NARRATIVE EXPLANATIONS: THE CASE OF HISTORY

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Narratives are stories, a telling that something happened. A narrative explanation, presumably, presents an account of the linkages among events as a process leading to the outcome one seeks to explain. Examples of explanations in a story-like format are readily found in history books, certain anthropological accounts, case histories in psychoanalytic writings, and the sort of stories one hears daily from students and colleagues as to why this paper was not done or that committee meeting was not attended. The use of narratives to explain is unquestioned; what is subject to philosophical dispute is whether this habit is to be tolerated or condemned.

An important focus of this dispute is not the fact that much is obscure with regard to the notion of narrative. Rather, objections arise because the notion of explanation is deemed by some clear enough to rule out any category of narrative explanation, no matter how "narrative" is to be understood.

Indeed, the very idea of a narrative explanation invites two objections. The first I term methodological. It runs as follows. Explanations have a characteristic logical form. And while the precise constituents of narrative form are a subject of much study and debate in literary theory, there exists a *prima facie* distinction between narratives and the standard form of a proper scientific explanation. Specifically, narratives relate discrete events; they do not invoke laws. The methodological complaint, in other words, is that narrative structure is too far from the form of a scientific explanation to count as an explanation. There cannot be narrative explanations, then, because such a category runs afoul of a received explication of "explanation."

This objection is closely associated, of course, with positivism. Although my purpose in this paper is not to review the too familiar debate inspired by positivist models of historical explanation, I sketch reasons for believing that much of the debate – both pro and con – on *the* form of historical explanation is misguided.

The second objection I call metaphysical. This objection may be formulated in the following way. The academic division of labor is such that while, for example, historians work to construct true accounts of the past, philosophers toil to understand by what marks the truth may be known. Any satisfactory analysis of the notion of explanation, and so of historical explanation, should reveal the conditions which must be satisfied if that explanation is to be counted true. Attention to narrative form, however, slights this critical point. Since analyses of narrative structure underline the parallels between history and fiction, the study of narrative is not going to illuminate the relevant differentia of historical expla-

nations. The complaint, in brief, is that emphasis on narrative structure situates historical practice too close to the writing of fiction. So the category of narrative explanation is rejected given the nature of narrative and its contrast to the purpose of historical inquiry.

Notice that the objections require only the assumption that history is a non-fiction discipline. This hardly seems disputable. Yet, if non-fiction, history either is a science or it is not. If it is, then narrative explanations will not do for formal or methodological reasons. But suppose, if you wish, that history is not science-like. Perhaps the nature of historical inquiry is only to provide an *understanding* of events. To invoke a traditional distinction, history is an *idiographic* and not a *nomothetic* discipline. Historians, on this account, study unique and non-repeating occurrences, or, at least, what is unique about events.[1]

Yet even on this conception of history, a question remains concerning how to verify a narrative. And the issue of verification does not intersect, in any obvious or interesting way, with the issue of narrative form. The extent to which history respects canons of narrative construction might influence the literary merit of that history. But it hardly seems relevant to determining the conditions under which that history is true. Thus, whether the emphasis of an historian's task is taken to be explanation or is defined as understanding, verificationist concerns seem to rule out the relevance of narrative form.

Both of these objections, I argue, are ill-founded. The reasons in each case are quite different. The methodological objection and the dispute regarding the status of historical explanation can be disposed of by undercutting the view of knowledge which motivates it. The metaphysical objection is more subtle and stubborn. It is with this objection that I am primarily concerned. What is metaphysical about the objection is that it assumes a correspondence theory of historical knowledge. This assumption, I argue, is incoherent.

A consequence of rejecting this correspondence view is that it no longer makes sense to speak of historical narratives as true or false. At first blush, this sounds troubling. I suggest why, properly understood, it is not. Concluding considerations related to the suggested logic of narrative explanation are meant to illuminate why the failure of narrative form as such to be true or false engenders no special problem for assessing the objectivity or explanatory utility of narratives *qua* explanations.

Why insist on the Procrustean exercise of rendering histories into a format dictated by the current favorite model of scientific explanation? The problem is what it means to do science. A remark by Hempel offers a glimpse of what lies at the heart of this issue. "The necessity, in historical inquiry, to make extensive use of universal hypotheses of which at least the overwhelming majority come from fields of research traditionally distinguished from history is just one of the aspects of what may be called the methodological unity of empirical science."[2]

1. Ernest Nagel traces this terminology to Windelband. See Ernest Nagel, *The Structure of Science* (New York, 1961). 547–548.

