

BOOK REVIEWS

What is Pragmatism in the Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography?

Kuukkanen, Jouni-Matti (2015), *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 239pp, ISBN 978-1-137-40986-7.

In his book *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography* (2015),¹ Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen has presented his critical thesis of postnarrativism, involving theories of philosophers of science, e.g. Thomas Kuhn's epistemic values and Karl Popper's falsificationism for historiographical rationale and objectivity (pp. 127, 169). In this review, shortly explaining (post-)narrativism, I will scrutinise a pragmatist extent of his thesis.

First of all, what is narrativism? It may be articulated, in my understanding, that meaning is not in the sentences, but in between, or between the lines; it is neither sentence nor statement but the story behind a claim makes the 'truth'. Something being narrated and interwoven into the text, or the narrative, ends up with some verifiable account as historiography. Certainly, Kuukkanen's thesis goes beyond the current scholarship of narrativism in philosophy of history or historiography. But it is neither anti-narrativism, nor a-narrativism, nor pre-narrativism.

In particular, Kuukkanen contends against three central tenets of narrativism or the narrativist philosophy: constructivism, holism, and representationalism (pp. 13, 97). He disagrees with holism that historiography should play a role in constructing and unifying expressions or texts of history as undecomposable wholes, and with representationalism that such wholes should be characterised as corresponding representation (or isomorphic resemblance) between the past and narrative (mode of presentation). On the other hand, he does not disagree

¹ Based on this book, Kuukkanen successfully conducted a four-day workshop 'Why History Matters: The Rational Grounding of Historiography', at the University of Tartu, Estonia (19–22 March 2018). The videos are available at <https://www.utv.ee/naita?id=26904>. My review is primarily concerned with the book alone.

with constructivism that historiography is a practice of colligation, or forming colligatory knowledge, which gathers and consolidates first-order information under the unified expressions. But rather, he cashes out the meaning or inferential practical knowledge of colligatory concepts, and critically analyses its reasons and problems in the light of *postnarrativism*.

Within the criticism of narrativism, Kuukkanen proceeds further against two broad categories (pp. 2–4, 173). On the one hand, he disagrees with objectivism in the sense that narratives about the past cannot be given objectively by the past ‘facts’. Due to the constructivist colligation, where one can be originally expressive of one’s interpretation (e.g., the renaissance and the thaw), historiography as the higher-order practice is to be subject-sided and detached from any objective reality of raw facts. I see here his epistemological anti-realism in historiography, as opposed to nineteenth-century non-subjective (or self-extinguishing), realist approach of von Ranke—*wie es eigentlich gewesen* (how it really was) (p. 51). On the other hand, Kuukkanen also goes against relativism, to the effect that historiography takes a form of rational practice that can justify one’s subject-sided colligation. Whilst relativism may express a relation, a relativist cannot justify or entitle one particular truth, reason, knowledge, or evaluation, for all interpretations are relatively true (with the logical fallacy of *reductio ad absurdum*). In the framework of epistemology and philosophy of science, therefore, he denies a postmodernist reasoning that historical accounts are necessarily relativistic or arbitrary, but argues for nominalist narratives (as colligations are nominal propositions without requiring natural essential properties) (pp. 109–14). Developing in this way, finally, he connects his postnarrativism with semantic inferentialism, particularly that of Robert Brandom in line with his logical expressivism and pragmatics (the use of linguistic expressions) (Brandom, 1994; 2000).²

To a large extent, as Kuukkanen himself admits, he follows Brandom’s rationalist pragmatism (Brandom, 2000, pp. 2, 20). Brandom argues that expressivism about logic relies on an inferential-propositional model of awareness (in the sense of sapience, not sentience) at a higher level. Possibly implying Aristotelianism, humans are deemed to be sapience as uniquely rational beings, but not sentience as merely ‘being awake’. For the sapient, rational activity, what Brandom cares about is the concept and use of meaning. According to him and his precursors (Frege, Dummett, and Sellars), implicit commitments of propositional attitudes should become explicit or expressive by logically inferring the meaning or conceptual content (i.e. semantic inferentialism). In other words, inferentialism

² It should be noted that Brandom’s pragmatism starts with German idealism of Kant and Hegel.

is the ‘meaning-as-use’ view of semantics, as inferences and the rules of inference construct the meaning of expressions. Here the awareness, sapience, or consciousness would posit a meaning in use for saying and thinking of the value or truth, by singling out discursive practice from a motley collection of skilful doing behind (i.e. pragmatics). Hence, what Brandom primarily means by pragmatism is a species of functionalism on the basis of linguistic pragmatics.

