



# Philosophy of History and History of Philosophy of Science

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## **Philosophy of History and History of Philosophy of Science**

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Abstract: Philosophy of history and history of philosophy of science make for an interesting case of “mutual containment”: the former is an object of inquiry for the latter and the latter is subject to the demands of the former. This paper discusses a seminal turn in past philosophy of history with an eye to the practice of historians of philosophy of science. The narrative turn by Danto and Mink represents both a liberation for historians and a new challenge to the objectivity of their findings. I will claim that good sense can be made of “working historical veins of possibility” (contrary to how the phrase was originally intended) and that already Danto and Mink provided materials (though they did not quite advertize them as such) to assuage fears of a constructivist free-for-all.

### **Introduction**

Philosophy of history, as a leading practitioner remarks, is a neglected discipline nowadays even when it is understood, as it will be here, as a strictly second-order inquiry innocent of Hegelian speculations.<sup>1</sup> It may be added that it has been neglected also in the history of philosophy of science.<sup>2</sup> We could speculate why even the latter should be the case.<sup>3</sup> Might it be that the notorious debate about the applicability of C.G. Hempel’s deductive-nomological model of scientific explanation to history is just too boring for neutrals to rake over and too embarrassing for scholars of logical empiricism to re-examine?<sup>4</sup> In any case, this would only be

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<sup>1</sup> See Roth (2013), (2016). It was not always so. As Gary Hatfield notes, philosophy of history was “a topic much discussed in American philosophy during the 1950s and 1960s” (2005, 87 fn). This also holds for Britain.

<sup>2</sup> This was noted in passing in Uebel (2010). To be sure, notwithstanding the neglect of philosophy of history as a disciplinary object, some relevant issues—like contextualism/antiquarianism v. presentism/appropriationism—have been discussed by historians of philosophy of science and analytical philosophy generally in recent years: see, e.g., Garber (2005), Hatfield (2005), Beaney (2013), Carus (2013), Kremer (2013), Reck (2013), Schliesser (2013).

<sup>3</sup> It would be a feeble response to justify this state of affairs by the supposedly problematic state of history as a science; for the argument, *au contraire*, that history forms an essential part of all science, see Creath (2010).

<sup>4</sup> See Hempel (1942) as *locus classicus* and Hempel (1962) and (1963) for supplementation of the position put forth and subsequently attacked. Remarkably enough, given the disciplinary context within which the the DN-model was introduced into the Anglophone discussion, Salmon’s otherwise very thorough

an example of one side of the “mutual containment” of philosophy of history and the history of philosophy of science. Philosophy of history may also put questions to historians of the philosophy of science, in turn, and historians have to answer to the demands that philosophy of history puts on their methodology. And again, the seminal works of philosophy of history that bear on these questions fall squarely within the remit of historians of philosophy of science. So my aim here is to do some *history of philosophy of history* by revisiting these seminal works, but to do so in pursuit of systematic questions in *philosophy of history* that are of considerable methodological, practical significance for us as *historians of philosophy of science*.

The seminal works I will discuss are by Arthur Danto and Louis Mink. It is due largely to them that nowadays historians are freed from worrying about the deductive-nomological model (not that it *really* them before). Moreover, it is also due to their work that historians are freed from mistaken strictures imposed by the anti-positivist *Verstehen*-tradition. My first point here will be to explicate this liberation which, however, comes with a certain cost. My second point will be to show that the historical texts at hand at least inspire hope that the cost can be met.

To put the issue somewhat crassly: What do we do when we research the history of the philosophy of science? Do we tell it, or aim to tell it, “*wie es eigentlich gewesen*”? And if we don’t, are we *making things up*? These questions are raised by what has been called the “linguistic turn” in historiography associated with Hayden White and the “narrative turn” of philosophy of history associated with Danto and Mink. With the former, methodological reflection by historians turned to the linguistic, indeed literary form of their accounts and the degree to which a chosen type of representation constitutes its subject matter.<sup>5</sup> With the latter turn, which concerns me here, historical explanation becomes predominantly explanation by narrative.<sup>6</sup> Both turns leave us with the question of what, if anything, distinguishes historical narrative from fiction. To be so worried, we need not be worried whether narrative explanations can be causal explanations: let’s grant that for a start. Nor indeed, need we think that all history is narrative in form: many historical inquiries, especially in historical sociology and economics are not and focused on establishing specific facts.<sup>7</sup> We may even concede that many text-based exegetical inquiries seem only minimally narrative, but the problem arises as

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account (1989) of the debate about its value to the natural sciences expressly declined to deal with the debates about it in history; there is but Dray’s (2000) brief overview of the latter by a former participant.

<sup>5</sup> See Hayden White (1973) and his essay collection (1987); see Vann (1995) for an overview of the beginnings of the historians’ debate.

<sup>6</sup> See Danto (1965)—in expanded editions with a new title in 1985 and 2007—and the collection of papers in Mink (1987).

<sup>7</sup> See Little (2010) for extended discussion of the epistemology of non-narrative historical social science; see Iggers and Wang (2008) for a global survey of the varied forms and uses of historiography from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present.

soon as a developmental perspective on these texts is taken—as often are in the history of philosophy of science, our concern here.<sup>8</sup>

### *History and the Charge of Presentism*

Consider a type of criticism historians dread, the charge of anachronism or presentism. This charge considers it illegitimate for an historical account to advert to conceptualizations and standards of evaluations that were unavailable to the historical actors under consideration. But on what basis is this held to be a failure? Much anti-presentism seems commonsense to us nowadays, but it was not always so and that it is so now reflects important debates about how history should be done of which Herbert Butterfield's campaign against "Whig history" as "the ratification if not the glorification of the present" (1931, v) was one important example. But anti-presentism also received more recent impetus, most prominently perhaps from Quentin Skinner.

Skinner's contextualist methodology for intellectual history demands that all thinkers and ideas be understood on their own terms in their own place and time. What seems to be little known is that at least part of the rationale for this methodology reflects Skinner's own diagnosis of the unsatisfactory state of historiography which the debate about the applicability of the deductive-nomological model had laid bare. In an early paper Skinner agreed with Hempel's critics that the model's demand for "covering laws" (laws subsuming the events serving as *explanans* and *explanandum*)<sup>9</sup> were inappropriate, but he also found that the very same critics—anti-causalists like Dray and Donagan, truists like Scriven and others—were unable to provide any convincing account of what legitimated the stock inference in intellectual history, namely that one thinker had influenced another.<sup>10</sup> Skinner's advice:

"The appropriate strategy must then be not to begin by abstracting leading ideas or events, but rather by describing as fully as possible the complex and probably contradictory matrix within which the idea or event to be explained can be most meaningfully located. ... The primary aim should not be to explain, but only in the fullest detail to describe." (1966, 213-214)

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<sup>8</sup> Thus I am not concerned here with questions concerning the role of narrative in all writing of history nor indeed with the nature of historical explanation in general. I am also not concerned here to give anything approaching an account of the debate about Hempel's model of explanation in history, nor indeed of the episodes to which the seminal contributions Danto and Mink belong.

<sup>9</sup> The phrase "covering laws", later taken over by Hempel, originated with his critic Dray, but not, as often noted, in his (1957) but already his (1954).

<sup>10</sup> Falling under Skinner's censure (since mentioned by him) are Dray (1957) and Donagan (1964), Scriven (1959) and the accounts of Joynt and Rescher (1960) and Gallie (1966).

