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# HISTORICAL EXPLANATION, FOLK PSYCHOLOGY, AND NARRATIVE

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## ABSTRACT

This paper argues history differs from natural science in relying on folk psychology and so narrative explanations. In narratives, actions, beliefs, and pro-attitudes are joined by conditional and volitional connections. Conditional connections exist when beliefs and pro-attitudes pick up themes from 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 paper defends the epistemic legitimacy of narratives by arguing we have legitimate grounds for postulating conditional and volitional connections since they are given to us by a folk psychology we accept as true.

## HISTORICAL EXPLANATION, FOLK PSYCHOLOGY, AND NARRATIVE

### I. Preliminaries

When we say that Susan crossed the road to buy a sandwich, we explain her action by attributing to her a desire to buy a sandwich and a belief that she can do so across the road. Our standard way of explaining human actions is by reference to the beliefs and pro-attitudes of actors. We should not be surprised, therefore, that historical explanations often appeal to beliefs and pro-attitudes. The most obvious examples are explanations of particular actions, whether decided upon by an individual or a 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' (Matthew, 1995, p. 236). The tactics Gladstone deployed are explained here by reference to both 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 collective entities such as classes, institutions, and states as akin to people by ascribing to them things such as intentions.

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 from each other, historians still turn to them, at least implicitly, to explain human life. Consider, for example, Lawrence Stone's explanation of the rise of the nuclear family in Britain. 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. Stone also 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 respect for the individual and an ideal of holy matrimony based on ties of love, which reached beyond the religious sphere of life. Puritanism, humanism, and the like then provided the context in which Enlightenment beliefs took root. Thereafter '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' (Stone, 1979, p. 178). Stone thus explains large patterns of social change by showing how new beliefs inspired new patterns of action. He allows that the spread of these new beliefs can be related in a mutually supportive fashion to changes in the state and the economy. But although people became attached to the new beliefs in a social context that made these 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. I want to analyse this narrative form of explanation. Before I do so, however, I want to clarify two features of the range of the analysis. The first is that we can not straightforwardly equate all historical explanations with narrative. Although many historical explanations rely at least implicitly on accounts of actions based on beliefs and pro-attitudes, not all do so. To explain an increase in the sales of a commodity by reference to a lowering of its price is surely to rely implicitly on narrative; and to explain the victory of one army over another by saying it had superior armaments is perhaps to rely implicitly on narrative; but to explain a famine by reference to flooding is scarcely to rely on narrative at all. So, the ensuing analysis of narrative will unpack the dominant, but not exclusive, type of historical explanation. The second feature of the analysis I want to clarify is my use of the term narrative. We can not straightforwardly equate narrative, as does Stone elsewhere, with storytelling or the ‘organization of material in a chronologically sequential order’ (Stone, 1981, p. 74).<sup>1</sup> Although the material historians relate sequentially almost always revolves around actions, beliefs, and pro-attitudes, this need not be the case; and although to explain any complex set of actions is almost always to organise material sequentially, this too need not be the case. It is possible to place in a chronological order objects that are not actions, beliefs, or pro-attitudes; and it is possible to discuss actions, beliefs, and pro-attitudes without putting them in a chronological order. So, the ensuing analysis of narrative will concentrate on the connections between actions, beliefs and pro-attitudes, not their temporal progression.

Narrativity has been invoked as a distinctive characteristic of historical scholarship by a number of philosophers - analytical philosophers such as Arthur Danto (1985) and Morton White (1965), those inspired by post-structuralism such as

Frank Ankersmit (1983) and Hayden White (1987), and phenomenologists such as David Carr (1986) and Paul Ricoeur (1984-88). Like these philosophers, I will introduce narrativity in part to distinguish history from natural science. Unlike them, however, I will make this distinction, and so define narrative, through an analysis of the concepts of folk psychology. I will begin by explaining why historians have to deploy folk psychology, and why doing so commits them to narrative explanations different from the strictly causal ones of natural science. Next I will analyse the nature of narrative, at times in contrast to the analyses offered by analytical philosophers, post-structuralists, and phenomenologists. Whereas analytical philosophers often unpack the explanatory power of narratives in terms of their fit with a general law-like form of explanation, I will do so by reference to the peculiar conditional and volitional connections postulated by folk psychology. Whereas post-structuralists often equate narrative with a questionable imaginative or linguistic construction of the past, I will defend the epistemological basis of narrative by securing folk psychology. And whereas phenomenologists often ground narrative in allegedly universal facts about mind and experience, I will do so by reference to a contingent folk psychology.

