

NARRATIVE AS A FORM OF EXPLANATION

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Abstract

Many scholars have argued that history embodies a different form of explanation from natural science. This paper provides an analysis of narrative conceived as the form of explanation appropriate to history. In narratives, actions, beliefs, and pro-attitudes are joined to one another by means of conditional and volitional connections. Conditional connections exist when beliefs and pro-attitudes pick up themes contained in one another. Volitional connections exist when agents command themselves to do something having decided to do it because of a pro-attitude they hold. The fear remains, however, that all narratives are constructed in part by the imagination of the writer, so if the human sciences deploy narratives, they lack proper epistemic legitimacy. The paper dispels this fear by arguing that we have proper epistemic grounds for postulating conditional and volitional connections because these connections are given to us by a folk psychology we accept as true.

Our standard way of explaining actions is by reference to the beliefs and pro-attitudes of actors. The most obvious historical examples are explanations of particular actions whether decided upon by an individual or group. Consider, for example, Colin Matthew's explanation of W. E. Gladstone's sensational production in 1886 of the controversial Government of Ireland Bill. Matthew describes how the Liberal Party was excluded from the process of discussion and how even the Cabinet was not given adequate time to examine the proposals. "Gladstone," he explains, "hoped to trump Cabinet doubts and party unease by the production of a great bill."¹ The tactics Gladstone deployed are explained here by reference to his wish to win support for his proposals and his belief, albeit surrounded by doubts, that he could do so through the drama of a great bill. A similar form of explanation appears whenever historians treat classes, institutions, states, and the like as akin to people by ascribing intentions and reasons to them.

¹ H. Matthew, *Gladstone, 1875-1898* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 236.

Numerous historical explanations work by pointing to the beliefs and pro-attitudes that informed an action or set of actions. Historians explain all sorts of aspects of life in this way, including not only particular actions or sets of actions, but also broad patterns of behaviour associated with social movements, social structures, and the dynamics of social change. Although the relevant beliefs and pro-attitudes can become multiple, complex, and hard to disentangle, it is still to them historians turn, at least implicitly, in explaining human life. Consider, for example, Lawrence Stone's explanation of the rise of the nuclear family in Britain.² Stone explains the decline of kinship and clientage largely by reference to the rise of beliefs that emphasised allegiances other than private and local loyalties to individuals: the Reformation stressed a moral allegiance to God; a grammar school and university education in humanism stressed allegiance to the prince; and an Inns of Court education stressed allegiance to an abstraction, the common law. Similarly, Stone explains the rise of a form of family life based on affective individualism largely by reference to the spread of Puritan beliefs. The Puritans bequeathed a legacy, including an ideal of matrimony based on love, and a respect for the individual, which reached beyond the religious sphere of life. Puritanism, humanism, and the like, moreover, provided the context in which Enlightenment beliefs took root. "Family relationships were powerfully affected by the concept that the pursuit of individual happiness is one of the basic laws of nature, and also by the growing movement to put some check on man's inhumanity to man."³ Stone explains large patterns of social change by showing how new beliefs inspired new patterns of human action. He allows, of course, that the spread of the new beliefs can be related, in a mutually supportive fashion, to changes in the state and the economy. But although people become attached to new beliefs in a social context which makes the beliefs meaningful to them, it is, as Stone recognises, the new beliefs that explain the new patterns of behaviour and so the changes in social structure. A prominent form of historical explanation unpacks actions by reference to beliefs and pro-attitudes. My aim in what follows is to analyse this narrative form of explanation.