It follows from this that the reconstruction of historical events and works had to proceed in terms of and according to standards that the historical actors themselves were or could have been conversant with. As put in Skinner's most influential paper, "no agent can eventually be said to have meant or done something which he could never be brought to accept as a correct description of what he had meant or done." (1969, 28)

In consequence, intellectual history became as agent-centered and participant-dependent in its perspective and choice of descriptive categories as cultural anthropology—both representing salutary reactions against temporal and cultural parochialisms. In philosophy, moreover, this effectively undermined the traditional idea of a canon of great thinkers all of whom sought answers to the same perennial questions. Now if there is one lesson that history of philosophy of science has to teach it is one precisely in line with this, namely that the kind of questions and problems that past thinkers have asked and pursued must not be taken for granted but need to be carefully interrogated. Attention to context then must be of first importance to historians of any intellectual activity or discipline.

But must agents' categories and standards *never* be transcended? Perhaps unsurprisingly, Richard Rorty protested against the universal imposition of the contextualist restriction on history and claimed that what he distinguished as "historical reconstruction" and "rational reconstruction"

"can never be *that* independent, because you will not know much about what the dead meant prior to figuring out how much truth they knew. These two topics should be seen as moments in a continuing movement around the hermeneutic circle, a circle one has to have gone around a good many times before one can begin to undertake *either* sort of reconstruction." (1984, 53, orig. emphasis)

Thus Rorty claimed legitimacy for competing *Geistesgeschichten* with different "experimental alterations of the canon", unperturbed that their competition is "not likely ever to be resolved" (ibid., 73-74). Needless to say, not everybody was convinced by Rorty's Davidsonian argument, leaving one editor of the *Journal of the History of Philosophy* unnerved at the very thought of "philosophers working historical veins of possibility" (Watson 2002, 527; cf. his 1994). I suppose the worry was that unless we stick to agent's categories our reconstructions can become too freewheeling to count as history. But it is not just Rorty who chafed under the yoke of strict contextualism.

In a very recent paper Alan Chalmers set out "to illustrate various ways in which history of science can, and needs to be, informed by knowledge acquired after the time of the science investigated" (2016, 27). Chalmers' account concerns the relationship between the seventeenth century change from an Aristotelian worldview to a mechanical one and the emergence of

experimental sciences on the other. He challenges “the presumption, whether held by seventeenth century actors or modern commentators” (ibid.) that it was the change of world view that spawned the experimental sciences and argues, by contrast, that these beginnings of experimental science “did not owe much” (ibid., 34) to the mechanical philosophy. Importantly, Chalmers’ account depends on the distinction between experimental inquiry and mechanical philosophy, a distinction that was not clearly drawn by Boyle as such (though his argumentation respected it) and that thus depends on our current knowledge of laboratory science as independent of mechanical or any other metaphysical philosophy.

Going further, some of Howard Stein’s explorations of the history of science not only presupposed contemporary knowledge to ask questions of the past but also used contemporary concepts to analyze past thinking. In his investigations of Newton, for instance, he employed the terminology of present-day four-dimensional affine geometry to establish to what degree Newton did or did not appreciate that he only needed absolute time but not absolute space for his dynamics to be consistent (1967). In another instance, he employed the modern concept of structure as a relational system individuated entirely by its internal relations in order to make anticipatory sense of a dark pronouncement of Newton’s on the nature of spatial extension (2002). These are cases, as one commentator noted, of a historian considering “interpretations that permit the past scientist to have been trying to articulate ideas for which there was *as yet no* available vocabulary” (Carus 2010, 625, orig. emphasis). Again, the perspective taken aims for reconstruction of historical episodes “from the viewpoint of our own present-day science, since that is what we are trying to understand and see in a larger perspective” (ibid., 624).

Likewise Alexandre Koyré once ascribed to Galileo a concept of “inertial mass” which he had no means to express (1960), incurring accusations of anachronism against which he was since defended on the grounds that he “wanted to argue that this is the first step in the development of inertial mass in the history of science” (Prudovsky 1997, 26) And we can go back even further, to Ernst Mach’s analyses of the development of different branches of physics which “aim[ed] to give a critical epistemological elucidation of the foundations of the theory ... to lay out for inspection the facts that influenced the formation of the relevant concepts, and to show why and to what extent the former are to be understood in the light of the latter” (1896/1986, 1; cf. 1883/1960, xxii).

Needless to say, by no means all uses of contemporary categories in historical accounts are justifiable and each has to be assessed on its own merit.<sup>11</sup> And, of course, in history of

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<sup>11</sup> As Sahotra Sarkar pointed out to me, Stein’s own use of the concept of field in analyzing Newton’s theory has been criticized and is considered highly problematical; see Stein (1970), Buchdahl (1970), Hesse (1970).

philosophy of science we are just as liable to be charged with presentism. It is possible, of course, to try to reject such charges as unwarranted case by case as well, but it would be good to have also a principled argument for the legitimacy of transcending agents' categories and standards. Before considering how post-Hempel philosophy of history can help, however, let's note again that the very methodology which rules against all forms of presentism was itself, at least in part, a response to the discussion of the demand for covering-laws in history.

### Danto: *Chronicles and History*

I can begin where post-Hempel philosophy of history begins, with Arthur Danto's *Analytic Philosophy of History* (1965).<sup>12</sup> Hempel's opponents to date, Danto opened entirely new vistas—beyond the debate about the need for or the impossibility of nomic generalizations in history and without requiring historians to retreat from the goal of explanation like Skinner. Danto presented a thought experiment that was the first of two steps that reset the entire framework of discussion.

At issue, first of all was Ranke's notion of history as a straight-up, no-additives retelling of the past. Note, as Danto did, that when first proposed, Ranke's notion provided much needed relief from previous pretensions. "To history has been assigned the office of judging the past, of instructing the present for the benefit of future ages. To such high offices this work does not aspire: It wants only to show what actually happened (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*). " (1824/1956, 57) Now Ranke was neither a mere positivist—his ideal was still to capture "the event in its human intelligibility, its unity, and its diversity" (ibid.). He did not abjure universal history even though he also insisted that different epochs had to be considered in their own terms. Nor was he overly naïve, having made extensive training in source criticism obligatory for historians ever since. But even Ranke's relatively humble program overextended itself.

To locate the problem Danto spelled out what Ranke's conception presupposed: a certain picture of the past and a certain expectation of what it meant to represent this past.

"Let the Past be considered a great sort of container, a bin in which are located, in the order of their occurrence, all the events which have ever happened. It is a container which grows moment by moment longer in the forward direction, and moment by moment fuller as layer upon layer of events enter its fluid, accommodating maw. ... E gets buried deeper and deeper in the Past as layer after layer of other events pile up. But

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<sup>12</sup> To be sure, the central chapter I focus on (1965, Ch. 8) was first published as Danto (1962), but since Danto repeatedly complained about the initial neglect of the latter I chose the year publication of the book which brought its ideas to wider attention. (The pagination of his (1965) remains constant throughout its later reprinting in expanded editions in 1985 and 2007.)

this constantly increasing recession away from the Present is the *only* change E is ever to suffer: apart from this it is utterly impervious to modification." (1965, 146, orig. emphasis)

I want to call this the "container conception" of the past. Now imagine a description of it:

"By a *full description* of an event E I shall mean a set of sentences which, taken together, state absolutely everything that has happened in E. Since the sequence of happening is important, we should want this order reflected in the full description by some device or other. Indeed, a full description will be an order-preserving account of everything that happened. ... We can imagine a description which really is a full description, which tells everything and is perfectly isomorphic with an event. Such a description will be definitive: it shows the event *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*." (Ibid., 148)

Next Danto introduced the "Ideal Chronicler".