## II. Folk Psychology

Our everyday discussions of human actions deploy a folk psychology consisting of a cluster of concepts that refer to human attitudes to propositions and to states of affairs - concepts such as fear, belief, desire, and pleasure. No doubt we can have the psychological attitudes we do only because we possess certain physiological characteristics. Yet even if we discuss our capacity for holding attitudes and

performing actions in physiological terms, we still discuss our actual attitudes and actions using folk psychology. Some philosophers and scientists have attempted to devise a theory of mind that ignores, or even overturns, this folk psychology. We need not dismiss their efforts, however, to recognise that they are irrelevant to historians. The most these physicalists can claim is that we should attempt to devise a physical interpretation of, or alternative to, folk psychology; after all, at the moment we can neither correlate cognitive states with neuro-physiological ones nor provide an adequate account of our mental life in purely physiological terms. Thus, historians should ask physicalists what they ought to do while waiting for cognitive scientists to tell them how to discuss human actions. Physicalism embodies an aspiration; it is a research programme based on a faith in biological science. No doubt if this aspiration became a reality historians would have to rethink their discipline. But until it becomes a reality, if it ever does, historians have no option but to work with folk psychology precisely because that is the language we use to discuss actions.

The dependence of our explanations of actions upon folk psychology renders narrative incompatible with the scientific concept of causation as natural necessity. We should renounce a social positivism, or reductionism, that seeks to install the scientific concept of causation into folk psychology. Social positivists argue that causal laws determine the nature of things such as pro-attitudes, beliefs, and actions: just as gravity causes apples to fall, so sociological or psychological forces cause people to have the preferences they do, to believe what they do, and to act as they do. Social positivists sometimes fudge the issue by adding a rider to the effect that sociological or psychological forces determine pro-attitudes, beliefs, and actions only in the last instance. But this rider misses the philosophical point. Either social positivists want to install the scientific concept of causation into folk psychology or



they do not. If they do not, they should stop talking in quasi-scientific terms of forces determining actions, and instead join the search for a concept of causation appropriate to folk psychology. If they do, they can continue to talk of social or psychological forces determining actions, but equally we can challenge the appropriateness of their concept of causation for much historical scholarship.

Social positivism attracts scholars for two main reasons. Sometimes it represents an attempt to claim the prestige of the natural sciences for a favoured approach: talk of explaining actions by causal laws can sound impressively rigorous compared to avowedly unscientific, interpretative approaches. At other times, social positivism springs from lax thinking: scholars rightly recognise that there is a universal feature of explanation such that to explain something is to relate it to other things, and this leads them wrongly to assume that the relationship between explanans and explanandum also must be universal, where the prestige of the natural sciences ensures that they identify this universal relationship with the scientific concept of causation. The two main attractions of social positivism derive, therefore, from the prestige of natural science. Surely however we should not take the success of natural science to preclude other forms of explanation? The undoubted power of natural science does not mean that we should model disciplines deploying other languages on it. On the contrary, because these disciplines rely on other languages, we can unpack the forms of explanation that operate in these disciplines only by studying the concepts at work therein.

When we discuss actions, we deploy a folk psychology that commits us to seeing them as products of beliefs and pro-attitudes, a folk psychology whose criteria of application centre on a weak notion of rationality. Within folk psychology, we explain actions as products of reasons - pro-attitudes and beliefs. Furthermore, when

we explain actions as products of reasons, we suggest that the people concerned could have reasoned differently, and had they done so, the objects would 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. 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. No doubt a reason still might be the cause of an action under an alternative, physical description.