Perhaps we can describe some actions in purely physical terms: we can say "Susan crossed the road".⁴ As soon as we try to explain an action, however, we necessarily place it, at least implicitly, in the context of beliefs

² L. Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*, abridged ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), partic. pp. 176-80.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

⁴ Many of the words we would naturally use to describe certain actions, however, presuppose that the actor possesses certain inter-subjective meanings or beliefs. See C. Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man", *Review of Metaphysics* 25 (1971-72), 3-51.

and pro-attitudes. Even to say “Susan crossed the road and bought a sandwich” is to evoke beliefs and preferences such that we generally would assume her reason for crossing the road was her desire to get a sandwich. When historians explain actions, they do so by deploying, even if only implicitly, the concepts of folk psychology. Those who assimilate history to natural science typically rely on one of two arguments. If they are physicalists, they argue that mental objects are at most manifestations of physical ones. If they are social positivists, they argue that mental objects are in principle no different from physical ones. According to physicalists, we can explain human actions in purely physical terms. An obvious difficulty with their position is that we do not do so. Rather, we explain human actions using the language of folk psychology. Conciliatory physicalists argue that at least in principle we can reduce the language of folk psychology to that of cognitive science. However, we can not really do so for the sufficient reason that the two languages instantiate incompatible categories. We apply the concepts of folk psychology using criteria of rationality which have no place in the application of the concepts used in natural science. Matthew’s explanation of Gladstone’s actions, for example, makes sense to us because we can see why Gladstone might have believed the drama of a great bill would quieten opposition, and why he might have wanted to quieten opposition. Natural scientists, in contrast, ascribe properties to physical objects without reference to criteria of rationality. They apply concepts using arational criteria such as mass, velocity, and concentration. Crucially, because the application of the concepts of folk psychology depends on criteria of rationality, and because we can not express these criteria in the language of the natural sciences, therefore we can not reduce folk psychology to the physicalist language of natural science.⁵ Confrontational physicalists could accept the irreducibility of folk psychology since they argue that folk psychology conflicts with a cognitive science concerned to give purely physiological descriptions of aspects and products of mind. At the moment, however, natural scientists do not offer us an alternative to folk psychology, so historians can not — at least for the moment — renounce folk psychology.

Social positivists argue that the language of folk psychology is analogous to that of the natural sciences. Numerous scholars have given various excellent critiques of social positivism. All I want to do, therefore, is to point out that the scientific concept of causation has no place in folk psychology. When we discuss actions we deploy a folk psychology whose criteria of application centre on a weak notion of rationality. When we thus explain actions as products of reasons, we suggest that the people concerned could in some sense have reasoned differently, and, had they done so, the objects would

⁵ Compare D. Davidson, “Mental Events”, in *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 207-27.

not have come into being as they did. If an object depends on the reasoned decision, or choice, of a person, we must explain it as the product of that decision, so we can not explain it as a determined outcome of a law-like process; after all, choices would not be choices if they were fixed by causal laws. We can conclude, therefore, that folk psychology instantiates a weak concept of rationality which precludes our explaining meaningful objects using the scientific concept of causation.

Many philosophers have distinguished history from natural science. Often they go on to define natural science in terms of the provision of causal explanations and history in terms of the understanding of beliefs, motives, and actions.⁶ The problem with these definitions is that they suggest historians try to understand or reconstruct objects, but not then to explain them. Indeed, some scholars argue that narrative can be no more than a preliminary exercise to be followed by a more properly scientific analysis or explanation.⁷ In contrast, historians often write as though their narratives explain actions by pointing to their causes. Scholars from all sorts of disciplines use the word cause to describe the explanatory relationship between the entities and events they study. When they do so, however, they typically use the word cause to indicate the presence of a significant relationship of the sort characteristic of explanation in their discipline without thereby conveying a philosophical analysis of the relationship. I want to suggest, therefore, that history generally relies on narrative conceived as a form of explanation that works by pointing to connections different in kind from those of the natural sciences.