2. Carl Hempel, *Aspects of Scientific Explanation* (New York, 1965), 243.

The methodological objection, this suggests, is not tied to the viability of some particular model of scientific explanation, such as the covering-law model; the issue is what disciplines yield knowledge. Hempel's remark points to the fact that behind the old debate on the applicability of the covering-law model to history is the unity-of-method thesis.

Positivism attempted to legislate to the republic of letters a general criterion of what could count as knowledge. Is there still a basis for mandating that some one form or other is, for example, *the* form of explanation? The failures of positivism remain a source of important and instructive lessons. Perhaps the most instructive failure can be seen in the history of the efforts, beginning with Carnap's *Aufbau* and continuing to Hempel's "Empiricist Criteria of Cognitive Significance: Problems and Changes," to provide a reconstruction of scientific knowledge by their own standards. Positivism was done in by its own best advocates. It ceased to be a viable research program not for reasons tangential to its concerns, such as an inability to provide a plausible reconstruction of historical explanation. The failure took place at the heart, in the discovery that its methods were inadequate and inappropriate to characterize scientific explanation. The broader epistemological objections later developed by Quine and by Sellars argued convincingly that the problems are irremediable.

The question of what to count as an explanation becomes, in part, a question of the use of this term. The methodological objection assumes that a proper subset of disciplines ought to serve to define for the rest what this standard is. This debate on explanation has interesting parallels to the problem I have elsewhere termed the *Rationalitätstreit*.[3] This problem concerns whether standards of rationality vary radically or whether one may insist, following Martin Hollis, on the "epistemological unity of mankind." Each side of this debate, I maintain, is committed to a view I dubbed "methodological exclusivism."[4] Exclusivists (of whatever stripe) presume that there is exactly one correct methodological approach to a subject matter. Yet, once the philosophical presumptions of methodological exclusivism are exposed, exclusivism loses its appeal.

As to explanation, it is worth reminding ourselves there is no good reason to believe that there is just one correct explication of the notion of explanation. Such claims to explication come to have a purely stipulative or legislative force in the absence of some notion of analyticity.

My suggestion has been that the methodological objection presupposes the plausibility of some exclusivist explication of explanation. These explications appeal, in the case at hand, either to the unity-of-method thesis or some implicit notion of analytic equivalence. Only by presupposing such problematic philosophical doctrines does one justify demands either for countenancing or failing to countenance narrative as a form of explanation. Indeed, there is no clear candidate for the title of *the* logic of explanation.

3. See Paul A. Roth, "Resolving the Rationalitätstreit," *Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 26 (1985), 142–157.

4. I discuss this issue further in *Meaning and Method in Social Science: A Case for Pluralism* (Ithaca, 1987).

Yet, without some sense of what the logical form is, determination of truth conditions—however those are to be spelled out—and of implication remain obscure. And to the extent they remain obscure, the rational evaluation of issues is frustrated or precluded. I challenge the view that precisely one logical form is appropriate to explicating the notion of explanation. A positive case for a category of narrative explanation would require, *inter alia*, exposing enough formal properties of narrative accounts to establish how such explanations are viable candidates for objective evaluation. Resolving general objections is a mere prolegomenon to that undertaking.

There is, I suggested, a second general objection to the possibility of narrative explanations which bears examination. I termed this the metaphysical objection. The type of objection I have in mind here is made by Maurice Mandelbaum in *The Anatomy of Historical Knowledge*. The impulse to link history and narrative is one which Mandelbaum deems "unfortunate," because it emphasizes what is, strictly speaking, a purely incidental aspect of historical inquiry. Narrative structure is, on his view, a mere stylistic device. Whereas the methodological objection centered on the issue of adherence to certain formal constraints, the metaphysical objection emphasizes the relation of what is written to what is being written about. Indeed, Mandelbaum invokes an almost Rankean image of the historian recounting the past "as it actually was":

