *considered as positive ideal*, whether formally or materially, generates antinomies that undermine its internal coherence. These antinomies are evidenced by the constant deviation of the program into aesthetic or scientistic extremes. Considered, however, as a critical ideal, these difficulties largely disappear. The resulting conception of cosmopolitanism as a negative ideal aimed at blocking false totalization is more secure against both aestheticism and scientism than are its more positive counterparts. Thus, to the oft-repeated question whether history is science or art, our answer can be that it is neither of these things. It is not art because its point is not the creation of a narrative. It is not science because it cannot work outside of a narrative context. In sum: History is criticism, and historical knowledge of the highest kind is critical knowledge.

My argument might be threatened by the following objection: Historians' reflections and criticisms are, on my account, attempts to take a proper distance from the narratives that constitute social self-understanding. But in doing so, do not historians themselves presuppose narrative understandings of their own that are equally open to criticism? Indeed, since historians too are human and members of a society, how, on my account of the constitutive role of narrative in social and individual self-definition, *could* they fail to presuppose a narrative?

I see no problem in admitting this complexity, however. Historical

376 Narrativism, Cosmopolitanism, and Historical Epistemology

criticism is an ongoing activity rather than one aimed at a final product. This activity opens up an illuminating reflective space between the narrative to be criticized and the narrative presuppositions and self-understandings of the critic. Every historian himself, then, has both a critical and a "positive" side. Among groups of historians, moreover, there can be an ongoing tension between those who serve as positive agents of a community's self-conception by their role in revising narratives after the fashion recommended by Gallie, and those whose bent is toward deconstructing this self-understanding. The ever-present but ever-vanishing critical and reflective space thus opened up within historians and among them is, I believe, the place where the historical knowledge most worth pursuing is to be found.

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NOTES

1. William Dray, "On the Nature and Role of Narrative in Historiography," *History and Theory* 10 (1971):153-71.
2. A recent treatment of the cosmopolitan tradition, in its eighteenth-century context, can be found in Thomas J. Schereth, *The Cosmopolitan Ideal in Enlightenment Thought* (Notre Dame, 1977).
3. Michael J. MacLean has argued that it would have been better for academic historiography if Droysen's, rather than Ranke's methodological recommendations had been made canonical. Cf. his "Johann Gustav Droysen and the Development of Historical Hermeneutics," *History and Theory* 21 (1982):347-65.
4. Hegel held that the seeds of Reason were so deeply implanted within developing social reality that historical agents need not, *indeed should not*, consciously adhere to any rationalist or enlightened ideology to ensure that these seeds would come to fruition. Reason's cunning (*List der Vernunft*) means just this. Ranke's immersion doctrine is a radicalization of this claim. On this view of Hegel see J. Ritter, *Hegel und die Französische Revolution* (Frankfurt, 1965); and M. Riedel, *Bürgerliche Gesellschaft und Staat bei Hegel* (Neuwied und Berlin, 1970).
5. Many of the relevant texts from Ranke are available in Roger Wines, ed., *Leopold von Ranke: The Secret of World History: Selected Writings on the Art and Science of History* (New York, 1981).
6. This charge is inherited by, and made most explicit in, C. G. Hempel's famous article, "The Function of General Laws in History" (1942). This article is conventionally regarded as the opening shot in the modern analytic debate about the nature of historical explanation.
7. F. Teggert, *Theory and Processes of History* (Berkeley, 1941).

