

Varieties and Vagaries of Historical Explanation

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Abstract

For the better part of the 20th century, expositions of issues regarding historical explanation followed a predictable format, one that took as given the non-equivalence of explanations in history and philosophical models of scientific explanation. Ironically, at the present time, the philosophical point of note concerns how the notion of science has itself changed. Debates about explanation in turn need to adapt to this. This prompts the question of whether anything now still makes plausible the thought that history must make some forced choice with regard to the type of science it is and an associated explanatory form. The discussion that follows sketches the alternative forms of explanation between which historians were to pick, and indicates why each proves unsatisfactory. Examination of these issues allows identification of a conception of historical explanation that does not require the metaphysical and epistemological assumptions that engender previous dichotomous characterizations.

Keywords

historical explanation, narrative, events, positivism, natural science, philosophy of history

For the better part of the 20th century, expositions of issues regarding historical explanation followed a predictable format, one that took as given the non-equivalence of explanations in history and philosophical models of scientific explanation. These standard accounts diverge either in claiming for historical explanations a status of a “science-in-the-waiting,” (Hempel, Nagel), or as already possessing those virtues typically associated with

scientific ones, or by emphasizing the fallen state of debate in the absence of these virtues.¹

When framed as a contrast between motifs of explanation in history as opposed to those in the natural sciences, discussion only served to underwrite and recapitulate the rationales for dualisms canonized in the 19th century (associated with Windelband, Rickert, and Dilthey) – e.g., the idiographic as opposed to nomothetic, or (later) narrative as opposed to deductive-nomological. Current champions of narrative by and large simply forego any interest in or claims to being scientific and the associated virtues. The 19th century contrast, however, was among putatively different forms of scientific explanation. The contrast rests on a presumed distinction between types of science – human versus natural. The then friends of history did not want to surrender their title to science, but yet needed to provide a barrier against the Comtean tide that threatened to wash away those not safely within the confines of recognized forms of scientific explanation.²

At root, the dualisms develop from a presumed incompatibility between history’s concern with the culturally and temporally unique status of events and the demand of science to situate particular items or occurrences as outcomes of general processes. This difference underwrites the suggestion that the disparate forms of explanation reflect a split between the natural and the human sciences, between explaining (by means of causes) versus

¹ William Dray, *Philosophy of History*, 2nd ED. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1993). See also his classic reply to Hempel. *Laws and Explanation in History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957). Carl G. Hempel, “The Function of General Laws in History,” (1942) *The Journal Philosophy* 39:35–48, Ernest Nagel, *The Structure of Science* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961), John H. Zammito, “Are We Being Theoretical Yet? The New Historicism, the New Philosophy of History, and ‘Practicing Historians,’” (1993) *Journal of Modern History* (December):783–814, “Reading ‘Experience’: The Debate in Intellectual History among Scott, Toews, and LaCapra,” in *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism*, ed. Paula M.L. Moya & M.R. Hames-García (Berkeley: University of California Press 2000), pp. 279–311. See also John E. Toews, “Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience,” *American Historical Review* (October 1987) 92: 879–907.

² Patrick Gardiner, ed. *Theories of History* (New York: The Free Press, 1959). See also his *The Nature of Historical Explanation* (London: Oxford U.P., 1961); Georg Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan U.P., 1997).

understanding (by the citing of reasons). What can count as a causal process presumably requires no reference to social or cultural milieu; what can function as a reason does appear contingent on just such factors.

Ironically, at the present time, the philosophical point of note concerns how the notion of science has itself changed. Debates about explanation in turn need to adapt to this. This prompts the question of whether anything now still makes plausible the thought that history must make some forced choice with regard to the type of science it is and an associated explanatory form. The discussion that follows sketches the alternative forms of explanation between which historians were to pick, and indicates why each proves unsatisfactory. Examination of these issues allows identification of a conception of historical explanation that does not require the metaphysical and epistemological assumptions that engender previous dichotomous characterizations.