On this inferentialism of semantics and pragmatics, Brandom and Kuukkanen trace back their sources, specifically, linguistic pragmatism of Wilfrid Sellars. It is his principle that Brandom agrees with, that is, *grasping a concept is mastering the use of a word* (Brandom, 2000, p. 6). Brandom here, in fact, relates this Sellarsian principle to the earlier American pragmatists, such as William James and John Dewey, for they are also considered to understand conceptual content from the practice of using concepts.³ In line with them, Kuukkanen quotes Sellars (1997, §36) to explain the conceptual and pragmatist approach to narratives, as follows:⁴

The essential point is that in characterizing an episode or a state as that of *knowing*, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the *logical space of reasons*, of justifying and being able to justify what one *says*. (p. 144; Kuukkanen’s and my emphases)

This indicates, roughly put, the pragmatic underpinning of semantics, or rationalising the meaning as use. Hence, in view of historiography, one can understand that narratives include empirical or sense experiences, because narratives or what are articulated are to be justified within the *logical space of reasons*. In this sense, inference is a rational activity, as Brandom underpins the notion of reason in inferentialism:

Reason is nothing to the beasts of the field. We are the ones on whom reasons are binding. ... Being rational is just being in the space of giving and asking for reasons, and being a rational *agent* is being in the space of giving and asking for reasons for what one *does*. (Brandom, 1994, pp. 5, 253)

Aligning his argument with this rationalism in Brandom’s inferentialism, Kuukkanen proceeds to his pragmatist conclusion for historiography as a linguistic, inferential, and rational practice.

³ See, for example, Dewey’s argument: ‘The scientific revolution came about when the material of direct and uncontrolled experience was taken as problematic; as supplying material to be transformed by reflective operations into known objects’ (Dewey, 2008, p. 206).

⁴ See also, on the developed Sellarsian view of ‘assertion as a doing’ integrating Austin’s speech act theory and Wittgenstein’s (vocal, not verbal) *Sprachspiel* (Brandom, 1994, p. 172).

What I would now question is to what extent Kuukkanen traces back his pragmatist postnarrativism beyond the scope of Brandom's and Sellars' pragmatism (or pragmatics). For I suspect that some views of the earlier and other pragmatists are not appropriately integrated into Kuukkanen's explanation. Specifically, in my view, he does not sufficiently consider in his book the founding father of nineteenth-century American pragmatism, C.S. Peirce's theories of (1) truth and (2) signs.

In terms of truth, firstly, Kuukkanen *prima facie* assimilates Peirce's fallibilist pragmatism of a two-reality theory, which coalesces the nominalist or conventional reality and the realist/pragmatist or absolute reality (pp. 140–41; Misak, 1991, pp. 130–133).⁵ Put simply, sciences (particularly, evolutionary cosmology; Kasak & Veede, 2016, p. 82) progress unbeknownst to humans or rational beings, so that with present knowledge one could not infallibly infer any definite belief, value, or truth. Kuukkanen accepts historical nominalism of colligatory concepts at a higher level, but he does not actually mean Peirce's independence condition of truth at the absolute level (p. 113). Indeed, Peirce's pragmatism, as H.S. Thayer explains, has been regarded as a “theory of meaning” (that I think foreshadows the later inferentialism), or as a maxim, rule, and method for ascertaining the meaning of certain kinds of signs, not “all signs” (Thayer, 1981, p. 87).⁶ As Peirce states, his pragmatism is “merely to lay down a method of determining the meanings of intellectual concepts, that is, of those upon which reasonings may turn”.⁷ However, the progressive, absolute meaning of truth in Peirce becomes *useless* if it cannot correspond to the use of language. The rational grounding in semantic inferentialism might be then undermined. Whilst Kuukkanen touches on various pragmatist positions (not only Peirce, Sellars, Brandom, also Dewey, Davidson, and Rorty), I think that his postnarrativism could have been in more depth reinforced with pragmatism by critically examining Peirce's semantics on the fallibilist *truth*.

In terms of signs, secondly and more seriously, the Peircean semiotics would be repugnant to Kuukkanen's rationalist historiography. For Peirce, it is possible

⁵ Misak points out that Peirce's two-reality theory is first influenced by Bishop George Berkeley, whom Peirce regards as the father of the method of pragmatism. See Peirce's argument in the 1871 review of Fraser's edition of *The Works of George Berkeley: realism and nominalism are 'two views of the real—one as the fountain of the current of human thought, the other as the unmoving form to which it is flowing'* (CE 2, 471). That is, realism or pragmatism ‘emphasizes the permanency and fixity of reality’, whilst nominalism ‘emphasizes its externality’ (‘On Reality’, 1872; CE 3, 29).