"He knows whatever happens the moment it happens, even in other minds. He is also to have the gift of instantaneous transcription: everything that happens across the whole forward rim of the Past is set down by him, as it happens, the *way* it happens. The resultant running account I shall term the Ideal Chronicle (hereafter referred to as I.C.)." (Ibid., 149)

The description of E that the Ideal Chronicler gives includes all descriptions true of E and all views held of E—but only as long as these either are true of E or held about E *at the time of E itself*. Still, with that restriction in place "the I.C. is so constructed as not to be mistaken at any point. There are to be no erasures. What it describes is fixed, and it says nothing which is not true." (Ibid., 152) I want to call this the "witness conception" of history.

Now ask whether the witness conception is an adequate conception of what knowledge of the past, what history involves. Suppose a historian were to

"use the I.C. as he would any eye-witness account of any event in which he was interested. It will not tell him everything he wants to know about the event. ... For there is a class of descriptions of any event under which the event cannot be witnessed, and these descriptions are necessarily and systematically excluded from the I.C. The whole truth concerning an event can only be known after, and sometimes only long after the event itself has taken place, and this part of the story historians alone can tell. It is something even the best sort of witness cannot know." (Ibid., 151)

This denouement of Rankean history is conclusive and is owed to the so-called "narrative sentences": they refer to at least two events separated in time and describe the earlier event in terms of the later one. Thus Danto noted that "without going beyond what can be said of what happens, as it happens, the way it happens," an ideal witness "could not even write, in 1618,



‘The Thirty Years war begins now’” (ibid., 152) That it cannot allow narrative sentences means that the witness conception of knowledge of the past is severely limited.

It is worthwhile to ask why. Narrative sentences exhibit two asymmetries, a temporal and a conceptual one, both with weighty epistemic consequences. The first asymmetry is temporal: narrative sentences state *true descriptions of E that could not be known at the time of E*. The operative description (“the Thirty Years War”) makes essential reference to happenings later than E: nobody in 1618 could have known that the war just starting would last 30 years.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, new truths about past happenings keep accumulating. History it is not fixed just because what happened in the past cannot be undone. In consequence of this already, it is impossible to give, as Danto put it, “a complete description of an event which does not use narratives. Completely to describe an event is to locate it in all the right stories, and this we cannot do. We cannot because we are temporally provincial with regard to the future.” (Ibid., 142).

The second asymmetry is conceptual. Note that by describing an earlier event  $E_1$  in terms of its relation to a later event  $E_2$  we allow narrative sentences to use *descriptions for  $E_1$  that were altogether unavailable at the time of  $E_1$* . Quite generally then, descriptions of an event used in narrative sentences can be owed to developments and events that happened afterwards so that the very concepts used in them were unknown to the historical actors at the time. Importantly, Danto noted about this asymmetry (without designating it as such):<sup>14</sup>

“This is an important limitation to the use of *Verstehen*. It was not an *intention* of ... Petrarch to open the Renaissance. To give such descriptions requires concepts which were only available at a later time. From this it follows that even having access to the minds of the men whose actions he describes will not enable the Ideal Chronicler to appreciate the significance of those actions.” (Ibid., 169, orig. emphasis)

This conceptual asymmetry underscores that there is more to historical explanation than intentional explanation. This is so not only because the explananda of history encompass more than just intentional actions, but because even when the explanandum is an action, historical explanation can make use of descriptions that the actor did not as a matter of fact entertain or could not even have entertained in principle.

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<sup>13</sup> Whether these narrative statements are true of E already at E is controversial and depends on one’s view of the timelessness or otherwise of truth.

<sup>14</sup> Mink (1968/1987, 140) criticized Danto for “not giv[ing] full weight to the conceptual asymmetries which arise from the fact that there is a history of change in the concepts and conceptual systems presupposed in the most interesting descriptions we have and seek” but this underestimates the force of Danto’s remark about the limitation of *Verstehen*.

So the result of Danto's thought experiment is this. If we call the record which the ideal chronicler produces "the ideal chronicle", then the ideal chronicle is not a complete description of the past. If we were to insist that to be an "ideal chronicle" a chronicle must be complete, then what the ideal chronicler produces is not an ideal chronicle. But however we may wish to formulate the result, there is more to history than any chronicle, no matter how "ideally" it records "what happens, as it happens, the way it happens". The past as it is covered by history (which uses narrative sentences essentially) is never fixed and determinate—contrary to what the witness conception suggested.

### *History Meets the Challenge of Presentism*

Danto's thought experiment provides the materials needed to answer the question we raised about the use in historical accounts of conceptualizations that were unavailable to the actors in question. Danto himself noted that for narrative history the possibilities for such a "retroactive re-alignment of the Past" (ibid., 168) are unlimited.

"Any novel philosophical insight, for instance, may force a fresh restructuring of the whole history of philosophy; one begins to see earlier philosophers as predecessors—which, ironically, can lead men to understress the originality of him whose novel insight brought to philosophical attention otherwise unremarked traits of antecedent philosophical utterances. Kant complained bitterly about this." (Ibid.)

Now Kant's complaint was that "[m]en who never think independently have nevertheless the acuteness to discover everything, after it has once been shown to them, in what was said long since, though no one ever saw it there before." (Ibid., 305, quoted from *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics*) But even though they turn on a similar phenomenon, our earlier examples highlight a different aspect of the conceptual asymmetry possible in historical descriptions. Unlike Kant's Johnny-come-latelies who are unduly wise after the fact, Chalmers subjected Boyle, Stein Newton, Koyré Galileo and Mach numerous earlier physicists to "anachronistic" conceptualizations for forward-looking purposes in order to better understand, on the basis of their near-but-not-quite fit with contemporary concepts, the distance of the road still to be travelled, even the nature of the road to be travelled to reach the current state of science.

Now for instances of such forward-looking re-alignments of the past we are not limited to examples from the history of science. The history of philosophy of science also offers examples where, for example, the coinage of new terms affords such a re-alignment. Take Alberto Coffa's "semantic tradition" (1991): here a tradition of thought about the *a priori* was created in retrospect and from a long distance to allow us to appreciate a cumulative development in the history of philosophy that was not understood as such by the participants but bequeathed

important problems for current-day practitioners. Or take Gustav Bergmann's "linguistic turn" (1964): here a name was given to a significant reorientation of philosophical thought pioneered by Frege, brought to fruition by Wittgenstein and then taken up by others and made the methodological basis of an entire new philosophical movement, but which until its baptism by Bergmann had not been thought of in this way.<sup>15</sup> Other examples of such retellings of the past resist telescoping into a single phrase but are no less representative of this dynamic. Take Michael Friedman's *Parting of the Ways* (2000), for instance, which designates a set of public philosophical debates as the point where Kantianism split and after which so-called Continental and analytical philosophy went their separate ways. Here too the actors did not consider themselves to be initiating the parting of the ways that Friedman discusses. Or take Tom Ryckman's *Reign of Relativity* (2004) which fashions a tradition of transcendental idealism in the philosophy of physics from what were previously viewed as somewhat disparate elements so as to indicate a path not taken yet, he argues, worthwhile to be pursued. Or take Alan Richardson's *Carnap's Construction of the World* (1998) which portrays Carnap's first major work as crystallizing the internal contradiction of the Neo-Kantian tradition of which he was a part: as Alan had to emphasize repeatedly since, he did not claim that Carnap saw himself as a Neo-Kantian. Or, finally, take Don Howard's paper "Relativity, *Eindeutigkeit*, and Monomorphism: Rudolf Carnap and the Development of the Categoricity Concept in Formal Semantics" (1994) the title of which virtually represents a narrative sentence and which combines careful contextualization and a forward-looking perspective. I could go on.<sup>16</sup> The history of philosophy of science provides rich pickings indeed for anyone seeking examples of "retroactive re-alignments of the Past" — examples from which we all have learnt things about the past we did not know before.