Every form of explanation works by postulating pertinent connections between entities or events. Narrative explanations relate actions to the beliefs and pro-attitudes that produce them. Their abstract form is: an action X was done because the agent held beliefs Y according to which doing X would fulfil his pro-attitude Z. Narrative explanations postulate two types of connections. The first is that which relates actions, beliefs, and pro-attitudes in a way which makes them intelligible in the light of one another. I will call these conditional

⁶ Thus the well known debate over whether or not narrative explained revolved around the issue of whether or not narrative could be assimilated to a strictly causal or a covering-law form of explanation associated with the natural sciences. See, in particular, the classic argument that narrative is a sketchy or partial version of the nomological-deductive form of explanation, as found in C. Hempel, "The Function of General Laws in History", *Journal of Philosophy* 39 (1942), 35-48. For a general account of the debate, see M. Murphy, "Explanation, Causes, and Covering Laws", *History and Theory* 25 (1986), Beiheft 25: *Knowing and Telling History: The Anglo-Saxon Debate*, 43-57.

⁷ The annales school are associated with this position. See, in particular, F. Furet, "From Narrative History to Problem-oriented History", in *In the Workshop of History*, trans. J. Mandelbaum (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 54-67.

connections. Conditional connections can relate agents's beliefs to one another, including their beliefs about the effects of their actions, so as to make sense of the fact that they thought the actions would fulfil one or more of their pro-attitudes. Consider, for example, Gladstone and the first Government of Ireland Bill. We can make his actions intelligible by connecting his preference for getting such a Bill passed to his beliefs that there would be opposition to the Bill in his party, that his party would rally around during a great drama, that he could make such a drama out of the Bill, and so on. The second type of connection found in narrative explanations is that which relates pro-attitudes to the actions they motivate. I will call these volitional connections. Volitional connections enable us to make sense of the fact that agents moved from having pro-attitudes to states of affairs to intending to perform actions and then to acting as they did. We explain Gladstone's actions, for instance, by postulating his preference for the Bill being passed, so as to assume that this pro-attitude, in the context of the beliefs just discussed, gave him certain intentions upon which he acted. Crucially, conditional and volitional connections are neither necessary nor arbitrary. It is because they are not necessary that history differs from the natural sciences; and it is because they are not arbitrary that we nonetheless can use them to explain actions.

Conditional connections relate agents' beliefs and pro-attitudes to one another so as to make sense of the fact that they thought an action would fulfil one or more of their pro-attitudes. Conditional connections exist when the nature of one object draws on the nature of another. The former is conditioned by the latter, so they do not have an arbitrary relationship to one another, but equally the former does not follow from the latter, so they do not have a necessary relationship to one another. More particularly, conditional connections exist when beliefs and pro-attitudes reflect, develop, or modify themes that occur in others. A theme is an idea suggested by the specific character of several beliefs and pro-attitudes. Any belief or pro-attitude will give us intimations of associated ideas that might or might not have been picked up by the person involved. When they are picked up, they become themes which link the relevant beliefs and pro-attitudes. For example, a concern about corruption in the Church suggests a greater focus on the direct relationship of the individual to God, which, in turn, hints at a greater emphasis on individual virtue, and so at affective individualism. These religious ideas are not linked indissolubly to one another, but neither are they an arbitrary set. Rather, they go together in that they take up, elucidate, and develop intimations found in one another. They go together in that there are themes running through them.

Because conditional connections are not arbitrary, themes must be immanent within the objects they bring together. Historians uncover themes that really do exist in the objects they are considering: the presence of the

themes shows the objects belong together. Because themes are immanent in the objects they connect, historians should concern themselves only with themes that actually did link beliefs and pro-attitudes. Consider, for example, Stone's evocation of the themes running from a stress on the individual's direct relationship with God to an affective individualism. The relevant themes must be present in these ideas as they were understood by Stone or else he could not have linked the ideas to one another. Yet the existence of the relevant themes in the ideas as they are understood by Stone does not of itself entail their existence in the ideas as they are understood by others. The validity of his explanation depends on his argument that British Puritans made the same conditional connections as he identifies. Narratives must rest on conditional connections that really were immanent in the subjective consciousness of the relevant individuals.