> describing history as narrative suggests—and I assume is meant to suggest—that historiography is to be compared with telling a tale or story. This is misleading even when applied to the most traditional histories. A historian dealing with any subject matter must first attempt to discover what occurred in some segment of the past, and establish how these occurrences were related to one another. Once this research has been carried forward to a partial conclusion, he must, of course, think about how he will best present his findings, and this . . . may be regarded as "constructing a narrative." Such a narrative, however, is not independent of his antecedent research, nor is that research merely incidental to it; the historian's "story"—if one chooses to view it merely as a story—must emerge from his research and must be assumed to be at every point dependent on it. It is therefore misleading to describe what historians do as if this were comparable to what is most characteristic of the storyteller's art.[5]

Mandelbaum's artless Baconian conception of historical research stops just short of endorsing what might be called a correspondence theory of historical truth and objectivity. The reluctance to endorse directly a correspondence theory is a consequence of contrasting the complexity of the "full" historical picture and any historian's necessarily limited depiction of it. His version of the sort of metaphysical picture I ultimately want to reject has it that events enter into processes by some natural *historical* dynamic inherent in the events and processes of which they are parts. He argues:

> From what has been said it can be seen that the events with which a historian deals in tracing a process may belong together either because they are, quite simply, constitutive parts within that process, or because they have entered it through influencing one or more

5. Maurice Mandelbaum, *The Anatomy of Historical Knowledge* (Baltimore, 1977), 25.

of these parts. In speaking of the constitutive parts of a series of events, I refer to the fact that when a historian seeks to understand the nature of and changes in a society . . . he is dealing with a complex whole, some of whose parts he already knows. It is these parts—and any others whose existence he uncovers—that are parts of the whole. . . . Thus, one can see that whenever a historian correctly analyzes the structures present in a society, or whenever he gives correct information as to the sequence of changes that it . . . has undergone, he has dealt with events that belong together because they are the parts of the continuing whole.

Such a whole is not formed merely because the historian has defined his subject matter in a certain way and has confined the scope of his inquiry to what occurred with respect to that particular subject matter. . . . Rather, the events that he includes as belonging within the series of occurrences with which he is to deal are those between which he finds inherent connections because they have influenced one another.[6]

Mandelbaum's guiding analogy is likening history to mapmaking.[7] Both maps and histories may differ in terms of scale, scope, detail. Both may be subject to change over time. However, histories, like maps, are guides over existing terrains:

one may hold that a basic structure is imposed on a historical account by the evidence on which it rests; the existence of lacunae in that evidence, and the new questions that are present in it, direct the historian's attention to the need for further evidence of a specific kind. . . . Thus, whatever evidence is originally available to a historian will not be an inchoate mass, and the more evidence there is, the less choice he will have as to the alternative ways in which he may reasonably structure his account.[8]

It is on the basis of the connections inherent in the evidence with which historians work that they can propose concrete causal analyses of the events with which they deal.[9]

Historical pictures are successively filled in by collecting more evidence concerning the events of interest. The picture is always partial; but what history provides is an ever clearer picture of things as they actually were. The past exists in itself; in Louis Mink's phrase, it exists as an "untold story."[10] A history is, of course, more than a mere chronicle. But the work of an historian, in Mandelbaum's conception, is more like that of a scribe than an author.

The sort of metaphysical assumption which underwrites Mandelbaum's rejection of narrative, however philosophically tenuous Mandelbaum's own exposition of it, has deep intuitive roots. It is anchored in an intuition that, as Mink puts it, "the story of the past needs only to be communicated, not constructed."[11] What needs to be rejected is the picture of a past that is simply there waiting for an historian to come along. Construing history on the model of narrative appears inappropriate so long as the historian's art is assumed to consist in chipping off the excrescences of time so that the past can stand revealed.

The assumption on which the metaphysical objection is predicated is difficult

6. *Ibid.*, 126–127.
7. *Ibid.*, 15–17.
8. *Ibid.*, 192–193.
9. *Ibid.*, 193.
10. Louis O. Mink, "Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument," in *The Writing of History: Literary Form and Historical Understanding*, ed. R. Canary and H. Kozicki (Madison, Wisc., 1978), 140.
11. *Ibid.*, 135.

to attack because it is most commonly implicitly assumed rather than articulated. As Mink notes, "But that past actuality is an untold-story is a presupposition, not a proposition which is often consciously asserted or argued. I do not know a single historian, or indeed anyone, who would subscribe to it as a consciously held belief; yet if I am right, it is implicitly presupposed as widely as it would be explicitly rejected."[12] No sophisticated person, I presume, doubts that stories about the past can be constructed in many ways. But this belief is consistent with an assumption "that everything that has happened belongs to a single and determinate realm of unchanging actuality."[13] The past is a *Ding-an-sich* at a temporal remove.