8. The story of neo-Kantian theory of historiography has been told often. A good recent account is to be found in Herbert Schnadelbach, *Philosophy in Germany, 1831-1933* (Cambridge, 1984).
9. Hempel, 1942.
10. William Dray, *Laws and Explanations in History* (Oxford, 1957); G. H. von Wright, *Explanation and Understanding* (Ithaca, 1971). See also Rex Martin, *Historical Explanation* (Ithaca, 1979).
11. Quentin Skinner, *Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge, 1978); for Skinner's method, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory* 8 (1969):3-53.
12. W. B. Gallie, *Philosophy and Historical Understanding*, 2nd edition (New York, 1964, 1968), chap. 1.
13. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th-Century Europe* (Baltimore, 1973).
14. Louis O. Mink, "Narrative Form as an Instrument of Cognition," in *The Writing of History*, ed. Robert H. Canary and Henry Kozicki (Madison, 1979), 137. See also Mink's "History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension," *New Literary History* (1970), 541-58.
15. There is also a more Wittgensteinian version of this sort of narrativism, less pragmatic in its tone, offered by A. R. Louch in "History as Narrative," *History and Theory* 8 (1969):54-70.
16. Morton White, *Foundations of Historical Knowledge* (New York, 1965); Arthur Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History* (Cambridge, 1965).
17. This charge has been brought by Dray in "On the Nature and Role of Narrative in Historiography," *History and Theory* 10 (1971); and by Frederick A. Olafson in "Narrative History and the Concept of Action," *History and Theory* 9 (1970):265-89.
18. This characterization of narrative is loosely adapted from Gallie, 1964, 1968.
19. Mink, 1979, 145.
20. Mink, 1970, 557-58.
21. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, 1981), 196.
22. MacIntyre, 1981, 197.
23. Frederick A. Olafson, *The Dialectic of Action: A Philosophical Interpretation of History and the Humanities* (Chicago, 1979).
24. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 3rd edition (Tübingen, 1972).
25. MacIntyre, 1981, 199.
26. Olafson's argument on this crucial topic uses his enriched notion of narrative to mediate between Gadamer's neo-Rankeanism and Habermas's Enlightenment rationalism. Gadamer argues that if both historians and their public live fully immersed in their own tradition, the problem of historical incommensurability will take care of itself. Habermas objects to the obscurantism and fideism he finds in this belief. He defends the Enlightenment insistence that only conscious devotion to rational cosmopolitan ideals

378 Narrativism, Cosmopolitanism, and Historical Epistemology

can cause historians or communities to attain these ideals. He defends the traditional neo-Kantian analysis of the possibility of this rational commensurability. The demand for the integration of the "one historical world" is, on his view, a Kantian idea of reason.

The literature on the so-called Habermas-Gadamer debate is extensive. A guide to the quarrel may be found in David C. Hoy, *The Critical Circle* (Berkeley, 1978). I have commented on the polemics in "The Habermas-Gadamer Debate in Hegelian Perspective," *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 8, no. 4, 1982.

27. Olafson acknowledges, it must be said, that in every historical account there is a residual subjective element that can be ascribed to the "point of view" of this or that historian, or to the limits of his or her immediate circumstances. Olafson marks this off as "interpretation," as distinct from "understanding." This element is, however, said to be a fairly harmless variant on a solid core of intersubjectively constituted communal agreement over appropriate time scales. It thus provokes few of the puzzles, on Olafson's view, that attend the role of subjectivity that can be found in the work of Danto, White, and Mink. It is truly residual.

28. For reflection on this call for a return to narrative history, see Lawrence Stone, "The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History," *Past and Present* 85 (1979):3-24.

29. Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, 2 vols, trans. S. Reynolds (New York, 1975). All three volumes of Braudel's history of capitalism have now appeared in English: *The Structures of Everyday Life* (New York, 1981); *The Wheels of Commerce* (New York, 1982); *The Perspective of the World* (New York, 1984). My interpretation of Braudel seems to contrast with that of Ilse N. Bulhof, "The Cosmopolitan Orientation to History and Fernand Braudel," *Clio* 11 (Fall, 1981):49-63.

30. An earlier, quite different version of this paper was read to the Department of History, California State University, Fullerton, at the invitation of Drs. Arthur Hanson and James Woodward. Marjorie Grene, Merrill Ring, David Barlow and Robert Hollinger gave me helpful readings of the first draft. My thanks to Gordon and Diane Brown for typing and editing the manuscript.