One upshot of Danto's thought experiment, then, is that, with proper safeguards, history may legitimately engage in what on the surface may look suspiciously like presentism. Danto's argument is an argument for historical pluralism, recognition of which was conspicuously absent from Skinner's strict contextualism, or, at a minimum, for a relaxation of its strictures.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> That Bergmann made a fair hash of describing that turn beyond its barest characterization is another matter; see Hacker (2013). Hacker also favors Wittgenstein as originator, unlike Dummett who so designated Frege (1993, 5)

<sup>16</sup> I must also declare a personal interest here, namely as advocate of the left Vienna Circle's "bipartite metatheory conception of philosophy"; see, e.g., Uebel (2007, 435), (2013), (2015).

<sup>17</sup> Not all contextualist intellectual history need be as rigid as Skinner's. For an agenda for contextualist history of philosophy and philosophy of science that does not rule out "reading history backwards" — though it cautions of its dangers — see Hatfield (2005).

Another upshot of Danto's thought experiment is that, far from marking a blemish, reconceptualizations of the past may mark the significance of certain histories we tell.<sup>18</sup>

At this point, however, we may get worried whether what we call "history" is not becoming mere story-telling. What are the "proper safe-guards" I just smuggled into my conclusions from Danto? How far may we go in our re-alignments of the past in line with contemporary concerns? What constraints are there on our re-tellings of past events and actions? And finally, *sotto voce*: whatever happened to the aim of truth? This worry is amplified when we note that, sometimes, the re-alignments of the past are not wholly disinterested ones but come with an agenda. None more so, perhaps, than the invention of "Austrian philosophy" by Neurath who made it a historical focal point of his then very much present-day struggle against the metaphysical school philosophies of his day.<sup>19</sup> So let me now turn my second point of business: considering the cost of the liberation from strict contextualism.

### *History and the Challenge of Narrativity*

Besides introducing the idea of narrative sentences and their potential, Danto's monograph also placed the idea of narrative itself center-stage for post-Hempel philosophy of history. "The difference between history and science is not that history does and science does not employ organizing schemes which go beyond the given. Both do. The difference has to do with the kind of organizing schemes employed by each. History tells stories." (1965/1985, 111) Narrative had been discussed by philosophers before, of course, but not as epistemologically central to and distinctive of historical explanation.<sup>20</sup> Yet Danto did not press the narrative turn quite to its full conclusion; that was left to a series of papers by Mink.

Now narrative sentences, we saw, describe an event in terms of a later one, thereby implying but not telling, a narrative. A narrative, in turn, presents a temporally ordered sequence of

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<sup>18</sup> On independent grounds this appears to be the basic position also arrived at under various guises in, e.g., Beaney (2013), Carus (2013), Reck (2013), Schliesser (2013). Given my historical aim I can rest with noting this broad convergence..

<sup>19</sup> See Carnap, Hahn, Neurath (1929) and Neurath (1936), but also Haller (1977) and (1988). I happen to think Neurath's thesis correct in outline but that is not the point here; see Uebel (2003).

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., Morton White (1963), (1965, Ch. 6) and Gallie (1963), (1964). For convincing criticisms—that White's reduction of narrative explanation to sequences of singular causal claims fails and that Gallie's exclusion of causal analysis fails too—see Mink: "as White is not serious about *historical* knowledge, as historical, so Gallie is not serious about historical *knowledge*, as knowledge" (1968/1987, 137, orig. emphasis). A still earlier discussion of narrative occurs in Dray (1954) where, however, its causal explanatory capacity is disputed and so does not feed into the narrative turn, re-inforcedly so in Dray (1971). And there is, of course, Walsh (1951) against whose mainly descriptive conception of "significant narrative" Danto developed his own conception in (1965, Ch. 7) and instead urged for the principled distinction between chronicle and narrative.

events that has a beginning and an end point and that typically has a more or less unified subject and relates the events in question as causally connected.<sup>21</sup> Narratives are variously employed and function differently in different contexts. According to Alasdair MacIntyre, in the explanation of action the aim is to “characterise correctly what an agent is doing”, so the narratives that provide the explanation-are required to be “both true and intelligible” (1981, 193 and 198).<sup>22</sup> By contrast, Danto noted about historical narratives, obviously worried:

“the imposition of a narrative organization logically involves us with an inexpugnable subjective factor. There is an element of sheer arbitrariness in it. We organize events relative to some events which we find significant in a sense ... of significance common ... to all narratives, and [that] is determined by the topical interests of this human being or that. The relativists are accordingly right.” (1965/1985, 142)

Now one central question here is whether narrative explanations are or are not a distinct type of explanation that cannot be reduced to or replaced by another type. If narrative explanations cannot be reduced or replaced, then their potential non-truth-valuability typically becomes a non-negotiable problem, whereas if they can be so reduced or replaced we need not worry. On this point Danto occupied an unusual position.

While Danto rejected the demand that narrative explanations be reducible or replaceable by straight-forward translation into covering-law explanations—“narratives are not always reducible to deductive arguments” (ibid., 251)<sup>23</sup>—he sought to demonstrate their compatibility with covering-law explanations. Crucially, and as a Humean predictably so, Danto argued that narrative explanations depend on “the use of general laws” (ibid., 239 and 255). Thus the singular causal claims involved in narratives could be expanded, with the help of additional determinations (in other words: redescriptions) into straight-forward instantiations of covering-laws.<sup>24</sup> Typically, however, such an expansion was not needed, for narratives explain independently of these covering-laws. The “narrative organization” of the elements of historical explanations worked on its own level because on their level of descriptions the sequence of singular causal claims made good sense—once one shared the perspective and

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<sup>21</sup> For further discussion see Carroll (2001).

<sup>22</sup> That autobiographical narratives in a therapeutic setting need not be so narrowly delimited is convincingly argued in Roth (1998).

<sup>23</sup> Danto’s argument here turned on “molecular narratives” explaining longer-term processes of change which while being causal have no single causal law to account for the process as a whole. Thus he concluded that capability of deductive formulation “may well be a sufficient condition, but not a necessary one if molecular narratives be accepted as explanatory” (1965, 255).