The metaphysical objection to narrative explanations in history presupposes the cogency of conceiving of an objectively desirable past. What I propose to do is to give this metaphysical assumption of the objective past the most plausible form that I can, and then show that the assumption is untenable.

The metaphysical presupposition is made compelling in a device made famous by Arthur Danto in his excellent *Analytical Philosophy of History.*[14] In the context of his seminal discussion of what he terms "narrative sentences," Danto introduces as expository devices the notions of an Ideal Chronicle and, correlatively, an Ideal Chronicler. The purpose of these devices is to suggest a case in which the factual record of the past is as complete as can be imagined *at the moment at which events occur.*

> We can imagine a description which really is a full description, which tells everything and is perfectly isomorphic with an event. Such a description then will be *definitive*: it shows the event *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*. . . . I now want to insert an Ideal Chronicler into my picture. 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.[15]

Having assumed for the sake of argument that such a complete record exists, Danto then convincingly shows that there are statements true of some time *t* in the past which cannot have been known to be true at that time. These statements will not appear even in an Ideal Chronicle. Examples are easy to generate. Simply formulate descriptions known to be true of persons at a time later than *t* and use them to refer to those persons at *t*. The result—what Danto calls "narrative sentences"—is sentences true at *t* but which could not have been known at *t*, and so escape even the Ideal Chronicler.

Consider, for example, someone who viewed *Bedtime for Bonzo* when it was first released (1951). That person could not say truly, at that moment, that he had just seen a movie starring a future President of the United States. But we can describe the matter in that way; we can give a true description of what hap-

12. *Idem.*

13. *Ibid.*, 141.

14. First published in 1968; revised edition, *Narration and Knowledge* (New York, 1985). All references are to the later edition.

15. *Ibid.*, 148–149.

pened at time *t* which is missing from the Ideal Chronicle. An example of Danto's is: "The Thirty Years War begins in 1618." Assuming that that war is so named because of its length, the sentence is true of some event (or series of events) in 1618, but could not appear in even an Ideal Chronicle of events for 1618.

Danto's device vividly illustrates that what is interesting and important about events, what is of historical interest, is characteristically known only after the fact. A perfect witness to the past does not pick out or observe all there is to be known about the past. Danto's narrative sentences are sentences true of the past but not knowable in the past. They "belong to stories which historians alone can tell."[16] Danto nicely summarizes his own point as follows:

> 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.[17]

Danto's characterization of narrative sentences is ingenious and, I believe, correct. But how does any of this bear on the metaphysical objection with which I began? It is relevant in the following way. Recall that I claimed that this objection to narratives as a form of explanation takes its force not from the sort of flat-footed exposition which one finds in Mandelbaum, but from the intuition behind that exposition, the sort of intuition captured in Nietzsche's remark that the past is a rock you cannot move. The past is *there*. But if the fixity of the past is a coherent notion, as it seems to be, then this implies that there could be an Ideal Chronicle. Danto, for one, explicitly draws this conclusion in a passage I cited above. And even Danto betrays more allegiance to this notion of a fixed past than he otherwise claims to have by suggesting, as noted above, that the whole truth of an event might be known.

No matter that an Ideal Chronicle lacks narrative sentences; that is not the issue which now concerns us. If the past is fixed, if it is a story waiting to be told, then it must be logically possible to have some chronicle of it of the sort Danto imagines. What I argue is that the notion of an Ideal Chronicle is *not* coherent, and so we must reject as well the metaphysical picture which implies it.

The critical difficulty with the notion of an Ideal Chronicle is hinted at in the following passage from Mink.

> I refer to the Ideal Chronicle . . . to point out, merely, that we *understand* the idea of it perfectly clearly. And we 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.[18]

16. Louis O. Mink, "Philosophical Analysis and Historical Understanding," *Review of Metaphysics* 21 (1968), 690.

17. Danto, 151.

18. Mink, "Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument," 141.

Mink is, I suggest, right in sensing a difficulty, but he does not develop an argument. In order, then, to make the problem explicit, imagine the I. C. at work. What does the I. C. record? Danto's suggestion is everything, and at once at that. But in agreeing that the I. C. can write anything at all we have, in a Wittgensteinian sense, been tricked; the very first step is the fatal one. The conjuring trick is complete once one concedes that there is *anything* for an Ideal Chronicler to record.