Nonetheless, as Donald Davidson has argued convincingly, reasons are not causes when we discuss an action using folk psychology. Events relate to one another as cause and effect only if they are subsumed under a strict law, and we can not subsume psychological events under strict laws because folk psychology is neither a closed language nor reducible to a closed language (Davidson, 1980b).

Historians have to study actions using the language of folk psychology, not natural science. They can not repudiate folk psychology because we can not reduce the concepts within it to physiological ones, and, at least at the moment, we do not have an adequate physical alternative to it. They also can not transplant the language of natural science into folk psychology because the two are strictly incompatible: the categories of folk psychology revolve around the concepts of reason, decision, and choice, concepts that rule out the strictly causal form of explanation associated with the natural sciences. Folk psychology requires historians to explain actions by elucidating the reasons people have for performing them, not by pointing to the physiological states of the actor or to sociological and psychological laws. No doubt the reasons people have for an action sometimes derive from their experiences and so indirectly from their social location, and sometimes from the influence of their

emotional make-up upon their reasoning. Even in these cases, however, sociological and psychological facts are relevant only because they inform the reasons people have for performing a given action. They are not relevant because of a law-like generalisation of the form ‘people in social location X or with psychological make-up Y act in a way Z’.

### III. Varieties of Explanation

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. The problem with these definitions is that they suggest that historians try only to understand or reconstruct objects, not then to explain them by postulating appropriate connections between them.<sup>2</sup> Hence, while analytical philosophers, such as Danto and Morton White, who defend a version of narrativism typically do so by assimilating narrative to a general type of explanation also found in natural science, their opponents argue that narrative at most can be a preliminary exercise to be followed by a more properly scientific analysis or explanation.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, historians often write as though their narratives explain actions by pointing to their causes without thereby claiming to be scientists (Hexter, 1971, pp. 77-105). 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, they rarely tell us anything about the nature of the connections between these entities and events. Rather, they use the word cause to indicate the presence of a significant relationship of the sort that characterises explanation in their discipline without thereby conveying a philosophical analysis of

this relationship.<sup>4</sup> Narrative thus constitutes a form of explanation in that it answers the question ‘why’ as well as ‘what’ (Hempel & Oppenheim, 1988, p. 9).

Every form of explanation works by postulating pertinent connections between entities or events. Narrative explanations relate actions to the beliefs and pro-attitudes that inform them. Their abstract form is: an action X was done because the agent held beliefs Y according to which X would fulfil a pro-attitude Z. Narrative explanations postulate two types of connection. 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 connections. Conditional connections relate agents’ 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 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 that one way of doing so would be to spring it on people. The second type of connection postulated by 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 an agent moved from having a pro-attitude to a state of affairs to intending to perform an action and then to acting. Consider once again Gladstone and the first Government of Ireland Bill. We can explain his actions 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.

Later I will give a positive analysis of conditional and volitional connections but first I want to contrast them with other types of connection (Oakeshott, 1983, pp. 45-96; and von Wright, 1971). Crucially conditional and volitional connections are neither necessary nor arbitrary. It is because they are not necessary that we can not express them as physical or logical laws; and it is because they are not arbitrary that we nonetheless can use them to explain actions.

When we deny that the concept of causation found in natural science is appropriate to human actions, we contrast conditional and volitional connections with physically necessary ones. Whereas folk psychology entails the possibility of people having chosen to do other than they did, explanations in natural science point to physical connections that are necessary precisely because they do not include the idea of objects being able to choose to do other than they do. Of course, some philosophers follow Hume in analysing the scientific concept of causation in terms of regularity, not necessity (Hume, 1978, pp. 400-1). A Humean view of causation still suggests, however, that the regularities postulated in narratives, but not those explored by natural scientists, arise because people choose to do what they do. Imagine, for example, that historians uncovered a regularity to the effect that the emergence of Puritanism always has led to the rise of the nuclear family. The explanation of this regularity would have to lie in an account of what it was about Puritan beliefs that made people who held them form nuclear families. Historians would have to point to the reasons Puritanism gave people for adopting certain domestic arrangements. Perhaps some philosophers will reject not only the idea of necessity, but also the distinction between different regularities. Perhaps they will do so on the Humean grounds that this distinction, like the idea of necessity, has no basis in experience. Surely, however, if they did so, they would commit themselves to an unacceptably