<sup>24</sup> The additional determinations in question “allow us to identify the things that happen as instances of the general description” (1965, 239), they bridge the gap, as it were between the description in the narrative and the one used in the formulation of the law that applies.

interests of the narrator. This relativity, however, put pressure on the truth-valuability of narratives. For Danto, this difficulty remained an attenuated one insofar as, on his resolution of the debate about covering-laws, the causal relations specified by historical explanations were ultimately, after redescription, backed by universal laws—yet the narratives in their own terms seemed to float free of these groundings.<sup>25</sup> Danto combined recognition of historical truth with that of the constructive role of the historian.<sup>26</sup>

### *Mink: The Autonomy of Narrative Explanation*

Mink gave an argument for a still stronger form of autonomy of historical explanation. For him, the narrative form of explanation characteristic of history was explanatory in its own right: its legitimacy did not even require its compatibility with covering-law explanations. (On this point Mink differed from Danto.)<sup>27</sup> Mink made common cause not only with earlier analytical opposition to Hempel but also with the idealist foes of logical empiricism of old. Yet Mink supported neither anti-causalism nor was he content with letting historical explanation rest on truisms. Moreover, the separatism of history which had been the point of “the distinction originally made by the neo-Kantians Windelband and Rickert, between the theoretically oriented or ‘nomothetic’ sciences and history as an ‘idiographic’ science” was no longer held to be supported by the claim that “the objects of historical inquiry are ‘unique’”. That claim, even Mink conceded, is “inadequate to support such a distinction, as has repeatedly been pointed out in defense of the unity of science” (1973/1987, 180).<sup>28</sup> Mink’s argument for the methodological distinction of history neither relies on spurious metaphysics (realm of validity) nor dodgy epistemology (direct empathetic perception of other minds).

Instead, Mink’s distinctive argumentation ran as follows. “One may accept that there is no fact incapable of being scientifically explained, and yet hold without inconsistency that there are

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<sup>25</sup> Thirty years later Danto still endorsed his compatibilist analysis but questioned its continued relevance: “Hempel’s theory strikes me still as true. It just stopped being relevant, the way the whole philosophy of history it defined stopped being.” (1995, 85)

<sup>26</sup> “We capture the future only when it is too late to do anything about the relevant present, for *it* is then past and beyond our control. We can but find out what its significance was and this is the work of historians: history is made by them.” (1965, 284, orig. emphasis)

<sup>27</sup> For Mink’s criticism of Danto’s equanimity vis-à-vis covering-laws explanations see Mink (1968/1987, 138-145) and its later modulation at (1973/1987, 174). Interesting questions about the adequacy of Mink’s criticism of Danto’s conception of narrative explanation arise here but must be investigated elsewhere.

<sup>28</sup> The distinction universal/particular was “at best one of emphasis and degree” (1966/1987, 71) and generic explanations naturally also apply to individuals that fall under the concepts used by the theory (ibid., 81). Earlier Mandelbaum (1961) had chided the anti-causalists for failing to recognize that Hempel had at least correctly identified the fallacy of the earlier idealist argument from uniqueness. And still earlier one of Danto’s first papers dismissed what he called “the Teutonic argument” that what distinguishes history is that it is concerned with the one-of-a-kind and uniquely-occurrent (1954).

other ways of understanding the same facts..." (1966/1987, 68)<sup>29</sup> Consequently, it is "the special character" of historical understanding "which a theory of historical knowledge must recognize if the methodological autonomy of history is to be justified and preserved" (ibid., 87). One important distinction of narrative explanation that Mink noted was they did not have detachable conclusions: "conclusions ... are ingredient in the argument itself ... in the sense that they are represented by the narrative order itself. As ingredient conclusions they are exhibited rather than demonstrated." (Ibid., 79) Unlike deductive arguments, narrative histories provide for "configurational understanding" (1960/1987, 39) or "synoptic judgment by which [one] can 'see together' all the facts in a single act of understanding" (1966/1987, 82).

"[N]arrative is a primary cognitive instrument—an instrument rivaled, in fact, only by theory and by metaphor as irreducible ways of making the flux of experience comprehensible. ... One understands the operation of a spring-powered watch, for example, only insofar as one understands the principles of mechanics, and this requires describing the mechanism of the watch in terms, and *only* in terms, appropriate to those principles. ... But a particular watch also has a historical career ... Now from the standpoint of theoretical understanding, the type of appropriate description is a given; it is not problematic. But the particular history of the watch escapes theoretical understanding simply because to envision that history requires the attribution of infinitely many descriptions of it as they are successively relevant or irrelevant to the sequences that intersect its career. This is what narrative form uniquely represents, and why we require it as an irreducible form of understanding." (1978/1987, 185)

Thus "the cognitive function of narrative form ... is not just to relate a succession of events but to body forth an ensemble of interrelationships of many different kinds into a single whole" (1978/1987, 198). Grasp of just this ensemble is what is manifested in "the synoptic vision" of "a whole ... connected by a network of overlapping descriptions" where, importantly, "the overlap of descriptions may not be part of the story ... but only of the comprehension of it as a whole" (1970/1987, 55 and 58).

Mink paid special attention to the way the individualistic descriptions combine in narratives. To begin with, they identify the explanandum event in terms that prevent it being brought under laws or lawlike regularities. Described in such non-standardizable terms, events can only be explained by laying out the sequence of events that led up to or are related to it in a narrative. In this regard, narrative explanations are both irreducible and indispensable. But Mink went still further and argued that since there is no standardization even of what we can

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<sup>29</sup> Compare: "Most philosophical criticism of the proto-science view has been devoted to prying loose the concept of explanation from that of prediction; but we might also try to see to what degree and by what arguments we can loosen the tie that binds the concept of understanding to that of explanation." (1966/1987, 77)

designate by the term “event”, “we cannot without confusion regard different narratives as differently emplotting the ‘same’ events” (1978/1987, 201). The idea of one unified subject matter of history is called into question here. “[N]arrative histories should be aggregative, insofar as they are histories, but cannot be, insofar as they are narratives.” (Ibid., 197)

Together the features of “non-detachability”, “non-standardizability” and “non-aggregativity” render narratives highly problematical.<sup>30</sup>

“The analysis and criticism of historical evidence can in principle resolve disputes about matters of fact or about the relations among facts, but not about the possible combination of kinds of relations. The same event, under the same description or different descriptions, may belong to different stories, and its particular significance will vary with its place in these different—often very different—narratives. But just as ‘evidence’ does not dictate which story is to be constructed, so it does not bear on the preference of one story to another.” (Ibid., 198-199)

The problem is that since it does not originate in the subject matter itself, “narrative form in history, as in fiction, is an artifice, the product of individual imagination” (ibid., 199). Nothing in the facts demands their arrangement in just the way that provides for configurational understanding: “the narrative combination of relations is simply not subject to confirmation or disconfirmation, as any one of them separately might be” (ibid.). It follows that “while objectivity is conceivable for a cumulative chronicle, it cannot really be translated into terms of narrative history” (ibid., 197). To be sure, Mink did not explicitly deny truth-valuability to historical narratives, but it is clear is that for him the idea of narrative truth had become highly problematical. “So narrative history and narrative fiction move closer together than common sense could well accept.” (ibid., 203) He hastened to add to this disquieting conclusion: “Yet the commonsense belief that history is true in a sense in which fiction is not is by no means abrogated, even though what that sense is must be revised.” (ibid.) Unfortunately, however, Mink left it to the reader to determine what precisely that new sense is. Before considering what the hints he left behind may amount to, we must establish the extent of the problem.