What is the basic unit of the posited perfect record? They are events of every sort: visits home, heartbeats, a first kiss, the jump of an electron from one orbital position to another. But, as we know, events may be sliced thick or thin; a glance may be identified as an isolated event or as an instance in an event. What the unit-event is depends on the telling of it. Given the instructions to record "everything that happens, as it happens," the problem is not that there is too much for an Ideal Chronicler to record; the irony is that there are *no things* in the abstract to be recorded. An Ideal Chronicler never gets started because there are no ideal events to chronicle.

What sort of things are events? On one standard account, events are identified only under a description. A reason for worrying whether events exist in some philosophically relevant sense of that term—that is, whether they count as legitimate objects of discourse—is that assuming their existence proves a convenience for the purposes of explicating the logical form of sentences about actions. Countenancing events facilitates the ability to draw permissible inferences which otherwise cannot be readily managed if events are ruled out as individuated objects.

To show, then, that my claim of a paragraph back does not simply beg the question against events as objects, consider someone such as Davidson who has argued for tolerating such an ontology.[19] But a Davidsonian ontology does not help the Ideal Chronicler with her task. Without some description or other, there are no specific events; with an identifying description, we still do not know if the event is of the requisite ideal sort—that is, not primarily of our making.

The specification of identity conditions does not solve the problem of underdetermination which has bedeviled philosophers of science. There is no unique physical theory entailed by the available evidence; incompatible theories can be formulated compatible with whatever data is at hand. My point about putative "ideal events"—those recounted in some Ideal Chronicle—is that treating such events as objects independent of our object (and event) positing scheme of things runs afoul of what we know about the relation of evidence to theory. The very possibility of an Ideal Chronicle presumes not just identity conditions for events, but their existence apart from our theoretical specification of them. But it is precisely this realist inference which is unjustified by any set of identity conditions for events and which, given the problem of the underdetermination of theories, is patently unjustifiable.

The problem is, of course, not ameliorated by shifting to some set of identity

19. See, for example, essays 1, 6–10 in Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford, 1980).

conditions for events other than Davidson's. Let events be as well individuated as you please; as noted, I grant we might even be allowed to quantify them (meaning, in non-philosophic jargon, that events are treated on a par with individual objects). This does not change the problem. The objection arose not because of some inability to identify events, but due to a question about the status of these events apart from some object- (or event-) positing scheme or other. The issue is their metaphysical status, whether or not we may presume some correspondence between our talk of events and events-in-themselves. To assume that logically adequate identity conditions for events is tantamount to proving that this is how things must be with the world is, of course, to beg the question at issue.

Events *simpliciter* cannot be shown to exist; they are not known to be of nature's making rather than of ours. Events exist only by proxy. This is why one cannot presume that there are any *ideal* events for our erstwhile chronicler to chronicle; knowledge of events is restricted to happenings isolated under descriptions provided by interested parties.

Can this problem be solved by augmenting the Ideal Chronicler with a complete set of descriptions? (I continue to exempt, for the sake of argument, the type of descriptions used in Danto's narrative sentences.) Does the notion of completeness make sense here? The metaphysical assumption requires that the completeness be of the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. The I. C. is an objective record; a transcribing of all that has come to pass.

All statements of events appearing in the imagined chronicle are true. Therefore, they must be consistent with one another. But if all descriptions are allowed in, inconsistencies will cloud the chronicle. Consider the events depicted in Kurosawa's film *Rashomon*. The story of what happened in the forest is successively retold from the perspectives of the husband, the wife, and the robber. None tells the same story; indeed, their stories are inconsistent. One tells a tale of rape and humiliation and a husband's cowardice; in other tales, one or more of these descriptions is contradicted. The audience sees what happens each time through the narrator's eyes; it is just that the narrators see different things. Events off the screen certainly have this quality as well. If the conjunction of all possible descriptions is included in the chronicle, the imagined purpose of the chronicle is defeated. Since it contains inconsistencies, it is no longer the hoped for objective record of what actually happened. But if some descriptions of events are excluded, then the chronicle is incomplete, contrary to its intended purpose. Hence, if complete, then inconsistent, and if consistent, then incomplete. There can be no Ideal Chronicle.

My argument, so far, assumes the premise that events are not natural entities; they exist only under a description. I then argued for the premise that the varying ways of individuating events are not always mutually consistent. Granted these premises, Roth's incompleteness theorem for Ideal Chronicles follows.