rigid empiricism? Unless we are to defend the idea of pure experience, we must allow that we can postulate different types of regularities, and surely one such difference must mirror the distinction between physically necessary connections and those postulated by folk psychology. Thus, even if the connections natural scientists study are regularities, not necessities, these regularities must be unaffected by agency in a way which must distinguish them from conditional and volitional ones. Once we grasp the contrast between narrative and the strictly causal explanations associated with natural science, we can distinguish conditional and volitional connections from various other types of connection all of which point to, or at least can point to, physical necessity, or, if one takes a Humean view, physical regularity. Here conditional and volitional connections differ from unique ones, statistical and probabilistic ones, and the functional and teleological ones biologists often investigate.

When we deny that conditional and volitional connections are necessary, we contrast them with logical ones as well as physical ones. We do so because logical connections, like physical ones, preclude the idea of things being able to choose to do other than they do. If X is a logical corollary of Y, nobody is in a position to choose to have Y but not X; they can not choose to do so because the mere fact of Y brings X with it - Y makes X logically necessary. Narrative differ, therefore, from explanations from first principles and explanations from consequences, both of which rely on the presence of logically necessary connections.

All too often, scholars seek to assimilate narrative to physical or logical necessity in the mistaken belief that the only alternative is to renounce the very possibility of explaining actions. I want to argue, in contrast, that conditional and volitional connections are not only not necessary but also not arbitrary. An arbitrary

connection is not one that does not exist, but one of no explanatory significance. It has no significance because the things it links tell us nothing about one another. The model of such a connection is pure chance. We describe two situations as being connected by chance, when we recognise they are related but can not see any significant reason for their being so. There need be no explanatory significance, for example, in the fact that Gladstone produced the First Government of Ireland Bill in the same year that he published Lessons of the Election. In contrast, we postulate conditional and volitional connections when we can see a significant reason for objects being connected but this reason does not make their being connected necessary. To reject the assimilation of narrative to the recounting of arbitrary occurrences is not to reject the very idea of things such as fate, chance, and the inexplicable. It is to insist only that narrative relies on conditional and volitional connections, not arbitrary ones.

#### IV. The Conditional and the Volitional

Having distinguished conditional and volitional connections from various others, I want to turn now to a more positive analysis of their nature. 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. More particularly, they exist where beliefs and pro-attitudes reflect, develop, or modify themes that occur in one another. Beliefs and pro-attitudes need not have picked up themes in the way they did, which is why conditional connections are not necessary. But equally the themes really did abide in the beliefs and pro-attitudes

concerned, which is why conditional connections are not arbitrary. 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 linking 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. They go together in that they take up, elucidate, and develop intimations found in one another. Themes relate them to one another in a conditional manner.

We can fill out the concept of a theme by returning to the contrasts between conditional connections and arbitrary and necessary ones. Because conditional connections are not arbitrary, themes must be immanent within the objects they bring together.<sup>5</sup> Conditional connections differ from symbolic ones because we find the former in the world whereas we construct the latter for ourselves: we find X picks up themes in Y, whereas we decide to use X as a symbol for Y. Symbolical connections are arbitrary because the way we construct them means we need not postulate any natural significance in X symbolising Y. Thus, if we simply constructed themes, then conditional connections would be arbitrary, but they are not arbitrary, so themes must be immanent within beliefs and pro-attitudes. Historians attempt to uncover themes that really do exist in the objects they are considering: the presence of the themes shows the objects really did 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 entail their existence in the ideas as they are understood by others. Thus, the validity of his narrative explanation depends on his argument that British Puritans made the very conditional connections that he identifies. Narratives must rest on conditional connections that were present in the mind 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 bring together. Conditional connections differ from unique, statistical, and functional ones because we express them solely in terms of the relevant beliefs and pro-attitudes whereas we can express the latter three as fixed universal laws. Historians describe the connections they find between particular beliefs and pro-attitudes whereas natural scientists deploy laws of the form 'Y will occur in a set proportion of cases in which X occurs, even if X occurs only once'. What is more, unique, statistical, and functional connections are necessary precisely because they rely on general laws to fix the relationship between X and Y. Thus, if the themes that linked beliefs and pro-attitudes were fixed by abstract laws, conditional connections would be necessary ones; but they are not necessary, so themes must be given immediately by the content of the objects they bring together. Historians do not identify a theme as an instance of a general law that defines 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 not see the 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 a general law. All we could do would be to describe various other ideas that act as intermediates between the two principles. 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 points to a concern with the emotional and moral life of the individual, which in turn encourages affective individualism.