⁶ Peirce argues that ‘the meaning of a sign is the sign it has to be translated into’ (‘The Logic of Quantity’, 1893; CP 4.132); ‘When one reasons, ... all thought whatever is a sign’ (‘What Pragmatism is’, 1905; CP 5.421).

⁷ Peirce, ‘The Architectonic Construction of Pragmatism’, 1905 (CP 5.8).

to assume that signs operate independently of the human rationality or mental activity. More precisely, within his semiotic scope, a non-intelligent or non-mentalistic *sign action* can be taken into account teleologically (or in the mode of final causality).⁸ In his own example, Peirce explains that:

If a sunflower, in turning toward the sun, becomes by that very act fully capable, without further condition, of reproducing a sunflower which turns in precisely corresponding ways toward the sun, and of doing so with the same reproductive power, the sunflower would become a Representamen [i.e. sign as signification or way of representation] of the sun.⁹

This reveals Peirce's teleological semiotics, which crucially formulates his pragmatist "method of determining the meanings of intellectual concepts".¹⁰ For him, "the essential function of a sign is to render inefficient relations efficient—not to set them into action, but to establish a habit or general rule whereby they will act on occasion".¹¹ This symbolic processing,¹² or *semeiosis* ("action of a sign"),¹³ is thus a teleological part of Peirce's sign system. Unfortunately, this causal aspect of the non-intelligent sign action was absent in Kuukkanen's pragmatist and rationalist thesis. It is true, as far as his book is concerned, Kuukkanen briefly treated the practice of colligation (e.g., interpreting the process of the 1917 Russian Revolution from the perspective of Finland's autonomy within Russia) as "some kind of *teleological* conception of history where the parts with a specific inherent feature determined and pre-figured development towards a *telos*" (my emphasis) (p. 111). However, the fundamental nature of signs in the Peircean sense, or the teleology that evolutionarily drives to construct the meaning of signs themselves, was disregarded in Kuukkanen's postnarrativism. From my point of view, therefore, more attention should have been paid to the semiotic teleology in order to perfect his thesis.

⁸ In fact, Peirce's semiotics is teleological (i.e. signs bear the ends or final causes), which can seriously diverge from Kuukkanen's thesis. See, e.g., Seager, 1988, p. 304; Short, 2007, chs. 4–5; Hulswit, 2001.

⁹ Peirce, 'Syllabus', c. 1902 (CP 2.274).

¹⁰ On teleology, see also: "To say that the future does not influence the present is untenable doctrine. It is as much as to say that there are no final causes, or ends. The organic world is full of refutations of that position. Such action [by final causality] constitutes evolution" (Peirce, 'Minute Logic', 1902; CP 2.86).

¹¹ Peirce, a letter of 1904 to Lady Welby (CP 8.332); Seager, 1988, pp. 303–304, 311.

¹² Under his classification of three types of signs (i.e. icons, indices, symbols), Peirce would regard the relation between a sunflower and the sun in the above example as symbolic, in the sense that they have neither physical resemblance (not iconic) nor evidential indication (not indexical) but arbitrary association by habit. See, e.g., Peirce, 'Nomenclature and Divisions of Triadic Relations', c. 1903 (CP 2.247–249).

¹³ Peirce, 'Pragmatism', c. 1907 (CP 5.473).

On the contrary, Kuukkanen further follows Brandom's Fregean point on *performativity* of truth, inasmuch as saying something "true" is a force-indicating, rather than a sense-expressing, locution" (pp. 144–46, 179; Brandom, 1994, p. 288). In this semantic sense, not exactly semiotic nor epistemic senses, Kuukkanen argues that historical truth is neither true nor false, but functional and explanatory as a practical significance as long as any (historiographical) claiming is normative. Hence, from his argument, one might say that the narrative narrativises normative inferentiality. In other words, historiography might be featured as a normative venture for rationally grounding the past. In effect, the principal rationale for historiography is to be critically observant of any conception, or what is *conceived* and thus *said* about suggested history. That is why pragmatism in his thesis encompasses the performativity, normativity, and inferentiality of linguistic expressions.

In conclusion, through the prism of pragmatism or pragmatics, one can see that Kuukkanen's thesis of postnarrativism had the goal that historiography of narratives was rationally or normatively engaged in semantic inferentialism. Even though his argument highly depends on Brandom's pragmatism and does not suffice for Peirce's one (particular his theories of truth and signs), however, his book is undoubtedly a brilliant achievement claiming that historiography be the normative mode of inferentialism with the pragmatist truth or assertional commitment.

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