### *Danto and Mink Compared*

For Danto, narrative form introduced a subjective holistic element to which was owed the added value of narratives compared with chronicles, but which could not be tested for. Mink likewise stressed this subjectivity but he also pointed to a still deeper reason. The non-detachability of their conclusions, the non-standardization of their descriptions and the non-

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<sup>30</sup> These three features of Mink’s account in (1978/1987) are foregrounded particularly well in Roth (2016).



aggregativity of different narratives all brought to the fore “the same conceptual dissonance”, namely,

“an incompatibility between our implicit presupposition of what historical narratives are about and our conscious belief that the formal structure of a narrative is constructed rather than discovered. The locus of incompatibility is the presupposition that the structure of a historical narrative, as well as its individual statements taken separately, claims truth as representative of past actuality; so that the past has in its own right a narrative structure which is discovered rather than constructed.” (ibid., 201-202).

This presupposition is an idea which conditions our conception of the past itself: “the idea that there is a determinate historical actuality, the complex referent for all our narratives of ‘what actually happened’, the untold story to which narrative histories approximate” (ibid.). For Mink, it is this idea of the past as a fully determinate, *untold story* that jars with what we know about malleability of narratives—and it is this old idea of the past that has outlived its usefulness.

Now at this juncture a further possible disagreement between Danto and Mink comes into play which I must gloss over here. Mink appears to charge Danto himself with being committed still to the idea of the past as an untold story.<sup>31</sup>

“[W]e could not conceive or imagine an Ideal Chronicle at all *unless* we already had the concept of a totality of ‘what really happened’. We reject the possibility of a historiographical representation of this totality, but the very rejection presupposes the concept of the totality itself. It is in that presupposition that the idea of Universal History lives on.” (Ibid., 195)

As a criticism of Danto this diagnosis seems mistaken. According to Danto, not only is the witness conception an inadequate conception of our knowledge of the past, of history, but also the container conception is an inadequate conception of the past itself. It is so because the container conception negates and does not allow for the “retrospective realignments” that we must allow for, given narrative sentences and the openness of the past to the future that they topicalize. According to the container conception of the past, as we saw, the “*only*” change that any past event underwent concerned its distance from the present (1965, 146, orig. emphasis).

To be sure, Danto’s argument invoked the idea of “a full description” of an event which, he said, “we can imagine” and which “tells everything and is perfectly isomorphic with an event” such that it is “definitive” and “shows the event *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*” (ibid., 148). But it is evident that this imagination is delusional. Danto’s suggestion that we “can imagine” such a

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<sup>31</sup> See Roth (1988) and (2016).

description is part of setting up his thought experiment, not a truth claim, and holding it to be one is inconsistent with the result of his thought experiment. Moreover, just before he outlined his thought experiment he stated clearly that a “complete” description without narrative was impossible (ibid., 142, quoted above) So, with the container conception of the past rejected, the idea of the past as an untold story cannot gain a foothold.

On my reading of their understandings of how narratives work both Mink and Danto are in the same boat even though it remains the case that it was Mink who alerted us the difficulty which the presupposed idea of the past as an untold story presents for an unconflicted understanding of narrative history.<sup>32</sup> But now, what follows when we jettison the conception of the past as an untold story such that a historical narrative only is acceptable and true if it maps onto it without remainders? Can we still distinguish history from fiction?

### *History Meets the Challenge of Narrativity*

The problem that Danto hinted at and Mink elaborated holds for narrative history generally. Now conceivably one could opt to argue, seeking to preserve objectivity and truth for the history of philosophy of science, that our subject matter so constrains the narratives involved that Mink’s and Danto’s worries become groundless. That is, I think, a tall order (but that is not to say it can’t be done). What I want to explore instead, however, is whether Danto’s and Mink’s worries can be assuaged in a less heroic fashion.

Having followed Danto and Mink down the narrative path our problem is to find a “sense” in which history can be “true” in which fiction cannot be. What that sense must provide is a way of distinguishing between different historical accounts by reference to criteria other than the aesthetic and perhaps moral ones which govern our preferences for works of fiction.<sup>33</sup> We want the acceptability of historical narratives to be constrained by “cognitive” criteria (in the parlance of old). Suppose we accept that we can’t have criteria of straightforward truth—for the reasons Danto and Mink indicated—but we could still have criteria short of truth that would allow us to limit the number of candidates (and from which point onwards we can assess the

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<sup>32</sup> That ultimately, as the remainder of Analytical Philosophy of History and later writings intimate, Danto was far less worried by the sceptical challenge than Mink is a separate matter and one likely to be related to their different evaluation of the relevance of the DN-model.

<sup>33</sup> This is not to say that moral criteria or ethical-political ones cannot be applied in decisions about research programmes to be undertaken, but only that we cannot judge anything for approaching something like veracity according to whether the narrative satisfies such criteria of moral or ethical-political value.

explanations offered only in comparative terms).<sup>34</sup> In that case our choice of acceptable historical accounts would be constrained as our choice of works of fiction could not be. Suppose then we are looking for cognitive conditions for the acceptability of historical narratives that are *necessary* but not sufficient.

One solution would be to find *data that we have available independently of a narrative being furnished* so that matching them would provide a necessary condition of adequacy for the narrative. The thesis I now want to develop is that, while neither Danto nor Mink make an explicit proposal to this effect, one is lurking just below the surface of their main texts.<sup>35</sup> Both Danto and Mink draw a distinction between narratives and what one could crudely call their “raw material”: whatever it is that is laid down in a chronicle. The natural way to make use of this for our purposes is to decree the following as a first approximation. *A necessary condition for a historical narrative to be acceptable is that it be compatible with—better still: supported by—the relevant chronicle of events.*

Now Danto already adduced “necessary conditions for a ‘valid’ narrative” which would, if unsatisfied, render the narrative invalid (1965, 248), but on closer inspection these turn out to be necessary conditions for “narrative unity”: being “about the same subject”, “adequately explain[ing] the change in that subject which is covered by the explanandum”, and “contain[ing] only so much information as is required” for the explanation” (ibid., 251). What we are looking for are necessary conditions for a narrative providing an adequate explanation, so we must dig deeper. Let’s note then that at one point Danto isolates the so-called raw materials for narratives as themselves unchanging when a narrative is being developed:

“[T]here is a sense in which we may speak of the Past as changing; that sense in which an event at *t-1* acquires new properties not because we (or anything) causally operate on that event, nor because something goes on happening at *t-1* after *t-1* ceases, but because the event at *t-1* comes to stand in different relationships to events that occur later. But this in effect means that the *description* of *E-at-t-1* may become richer over time *without the event itself exhibiting any sort of instability ...*” (Ibid., 155, final emphasis added).