Our analysis of a theme allows for some conditional connections being multi-dimensional and multi-directional. Conditional connections can be multi-dimensional because themes are not exhausted by the beliefs and pro-attitudes in which they appear. Themes are not consumed by any one, two, or more objects. Rather, they can cover any number of beliefs and pro-attitudes, bringing them together around a hint found in all of them, and, what is more, they can be extended to yet more objects that also pick up on this hint. We can see, for example, how themes in both affective individualism and Puritanism relate to a commercial individualism associated with the rise of the market economy. Conditional connections can be multi-directional because themes are things of which several beliefs and pro-attitudes partake, not things that one gives to another. Themes do not link an object to one that goes naturally or logically before it. They link two or more objects that go together in a reciprocal relationship. We can see, for example, how affective individualism might have reinforced the Puritanism from which it in part derived.

Volitional connections enable us to make sense of the fact that agents moved from having a pro-attitude to a state of affairs to intending to perform actions and then

to acting. A volitional connection appears 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 intentions. 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. The will thus instigates things such as a movement of the body or a calling to mind of a memory.

Although volitional connections resemble conditional ones in that their location in folk psychology divorces them from the necessary and the arbitrary, the two differ from one another in other respects. Conditional connections link beliefs that pick up on themes contained in one another. The stance the agent takes towards the two objects is the same - the agent believes X and Y - but the two objects have different content - X and Y have themes in common but they are not the same. Volitional connections, in contrast, link commands back to decisions and then decisions back to pro-attitudes. The content of the objects is the same - the agent commands himself to do X having decided to do X having had a preference for something he believed would be brought about by X - but the stance the agent takes towards them differs - to command differs from to decide which in turn differs from to

prefer. Whereas conditional connections link different contents to which people take the same stance, volitional connections link similar contents to which people take a different stance.

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 but merely take them for granted. Our folk psychology tells us that 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 the themes between actions, beliefs, and pro-attitudes.

## V. Reason and the Will

Narrative can be defined as a form of explanation that entails references to the intentional states of actors in a way that distinguishes it from the forms of explanation associated with the natural sciences. In this view, narrativism closely resembles the doctrine that we explain actions by appealing to the intentions or reasons of the agents concerned. Narratives provide explanations precisely because they embody such appeals to reasons and intentions. While this is true, there are important contrasts between narrative explanations and at least some well-known accounts of action-

rational explanations. Here the appeal to conditional and volitional connections weakens the ties binding actions to reasons and intentions.

As conditional connections link beliefs, pro-attitudes, and actions, so reasons are often said rationally to justify actions. Our analysis of a theme should be taken here as a repudiation of too strong a concept of rational justification and as an unpacking of an appropriate alternative.<sup>6</sup> A strong concept of rationality comes too close to assimilating conditional connections to logically necessary ones. It implies that historians appeal to universal rational connections given outside of all immediate contexts. It suggests that a stress on the individual's direct relationship with God entails an affective individualism. Once we reject a strong concept of rationality, however, we should ask: in what sense do beliefs and pro-attitudes justify one another and actions? The concept of a theme provides the beginnings of an answer to this question. It shifts our attention somewhat from rationalisation to contextualisation, from logic to narrative. Historians do not show how beliefs and the like rationally demand actions outside of the particular instances they consider. Rather, they trace themes so as to fill out the way in which beliefs and the like supported or justified actions within a particular context. Perhaps we might say that themes are reasons rendered explicitly particular instead of being left implicitly universal.