Because conditional connections are not necessary, themes must be given immediately by the content of the beliefs and pro-attitudes they connect. Historians do not identify a theme as an instance of a general law defining a fixed relationship between the objects they are considering. They describe a theme solely in terms of the content of the particular objects it relates to one another. Because themes are given immediately by the beliefs and pro-attitudes they connect, when people can not see the conditional connection between them, we can bring them to do so only by describing other beliefs and pro-attitudes that fill it out. Imagine, for example, that people can see no connection between a stress on the individual's direct relationship with God and affective individualism. We could not show them the connection by appealing to some general law. All we could do would be to describe various other ideas that act as intermediate stages between the two principle ones. We might say, for instance, that a stress on the individual's direct relationship with God implies salvation depends primarily on the virtue of the individual, and this then points to a concern with the emotional and moral life of the individual, which, in turn, encourages affective individualism.

Volitional connections enable us to make sense of the fact that agents moved from having pro-attitudes to states of affairs to intending to perform actions and then on to acting as they did. Volitional connections exist when a will first decides to act on a pro-attitude and then does so. Whereas our beliefs and pro-attitudes give us all sorts of grounds for doing all sorts of things, the will selects the particular actions we are to perform from among the alternatives thus presented to us. The will forms an intention to act by deciding which action we should perform out of the many we have grounds for performing. We have to postulate the will here because there is a space separating pro-attitudes from intentions. This space suggests that we should conceive of the will reaching a decision in an unrestricted process in which previously formed intentions, current preferences, and future possibilities all interact with one another. The decisions it thereby makes give us our inten-

tions. Although our decisions give us intentions, we can act on such intentions only because of the ability of the will to command us so to do. Once we have decided to do something we still have to command ourselves to do it. Here the will instigates a movement of the body, a calling to mind of a particular memory, and other such things.

Volitional connections come into being when the will operates so as to transform one's stance towards a given proposition first from being favourable to it to a decision to act on it, and then from a decision to act on it to a command so to do. No doubt historians are unable to say much about the way the will operates: they can say little other than that the will did operate with a particular result. But that they can not do so is not a failing so much as a necessary consequence of the nature of the will. The will is a creative faculty. Typically, therefore, historians do not unpack volitional connections so much as take them for granted. Our folk psychology tells us people are capable of acting on their beliefs and pro-attitudes. Because people can do this, to elucidate the relevant beliefs and pro-attitudes is to explain an action or set of actions. Thus, narrative explanations consist primarily of the unpacking of themes between actions, beliefs, and pro-attitudes. Moreover, to show how various themes in an action are picked up by other actions, beliefs, and pro-attitudes is to contextualise that action. It is, therefore, I believe, the nature of narrative, and more particularly of conditional connections, that validates the processes of colligation and configuration that many philosophers have seen as central to history.⁸

History instantiates a narrative form of explanation. Human actions are explained by pointing to conditional and volitional connections which relate objects to one another in an intelligible manner without evoking the idea of necessity. Such conclusions suggest that history deploys the same type of narrative structures we find in works of fiction. However, we can accept this suggestion without assimilating history to fiction. Historians must offer us narratives they believe retell the way in which things really did happen in the past or really are today, whereas writers of fiction need not do so. Historians can not ignore the facts, although we surely should accept that no fact is simply given to them.

⁸ On colligation, see L. Cebik, "Colligation and the Writing of History", *Monist* 53 (1969), 40-57; W. Dray, *On History and Philosophers of History* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989), chap. 2; C. McCullagh, "Colligation and Classification in History", *History and Theory* 27 (1978), 267-84; and W. Walsh, "Colligatory Concepts in History", in P. Gardiner, ed., *The Philosophy of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 127-44. On configuration, see L. Mink, "History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension", *New Literary History* 1 (1970), 541-58; and P. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols., trans. K. McLaughlin & D. Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984-88), vol. 1, chap. 2.