Later in the book, Danto noted that “[t]he Past does not change, perhaps, but our manner of organizing it does” (ibid., 166-167) which has led to some discussion of his ontological stance

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<sup>34</sup> The point being that there is more to the evaluation of historical narratives than their comparative assessment—a point Roth is skeptical about; see his (2012)

<sup>35</sup> As it happens, Danto made what seems a not too dissimilar proposal—albeit, it seems, in an untrammelled realistic spirit—in an early piece (1956) discussion of which must be deferred to another occasion. That he did not repeat the proposal in his 1965 book may be interpreted either as that early conception having been dropped or as serving as unspoken background. Leaving this undecided here I concentrate the present excavation on what’s just below the surface of his (1965) and base the derived proposal on this.

which I'd like to bracket here.<sup>36</sup> Instead I take him to be indicating a substratum to acceptable historical narratives when he draws the difference between possible descriptions of an event and the event itself. That substratum I read *epistemologically* such that the past that does not change, except by the addition of new data, is the past that we believe to be *recordable in a true chronicle*.<sup>37</sup>

Turning to Mink, we saw that he was concerned to suggest in no uncertain terms that there is a sense in which history is true and fiction is not, but that this did not amount to straightforward common-garden truth. Note that his argument from the non-standardization of the events featured in narratives concluded:

“if we accept that the description of events is a function of particular narrative structures, we cannot at the same time suppose that the actuality of the past is an untold story. There can in fact be no untold stories at all, just as there can be no unknown knowledge. *There can be only past facts not yet described in a context of narrative form.*” (1978/1987, 201, emphasis added)

Mink clearly drew a distinction here—and seems to point to a way of handling our problem that agrees with the proposal already detected, below the surface, in Danto. That proposal, after all, accepts that there are no untold stories. All that it requires is that there be “past facts not yet described in a context of narrative form”, i.e. that we distinguish between narrative and chronicle. It is of those past facts that the proposal requires that they stand in a certain relationship to the narrative in order to provide evidential grounding for it. Are there such facts? Mink clearly recognizes their existence when he noted, as we saw, that: “the narrative combination of relations is simply not subject to confirmation or disconfirmation, *as any one of them separately might be*” (ibid., 199, emphasis added).

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<sup>36</sup> See Weberman (1997), Haddock (2002) and Roth (2012). Within a realist framework, the difference Danto pointed to appears easily accommodated by the distinction between changes in intrinsic or relational properties, esp. those known as Cambridge changes, but without one the difference he pointed to appears to be more problematic.

<sup>37</sup> Something like this idea is endorsed also in Danto's rare return engagement with the topic some 30 years later, where that substratum is even identified as observational: “To be sure, if *H* is a narrative description of an event *e*, there will always be some predicate true of *e*, call it *G*, under which *e* can be observed by its contemporaries. So ‘*e* is *H*’ may be thought analyzable into ‘*e* is *G*’ plus some sense. In fact, however, if we subtract ‘*e* was *G*’ from ‘*e* was *H*’, there will be a residue which cannot be so analyzed, and this residual information belongs to the language of historical consciousness, and constitutes the idiom in which narratives, historical narratives included, are framed.” (1985, 347) Here Danto did not question the accessibility (let alone the existence) of an observable substratum below the level of narration that can be isolated from the latter by the criterion of being observable by the event's contemporaries. (These levels coincide with those of chronicle and narrative.) What Danto rightly questioned was whether what remains was observational for “contemporaries”.

But these are not the only hints in this direction that Mink gives us. Abandoning the remnant of the idea of universal history, he stresses,

“does not put the past completely at risk; it does not imply that there is nothing determinate about the past since individual statements of fact, of the sort to which so much historical research is dedicated, remain unaffected. But it does mean that the significance of the past is determinate only by virtue of our own disciplined imagination. Insofar as the significance of past occurrences is understandable only as they are locatable in the ensemble of interrelationships that can be grasped only in the construction of narrative form, it is we who make the past determinate in that respect.” (ibid., 202)

Note that here Mink again spoke of individual statements of fact as opposed to the ensemble of their interrelations. So to save the distinction between history and fiction Mink introduced a distinction, however we phrase it, between two levels of description of events that in different ways are essential to history: individually and in narration. It is the in principle availability of “individual statements of fact” that matters for the proposal waiting to be retrieved from Mink’s and Danto’s texts.

It is but a small step, I submit, to now answer Mink’s question for a sense in which narratives can be true in which fiction cannot be as follows. We accept that historical narrative cannot be straightforwardly true, but we may still say that an acceptable historical narrative *necessarily* is truth-based, while fiction is not. (Fiction may be based on fact, acceptable historical narratives must be.)<sup>38</sup> Being truth-based means that acceptable historical narratives did or would pass the test that there be a true description of the narrated event in terms independent of the narrative at issue. The “revised” sense, in other words, in which historical narratives are true is that they are truth-based.

### Discussion

Where have we got to? If my analysis is correct, both Danto and Mink have the wherewithal to answer the question which their championing of narrative explanation in all its unorthodox epistemic glory gives rise to. This is not so say, of course, that Danto and Mink themselves are in full agreement, as we saw. But they would agree, on my interpretation, that “proper safeguards” for distinguishing acceptable historical narratives can be found, even if talk of their straight-forward truth is given up. But can such criteria really be found?

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<sup>38</sup> Even when remaining factual in outline, historical fiction will sooner or later leave the evidential base behind with the detailed descriptions it gives of individual incidents, whereas narrative history will stick to a evidentially-based broader network of relations between events described more generically.

One obvious worry is whether the distinction drawn between narratives and their raw material does not violate the well-known phenomenon of the theory-ladenness of observation. This worry may be prompted by Mink's own determination of narrative as a "primary cognitive instrument" alongside theory and metaphor, but it overlooks that narrative is not like a theory that works by subsumption of particulars under ever-wider descriptions by means of which they then are explained, deductively, inductively or abductively. Narrative rather works by providing configurational understanding by means of forming "an ensemble of interrelationships of many different kinds into a single whole" (1978/1987, 198). But the individual elements of such narrative wholes—unlike their "conclusions"—*are* detachable for, after all, each of them could also figure in an entirely different narrative. To be sure, Mink wrote that "we cannot without confusion regard different narratives as differently emplotting the 'same' events" (1978/1987, 201). But what is the confusion here? Mink accepted the existence of "past facts not yet described in a context of narrative form" (*ibid.*), so the confusion pointed to was that of transferring individuation conditions for standardized events of natural science to events in historical narratives. Mink was clearly right that these categories of events are distinct and even cross-cut such that historical events do not supervene on physical ones, say, on account of the context dependency of the former. But from this it does not follow—short of spiritualizing historical existence as such—that there cannot be descriptions of each individual historical event or its parts in physical or behavioral terms or even in intentional terms that differ from those a given narrative happens to employ. It is the availability of these in this respect non-narrative descriptions of narrated events (or their parts) that safeguard historical narratives from fiction. Just as observation reports can be theory-laden without the distinction between observation and theory being rendered moot, so historical accounts can be narrative without the distinction between chronicled event and narrative becoming moot.

Similar considerations hold for an objection to the idea of "the event itself" invoked by Danto, a worry that, understood epistemologically, may be based on the argument about so-called thick ethical terms (employed to show that value-statements cannot be reduced to a combination of pure descriptions and statements of a positive or negative attitude). All that Danto needs is that there be a true description of the narrated event in non-narrative terms, i.e. that the narrated event can be picked out also by a description that is independent of the narrative. There is no need to decompose narrative descriptions into non-narrative and narrative parts. Unlike in the case of disciplining value judgments (see Nagel 1961, 492-495), here we are not concerned with the principled replaceability of one type of statement without loss by another. Nor does Danto require the observational language of chronicle entries to be theory-free—he was well aware of

the notion of theory-ladenness<sup>39</sup>—but only that the event in question be specifiable independently of the narrative.