As volitional connections take us from pro-attitudes to actions, so actions are often said to be intimately connected to intentions. Our analysis of the will should be taken here as a repudiation of too strong an analysis of this connection and as an unpacking of an appropriate alternative. Philosophers such as Davidson argue that we do not need to postulate a will to explain actions. Actions follow deductively from the relevant beliefs and the pro-attitudes taken as premises. The intentionality of actions lies solely in their relationship to beliefs and pro-attitudes, not in a special

psychological capacity that moves from beliefs and pro-attitudes to actions (Davidson, 1980b). Yet the relationship between actions and the pro-attitudes that motivate them can not be one of logical necessity because we do not act on all pertinent pairs of pro-attitudes and beliefs. People might have a pro-attitude towards a state of affairs, and a belief that doing something will bring the state of affairs into being, and yet still not do that thing. So, Gladstone might have wanted to rally support, and he might have believed the drama of a great bill would have done so, and yet he still might not have produced such a bill with so little consultation; he might have been too busy with things he considered more important, or he might have wanted to open-up the decision making process in his party in a way which precluded such secrecy. Practical syllogisms with beliefs and a pro-attitude as premises can have as conclusions only grounds for actions, not actions, and we can bridge the gap between the two only by evoking the operation of the will. The concept of the will, like that of a theme, shifts our analysis from necessity to contingency, from logic to narrative.

Philosophers might accept that practical syllogisms only give people prima facie, as opposed to all-out, propositions in favour of actions, and still argue for a logically necessary relationship between actions and the beliefs and pro-attitudes that motivate them. Davidson, for example, identifies such all-out propositions with actions rather than the psychological states consequent upon having decided to act in a particular way (Davidson, 1980c; Martin, 1977, pp. 158-9; and von Wright, 1971, p. 96). Intentions thus become the products of a sort of algorithm applied to all the diverse pro-attitudes with a bearing on a particular action. However, this view ignores our capacity to decide now to do something in the future - it can not accommodate future intentions (Bratman, 1985, pp. 14-28). To co-ordinate our actions over time in accord with complex plans, we have to be able to do more than compute our

preferences as they are at the moment; we have to be able to follow past commitments for future purposes even when our current preferences would have us do otherwise.

## VI. Narrative and Fiction

Historians should explain actions by pointing to conditional and volitional connections that relate objects to one another in an intelligible but not necessary way. We can accept this assertion of the role of narrative in history without assimilating history to fiction. Although we can not say that fiction alone uses narrative, we can highlight a difference in the relationship of the narratives they use to our knowledge of the world.<sup>7</sup> Historians must offer us narratives that they believe adequately retell the way in which things happened in the past whereas writers of fiction need not do so. Although we should accept that no fact is simply given to historians, it remains the case that historians can not ignore what they believe happened, or invent what happened, as can writers of fiction.

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’ (Mink, 1978, p. 145). Some scholars who defend narrativism positively embrace this idea that we disrupt the world instead of representing it. Hayden White, for example, argues that historians endow the past with meaning by ‘the projection’ of narrative structures upon it, where the choice of narrative structures, or ‘genres of

literary figuration', is the result of an arational aesthetic judgement (White, 1987, p. 47). The rise of post-structuralism has given powerful support to such views. As Hayden White himself explains, post-structuralist theories 'dissolve the distinction between realistic and fictional discourses based on the presumption of an ontological difference between their respective referents, real and imaginary, in favor of stressing their common aspect as semiological apparatuses that produce meanings by the systematic substitution of signifieds (conceptual contents) for the extra-discursive entities that serve as their referents' (White, 1987, p. x). What I want to do now, therefore, is to defend the epistemic legitimacy of narrativism against its post-structuralist exponents.

A rejection of naive positivism implies that we can not have pure perceptions of given facts: we inevitably approach the world with a prior body of theories, concepts, or categories that helps to construct the experiences we have. The failings of naive positivism are recognised so widely now that I hope I will be excused taking its falsity for granted. Two important consequences follow from thus rejecting naive positivism. The first is that in all areas of human knowledge - natural science as well as history - we imaginatively construct the world of our experience. Thus, we can accept that 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 forms of explanation and all knowledge. Many fears 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 Hayden 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 pure data on to which we don't project prior categories.