The fear remains, however, that all narratives are constructed in part by the imagination of the writer, so if history relies on narrative, it lacks proper epistemic legitimacy. Even scholars who defend narrativism have expressed this fear. Louis Mink, for example, doubted whether one could resolve the dilemma that although historical narrative “claims to represent ... the real complexity of the past,” as narrative it must be an “imaginative construction, which cannot defend its claim to truth.”⁹ Some scholars who defend narrativism positively embrace the idea that a dependence on narrative implies history disrupts the world instead of representing it. Hayden White, for example, argues that historians endow the past with meaning by “the projection” of narrative structures on it, where the choice of narrative structures, or “genres of literary figuration”, is the result of an arational, aesthetic judgement.¹⁰ Arguments such as White’s are increasingly common due to the influence of post-structuralism. To conclude, therefore, I want to defend the epistemic legitimacy of narrative.

My defence of the epistemic legitimacy of narrative presupposes a rejection of naive positivism. It presupposes that we can not have pure perceptions of given facts, but rather always approach the world with a prior body of theories, concepts, or categories which help to construct the experiences we have. The failings of naive positivism are recognised so widely now that I hope I will be excused taking this presupposition for granted. Two important consequences follow from a rejection of naive positivism. The first is that in all areas of human knowledge — natural science as well as narrative — we imaginatively construct the world of our experience. Thus, we can accept that historical narratives are in part imaginative constructs and still defend their epistemic legitimacy, for their legitimacy can not be undermined by the fact that they exhibit a characteristic that is common to all knowledge. Many concerns about the epistemic legitimacy of narrative make sense only if one assumes the possibility of forms of knowledge that don’t entail anything akin to what Mink called “imaginative construction”. Certainly White’s reference to the way in which historians project narrative structures on to the past becomes critical only if one assumes the possibility of some sort of pure data on to which we don’t project prior categories. White clearly evokes an idea akin to that of pure facts by comparison with which to cast doubts on the epistemic adequacy of narrative: he talks of “the transition from the level of fact or event in the discourse to that of narrative,” arguing, moreover, that “this transition is effected by a displacement of the facts onto the ground of literary figurations or, what amounts to the same thing, the projection onto the facts of the plot structure of one or another of the genres of literary figuration.”¹¹ White, in other words, relies implicitly on a naive positivist faith in pure facts, a reliance

⁹ L. Mink, “Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument”, in *The Writing of History*, ed. R. Canary & H. Kozicki (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), p. 145.

¹⁰ H. White, “The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory”, in *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 47.

¹¹ White, “Question of Narrative”, p. 47.

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that seems odd given his broad sympathy for post-structuralist critiques of representation. Once we reject such naive positivism, the fact that narrative entails a form of projection becomes irrelevant to its epistemic legitimacy. The relevant issue is the reasonableness of the form of projection it entails.

The second important consequence of rejecting naive positivism is, therefore, that we must judge the epistemic legitimacy of a form of explanation by reference to the reasonableness of the theories, concepts, or categories it embodies. There are, of course, numerous, competing, post-positivist analyses of what counts as reasonable in this context.¹² Fortunately, however, we do not need to decide between these competing analyses to defend the epistemic legitimacy of narrative. Narrative rests on the theories, concepts, and categories central to folk psychology, and these surely must be judged reasonable by any criteria. Indeed, I argued earlier that the failings of scientism and social positivism are such that human scientists have no option but to work with folk psychology. A rejection of naive positivism implies that the past does not present itself to historians as a series of isolated facts upon which they then impose a narrative so as to bring the facts to order. Rather, the past, like all experience, presents itself as an already structured set of facts.¹³ Historians can not grasp facts about the past save in their relation to one another and also to the other theories they hold true. They can not experience the past apart from the categories given them by folk psychology. We might say, therefore, that the past they experience already has a narrative structure.¹⁴

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¹² For my preferred post-positivist epistemology, see M. Bevir, "Objectivity in History", *History and Theory* 33 (1994), 328-44.

¹³ Contrast White's, again implicitly positivist, argument that "it is because real events do not offer themselves as stories that their narrativization is so difficult." H. White, "Value of Narrativity", in *Content of the Form*, p. 4.

¹⁴ Several phenomenologists emphasise we experience history as narrative. See D. Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); and Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*. Typically, however, their analyses of narrative as part of our experience of the world rely primarily on an analysis of temporality not folk psychology.