Another worry is whether the envisaged proposal does not rely on the idea of the past as an untold story after all. Again, that the past is not an untold story does not mean that there are no past events unless they feature in a historical narrative. As long as they are described in non-relational, non-narrative terms, a set of events makes for a chronicle at best, but not a story told or untold. Note also that Mink's diagnosis of the non-aggregativity of narratives on the basis of the referential incommensurability of the events they speak about pertains to the events as explained by and described in different narratives, it does not rule out that for any one such event narrated a description be found that is independent of the narrative.

A different worry is whether the proposed criterion is not too strict. As it stands, affirmation and inclusion of just one event in the narrative that is, as it were, disconfirmed by checking with the chronicle would suffice to disqualify a narrative. Reasonably enough it could be argued that this applies unduly standards. At the risk of making realists wince and anti-realists howl, it may be proposed to weaken the already merely necessary criterion for the acceptability of narratives by restricting it to the important parts of the narrative. To be sure, it is impossible to specify this importance in formal, content-independent terms and it is, moreover, very much a comparative matter, but it would be wanton skepticism to deny that some parts of a story are more important than others and that some are, well, essential to the story being told.<sup>40</sup> I suggest then that we appeal to an analogue of what Kitcher and Immerwahr call the principle of "veritism about significant historical statements": "History aims at, and sometimes achieves, significant true statements about aspects of the past." (2007, 220) With their formulation Kitcher and Immerwahr do not distinguish between statements as part of a narrative and statements in a chronicle and so elide the distinction that is crucial to the present proposal for declaring acceptable historical narratives that are necessarily truth-based. But nothing stops us from reformulating the veritist principle such that it is necessary for significant elements of the narrative to be (or potentially be) positively checked and identified with recordable elements of

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<sup>39</sup> Hanson, Danto recalled, was "my classmate at Columbia and a close friend" (2007, 226) whose *Patterns of Discovery* (1959) "opened my eyes to the role that theory plays in scientific observation" (2013, 29). Note that in their anthology of readings from the philosophy of science, Danto and Morgenbesser state that "[t]he data of experience must be interpreted" and list Chapter 1 of Hanson's book in their "Selected Bibliography" under the heading "Meaning"; see their (1960, 25 and 472). Evidently Danto did not believe in a neutral observation language. To be sure, he even hinted (1965, 115 and 140) at a parallel between narrative and theoretical sentences (and in this went further than Mink) but that leaves the distinction between narrative and chronicle intact.

<sup>40</sup> What accordingly distinguishes historical fiction from historical narrative is the imaginative detail of the former—say the contents of conversations nowhere recorded—which become essential to its plot: that's what makes, e.g., Michael Frain's *Copenhagen* so gripping as theatre.

a corresponding chronicle. So the hope is that in this fashion the merely necessary condition can be prevented from ruling out narratives as unacceptable on account of only minor flaws.<sup>41</sup>

Let us take it then that the distinction between narratives and their materials that the proposal outlined appeals to can be sustained so that with reference to events recordable in a chronicle it may be possible to distinguish between narratives that are truth-based and ones that are not and make that a necessary condition of their acceptability. (Beyond this condition, as noted, comparative considerations concerning competing narratives rule over their acceptability.) This would allow measure of cognitive control that distinguishes historical narratives from fictional ones while accepting, for the reasons that moved Danto and Mink, that talk of their straight-forward truth remains problematic.<sup>42</sup>

Yet what about historical narratives that are not truth-based and so are not acceptable: could we call them “false”? I see no reason why not. Being truth-based is not sufficient for being true, but not being truth-based is surely sufficient for being false. Does the asymmetry matter that accordingly we may speak of individual historical narratives as false but could not speak of them as true? Again I see no reason why it should. There are cases where precisely the same linguistic state of affairs obtains and we are not bothered—and these are cases in the sciences, in the hard sciences no less. There for certain theoretical phenomena the binary opposite of “false” is not “true” but “true enough”. I suggest that historical narratives are judged in a similar fashion so that history need not look disconnected from the sciences at all. Before closing, let me briefly indicate what this would involve.

On grounds wholly drawn from the physical sciences Catherine Elgin has convincingly argued that the notion of “true enough” fits rational choice in science in cases where straight-forward truth is inapplicable.

“Sometimes ... it is epistemically responsible to prescind from truth to achieve more global cognitive ends. ... science smoothes curves and ignores outliers. ... The problem comes with the laws, models, idealizations and approximations which are acknowledged not to be true, but which are nonetheless critical to, indeed constitutive of, the understanding that science delivers. Far from being defects, they figure ineliminably in the success of science. If truth is mandatory, much of our best science

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<sup>41</sup> It should be added that the notion of truth appealed to in the present employment, whatever Kitcher and Immerwahr’s preference, can be readily understood in a deflationist fashion such that correspondence need not be invoked.

<sup>42</sup> To be sure, this is a fairly coarse measure and does address the question of when a retrospective realignment of past events or texts is permissible, raised halfway through this paper, only via whether the resultant narrative is acceptable in principle. Beyond that the precise pros and cons of a given retrospective realignment would emerge only its further comparative assessment.



turns out to be epistemologically unacceptable and perhaps intellectually dishonest.”  
(2002, 113)

Examples in point are curve smoothing, *ceteris paribus* laws, idealizations, stylized facts and a fortiori arguments from limiting cases. Such practices fall short of making a case for the truth of the claim in question, yet it would be most implausible to exclude them as unscientific. Rather, such practices are to be judged as follows.

“We accept a claim ... when we consider it true enough. ... I suggest that *to accept* that *p* is to take it that *p*’s divergence from truth, if any, does not matter. To *cognitively accept* that *p* is to take it that that *p*’s divergence from truth, if any, does not matter cognitively. The falsehood at hand is as close as one needs for the purposes at hand.” (Stalnaker 1987, 93, cited at Elgin 2002, 119)

Needless, to say, acceptability so understood is a highly contextual matter, but that fits the bill of historical explanations very well, given their repeatedly noted interest relativity.<sup>43</sup> Note also that accounting for selected historical narratives as true enough would not reintroduce the idea that there is one and only one account that merits this status and yet it would obviate the need for notions like relative truth. Importantly too, on this account, the standing of history among the sciences is “normalized”.

### Conclusion

So where would this investigation leave practicing historians of philosophy of science—were it accepted not only that Danto and Mink provided the materials for an answer to the problem of narrativity as outlined, but also that that answer could be made to work? Wittgensteinians should be delighted: it leaves historians of philosophy of science precisely where they are already. Such research typically is animated by the belief that one understands one’s subject matter better by understanding its history better—and work towards such understanding may focus on quite specific matters where the concern ultimately is a contemporary one or on matters where interest is piqued for their own sake. Even exploring the potential of past philosophies to sustain developments alternative to those that actually were realized—“working historical veins of possibility” or “articulating the as yet unarticulated”—may contribute to a better understanding of both the past philosophies and one’s current predicaments. But whatever we make of such ambitions and of the metatheoretical framework here developed, I hope it can be agreed that for the history of philosophy of science Danto’s and

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<sup>43</sup> To be sure, more needs to be said about acceptability and its criteria but that must be left for another occasion. Likewise it must be noted that my suggestion to employ Elgin’s conceptualization to historical explanation appears to require adjustment on her part of where it is applicable—namely also in history pace her (2009, p. 329)—but that too is a matter for another paper.

Mink's philosophies of history are of lasting, indeed double significance: as fascinating objects of inquiry and as potentially foundational object lessons.<sup>44</sup>

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