Hayden 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’ (White, 1987, 47). Hayden White, in other words, relies implicitly on a naive positivist faith in pure facts, a reliance that seems odd given his broad sympathy for post-structuralist critiques of representation (Carroll, 1990; Kansteiner, 1993; Lorenz, 1998). Once we reject such naive positivism, the fact that narrative entails a form of projection becomes irrelevant to its epistemic legitimacy. The relevant issue becomes 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 (Bevir, 1999, pp. 78-126). Fortunately, however, we need not decide between them in order to defend the epistemic legitimacy of narrative. Narrative rests on the theories, concepts, and categories of folk psychology, and these surely should be judged reasonable by any criteria - indeed we have seen that historians currently have no option but to work with folk psychology.

Once we thus accept the legitimacy of historians postulating conditional and volitional connections, we can allow for the way that they select entities or events for inclusion in their narratives. Critics might argue that if we experience the past as having a narrative structure, then historians would need only to record the narratives

they experienced, but actually they struggle to organise and convey their view of the past, so they can not experience it as having a narrative structure. Really, however, when historians struggle to organise their material, they do so not at random or for aesthetic reasons, but because they are trying to expand their knowledge by tracing the conditional and volitional connections that enable them to explain more and more of their chosen field. Similarly, when they struggle to convey their material, they do so in order to make their view of the past convincing.

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.<sup>8</sup> Historians can not grasp facts about the past save in relation to one another and to other theories they hold true. Historians can not experience the past apart from the categories given them by folk psychology. We might say, therefore, that the past we experience already has a narrative structure. If we say this, however, we should be clear about why it is so. Phenomenologists such as Carr and Ricoeur often argue that we necessarily experience the past as narrative (Carr, 1986; Norman, 1991; and Ricoeur, 1984-88). The nature of time or mind is allegedly such that all human experience of the past has a narrative form. In contrast, I have argued that we experience the past as narrative only contingently as a result of doing so in terms of the concepts and categories of folk psychology. Because we can not have pure experiences, our experience of the past is necessarily constructed in part through our wider set of beliefs, including folk psychology. To say this is not to imply that any part of our wider set of beliefs is necessary or universal as opposed to contingent. We understand human affairs in terms of folk psychology, but at other

times or in other cultures, people might not do so, and if they did not do so, they would not experience the past as possessing a narrative structure.

## VII. Beyond Explanation

I have argued, first, that narrative is a distinctive form of explanation appropriate to human actions; second, that it works by unpacking the conditional and volitional connections between actions, beliefs, and pro-attitudes; and third, that its epistemic legitimacy is secured by the reasonableness of our contingent adherence to the concepts of folk psychology. Under these arguments, a work will constitute a narrative if it relies on the appropriate form of explanation, irrespective of whether it follows a strict chronological order or whether it contains things such as a setting, character, actions, and happenings.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, however, historical scholarship consists of more than the explanation of actions by reference to beliefs and pro-attitudes. By way of a conclusion, therefore, I want to look briefly at the place of narrative in relation to other aspects of historical story-telling.

An important task of the historian is to describe objects, including actions, beliefs, and pro-attitudes. Matthew, for example, tells us that Gladstone wrote to Lord Hartington, ‘action at a stroke . . . will be more honourable, less unsafe, less uneasy, than the jolting process of a series of partial measures’ (Matthew, 1995, p. 236). Matthew describes an action of Gladstone’s - that of writing to Hartington - and also gestures at a description of Gladstone’s beliefs - that action at a stroke had the advantages adumbrated. Clearly we can say that narratives connect at least some of the objects that historians describe. But that is not quite the right way of expressing the relationship. Because descriptions embody theoretical categories, they often entail

embryonic narratives. Matthew's description of Gladstone's utterance will make sense to us only if we have some idea of its context such as that he was talking about the passage of a controversial Bill. To set the utterance in such a context is, however, to highlight pertinent conditional connections, such as that Gladstone hoped to promote, explain, or justify a particular strategy for getting the Bill passed.