But let us make another pass at attempting to fill out the notion of an Ideal Chronicle. Perhaps what I have shown is that it is futile to imagine that there could be an Ideal Chronicle if such a chronicle requires a summing of all descrip-

tions of events as various individuals perceive these matters. But an Ideal Chronicler need not proceed in this way. The charge of the Ideal Chronicler is not, after all, to be faithful to this or that perspective; the task is to record what happened, individual perspectives be damned.

This way of putting the matter is tantamount to denying my first premise—the claim that events are not natural entities and exist only under a description. The problem, as I originally developed it, does not assume that some fact is left out; the problem is a failure of people to agree on what counts as the event to be described. Is there a way to include all events and exclude the descriptions of human agents?

Boethius imagined that God saw everything at once; all actions at all times stood revealed simultaneously to God. Certainly this is a way of capturing all that happens. Moreover, the advantage of a Boethian Chronicler is that this person need not rely, or so I shall assume, on potentially conflicting descriptions. This account, however, still will not do, not even if we cut it down so that at time *t*, everything up to and including what is happening at *t* stands so revealed to the Ideal Chronicler. The problem is that the Boethian vision, though comprehensive, still does not contain events, or, alternatively, it contains just one event, the total picture at *t*.

The past so pictured presents not a chronicle, moreover, but a Jamesian buzzing, booming confusion. Put another way, the identification of events from the Boethian tapestry of the past requires separating the simultaneous presentation of happenings which Boethius imagined into particular strands, the ones that interest us. God may see everything at once; an Ideal Chronicler, within a temporal limit, may do the same, or so I asked you to imagine. But this chronicle gives us less than we have even now. It is not just that there might be a need to factor in cultural conditioning and personal quirks when discussing what we see; seeing is not perceiving, not in any simple sense. The basic problem is more elementary than that. When we view a snapshot or read a page of a book, if the object is not at the proper distance from our eyes, in appropriate light, and so on, we cannot see what we want to see. If someone pushes the book or picture up so it touches our nose, we see something—but not, for example, the picture of the picnic or the story of the latest Reagan gaffe. Given the Boethian view, the Ideal Chronicler is in just this position, or leaves us in this position when consulting the resulting tapestry of happenings. The Boethian Chronicler has no natural point of focus. But without a focus, either nothing appears—the booming, buzzing confusion—or God-knows-what looms before us, like the photo pressed too close for one to view. Total information gives us less than we need to know.

Given the Boethian picture, it does not follow that human beings could say anything about it at all. Chronicles presuppose categorizations of time and events, and there is no reason to believe the Boethian account could be a chronicle. Nothing in that account, filled though it is with every conceivable happening, entails that there are humanly identifiable events arranged in recognizable order. If events are picked out by human agents, the chronicle is not ideal; if the world

is viewed from the eye of God, there is no chronicle. A Boethian chronicle cuts things too coarsely to solve the problem of identifying events in an objective way.

The point at which the discussion has arrived is this: if events are individuated by some favored set of identity conditions, the notion of there being an ideal chronicle self-destructs; such a chronicle is logically impossible. If we imagine the chronicle along Boethian lines, the notion still cannot be made cogent, for the Boethian image cannot be translated into the form of a chronicle.

But perhaps the Boethian picture is a start. It is, at least, complete. The problem is to find a finer grained description of matters uninfected by conflicting descriptions; this would preserve the metaphysical assumption that the past exists objectively as an untold story.

Problems arise, we just noted, if there is total information and no categories by which to organize and focus viewing. Perhaps a solution to this problem is a Carnapian Chronicler. The C. C., let us imagine, defines a language—ideal-in-L—which contains rules and definitions such that, given certain state descriptions, Ideal-in-L permits the derivation of the event which took place. Consistency is thus assured and no ambiguity threatens. But this is no Ideal Chronicle in the desired respect. The question of which events exist has now been relegated to the status of an internal question; the existence of events is explicitly relativized to a particular set of rules. This preserves consistency, but it defeats the purpose of positing the chronicle. The purpose is to explicate how to construct a complete and objective record of the past. The correspondence theory of historical truth remains unvindicated by appeal to a Carnapian Chronicler.

The only refinement on the matter I have left to suggest would be to limit the Ideal Chronicler's task. Do the problems abate if we imagine an Ideal Boswell? The task is cut down by giving I. B. the more modest task of compiling a complete record for a single individual. If history is, as Carlyle claimed, but so many biographies, then the I. B. would preserve the metaphysical assumption. But, alas, the Ideal Boswell too produces only a blur. The root of the problem is not in the scope of the enterprise but in its completeness. Unless we equip I. B. with our categories, there are no recognizable events. But if equipped with our categories, he ceases to be ideal. He is just one of us, albeit a tad more compulsive. I conclude that the notions of an Ideal Chronicle and an Ideal Chronicler cannot be coherently fleshed out, and so the metaphysical objection fails.

Viewing the world *sub specie aeternitatis*, an ideal chronicler is imagined to see events bare, shorn of the misperceptions and oversights to which mere mortals are prone. In particular, historical events are conceived as having their own pristine ontological integrity. Caesar crosses the Rubicon in 49 B.C. or he does not; if true, the chronicler notes it and if not, not. (The dating here makes this a narrative sentence, but this complication can be ignored.) A disinterested chronicle seems impossible. The core of my complaint has been that it is the pretense to disinterestedness and completeness which makes Danto's fiction ultimately incoherent. Given the lofty God's-eye perspective, no events appear. A less lofty perspective defeats the purpose of the literary conceit. The philosophical moral is one pressed by philosophers from Kant to Davidson. We may query the world

and learn a great deal, but it is a confusion to think that the categories in which the questions are posed and the answers framed constitute, to paraphrase Rorty, History's Own Vocabulary.

My primary concern throughout has been with *prima facie* objections to the notion of a narrative explanation. My handling of these objections, even if convincing, is as yet no delineation, however, of what counts as a proper narrative explanation. My concluding remarks are, in this regard, only programmatic.

Histories ought to contain only true statements. What remains problematic is the narrative structure which presents the verifiable statements as steps in a process which effects change. The facts with which an historian works may be, in Hayden White's term, emplotted in various ways.[20] White, as is well known, claims that there are basic narrative strategies—fundamental tropes—for emplotting events, and that these incompatible forms of emplotment are products of the historian's art in telling about the events. There is no truth-value, for example, to the statement that such and such a happening is tragic; there is only a telling which so presents it.[21] Insofar as events and processes are artifacts of different strategies of emplotment, the narrative is neither true nor false in any sense congruent with the correspondence theory.

Narratives are constrained by the facts, since they are constructed from verifiable statements. They are subject to objective evaluation because, as both White and Gene Wise argue, narrative forms in history must function as methodological paradigms. Paradigms, in the methodological sense, provide problem-solving models and, as a consequence, function to direct research.[22] Narrative forms can, then, be judged relative to their fruitfulness in guiding research and their resources for solving problems.

Finally, the narrative patterns which are candidates for explanation forms are, White suggests, themselves artifacts of our cultural heritage. What counts as an explanation may, then, be an historically contingent phenomenon. And insofar as methodological paradigms serve as a basis for historical explanations, as Wise claims, an account of explanation as pattern finding and problem solving is suggested. The analysis of the notion of explanation, in short, is quite possibly a question which belongs as much to cognitive psychology and cultural history as it does to the logic and philosophy of science.

Narrative explanations, as is to be expected, are underdetermined by their evidence; agreement on the evidence still allows for the construction of logically incompatible histories. But a twist arises in the historical case that further complicates the epistemological picture. Settling the scientific world picture does not

20. Arguments that differences in historical explanations are *not* necessarily differences over matters of fact but disagreements concerning modes of emplotment are found in Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore, 1978), and *Metahistory* (Baltimore, 1973), and Gene Wise, *American Historical Explanations*, 2nd ed., rev. (Minneapolis, 1980).

21. See particularly "Interpretation in History" and "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," in White, *Tropics of Discourse*.

22. See Wise, chapter 5 for an especially interesting discussion of paradigms as "explanation forms."

settle which macroscopic events there are; each person's story in *Rashomon* involves, *ex hypothesi*, no alteration of the facts, and so no change in any scientific inventory of what there is. Historical events, this suggests, escape specification even within a completed theory of the physical universe. Surrendering a belief in a God's-eye chronicle, and so a metaphysical commitment to the past as an untold story, does not impugn the tie of historical inquiry to the world. My penultimate remark suggests a reason as well for believing that historical inquiry is not identical with natural science.

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