Another task of the historian is to relate actions, beliefs, and pro-attitudes to their settings. Sometimes these settings consist of purely physical phenomena that we can explain using the strictly causal model of the natural sciences. Elsewhere, for example, Matthew describes Gladstone conveying confidence to the Cabinet as it 'huddled together in the sharp Unionist wind' (Matthew, 1995, p. 333). The wind, a setting for part of Matthew's narrative, is something that we discuss and explain using the concepts of natural science. Often, however, the setting of a narrative will consist of yet other actions, beliefs, and pro-attitudes. Matthew's account of the first Government of Ireland Bill, for example, occurs in a setting that includes unease within the Liberal Party about such a measure, and this unease clearly consisted of the beliefs and pro-attitudes of party members. More generally, Matthew tells his story against the background of the broad pattern of British government - political parties, parliament, Cabinet government - that arose from the actions, beliefs, and pro-attitudes of numerous people over a long period of time.

The final aspect of historical scholarship I want to consider is that of justification. Historians try to justify their descriptions, narratives, and settings as reasonable representations of the past. No doubt part of the activity of justification consists of the use of certain rhetorical strategies (Nelson et. al., 1985). Yet central to the process of justification is the attempt to show an account of the past to be accurate and comprehensive, and this again rests on the evocation of narratives. Historians

illustrate the accuracy of what they say by reference to sources that consist of reports of actions, beliefs, and pro-attitudes. Matthew, for example, justifies his explanation of Gladstone's actions over the first Government of Ireland Bill in part by reference to the letter Gladstone wrote to Hartington, and, in doing so, he relies on a narrative in which Gladstone wrote the letter as a sincere expression of his beliefs about possible actions given certain preferences. Similarly, historians illustrate the comprehensiveness of what they say by reference to other well-established narratives within their disciplines. Stone's explanation of the rise of the nuclear family in Britain, for example, is justified in part by its symbiotic relationship to widely accepted theories about the relationship of Puritanism to commercial individualism and the Enlightenment.

We can conclude, therefore, that narrative is both a form of explanation appropriate to history, and also an integral part of other aspects of the stories historians tell, such as description, the setting of scenes, and justification.

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<sup>1</sup> The distinction between narrative and story-telling is made by all the analytical philosophers, post-structuralists, and phenomenologists mentioned below. For them, as for me, narrative is about historical understanding, interpretation, and explanation. On different definitions of narrative see Martin (1986) and Rigney (1991).

<sup>2</sup> Thus, the well known debate over whether or not narrative explained revolved around the issue of whether or not it could be assimilated to the strictly causal, covering-law form of explanation associated with the natural sciences. The classic argument that narrative is a sketchy or partial version of the nomological-deductive form of explanation is Hempel (1942). For an account of the debate, see Ricoeur (1984-88), vol. 1, pp. 111-155

<sup>3</sup> That narratives are composed largely of “atomic narratives” embodying lawlike, causal explanations is argued by Danto (1985). For the opposite view see the works discussed by Bann (1981).

<sup>4</sup> Collingwood (1940), pp. 285-343, attempts here to provide a logico-historical analysis of different senses of the word cause.

<sup>5</sup> The immanence of themes is echoed in many of the critical comments on the Humean concept of a cause found throughout Mandelbaum (1977).

<sup>6</sup> Anti-foundationalists renounce the possibility of a strong, universal rationality as an ideal. Even if one rejects anti-foundationalism, however, one should surely renounce the applicability of universal rationality to historical actuality. Irrespective of our epistemology, therefore, we should accept that historical explanations work by appealing to themes, not universal principles of reason.

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<sup>7</sup> Their different relationships to our knowledge of the world seems to me to be what underlies other pertinent differences, such as that author and narrator are brought together in history in a way they need not be in fiction. On this latter difference see Hernadi (1976). For another pertinent analysis of the differences between narrative in fiction and history see Ricoeur (1984-88), vol. 3, chaps. 6-8.

<sup>8</sup> Contrast Hayden White's (1987), p. 4, again implicitly positivist, argument that "it is because real events do not offer themselves as stories that their narrativization is so difficult."

<sup>9</sup> For this fuller definition of narrative see Megill (1989).