Keep in mind that the tradition insists upon a contrast between narrative explanations and nomological ones – ones where specific ends (a plot) provide the connective thread and those where generalizations (typically laws) do that work. Narrative explanations take the form of stories. Mink importantly emphasizes how various forms of what he discusses as the lingering assumption of Universal History come to be read/written into histories.³ In such cases (e.g., eschatologies, Marxist histories), the final end explains. All historical events not only find their meaning and order by virtue of their place in a larger pattern, but also this pattern works towards a determined end. This end patterns, connects, and unifies all of what happens in history.

White⁴ and Mink best characterize and analyze the shift in historiography from where narrative serves a more general integrative end to a focus on the structure of narrative per se. White famously argues that the repertoire of literary forms must determine the plot structures used in the writing of history. Mink stresses rather an epistemic conception of narrative (narrative form as a “cognitive instrument”). Both, however, attribute the

³ Louis Mink, *Historical Understanding* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).

⁴ Hayden V. White, *Metahistory: the historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), *Tropics of discourse: essays in cultural criticism* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), *The content of the form: narrative discourse and historical representation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

explanatory impression a narrative provides to its story-like form. Whatever cognitive factors allow readers to follow stories work for history as well. Both recognize that dropping the assumption of a universal telos engenders narrative anarchy – the “post-modern condition.” For then no universal story line constrains an historian’s plot choice.⁵ Narratives no longer need to unify with one another.

Debate on the form and scientific status of historical explanation as it moves forward in its modern guise from Hempel turns almost exclusively on questions of how to account for the ways that events connect. Nomological explanation takes generalization as a necessary condition of explanation inasmuch as that is what ultimately connects *explanans* to *explanandum*. The “explanation by subsumption” model insists that the event to be explained is explained when shown to be a particular of a certain type, a type governed by the laws relevant to that kind. It certainly seems that good reasons can be given for the rough consensus that any explanation requires recourse to generalizations. For positivists raised the question of explanation as a question of logical form precisely for the purpose of having some way of marking off legitimate candidates (whatever the final verdict) for explanation from the rest. Generalization were part of a formal criterion for identifying an explanatory relation.

In this regard, the positivist model set what proved to be the insurmountable bar for narratives to qualify as even candidate historical explanations. Laws or generalizations of some form were the engine of explanation because they work to connect explanans to explanandum. Sympathetic philosophers of science wrote of historians as offering incomplete but potentially scientific explanations (e.g., Nagel 1961 on “explanation sketches”). Histories seemed to lack precisely what was needed to have events connect in a way that gave the claims to connectivity some objective cachet.

Unfortunately for intellectual progress, early responses to Hempelian models and their variants tended to stress the use of generalizations as well, only of a sort other than those that had the lofty status of scientific laws. But few questioned whether generalizations were necessary for explanation. The fight concerned either the logical status of these generalizations

⁵ Paul A. Roth, “The Disappearance of the Empirical,” *The Journal of the Philosophy of History* (1971) 1:271–292; Richard Vann, “Turning Linguistic: History and Theory and History and Theory, 1960–1975,” (in Ankersmit, Frank & Hans Kellner, ed. *A New Philosophy of History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995)), pp. 40–69.

(were reason explanations analytic?) or their empirical standing (truistic? commonsensical? contextual?)⁶ Hempel's effort to explicate what would be required of historical explanation were they to fit a scientific pattern ends badly and relatively quickly. For with the historicization of the view of science generally that starts with Kuhn and has accelerated under pressure by studies from within philosophy of science and by science studies generally, questions about historical explanation tied to issues of logical form no longer have any intellectual purchase.⁷ Danto (1995) offers a particularly elegiac coda regarding the post-Kuhnian fate of debate about historical explanation.

By the early 1970s this debate loses its claim on professional interest.⁸ Moreover, the debate had no discernible impact on historical writing. On the one hand, it becomes evident to many that all parties to the debate concede what in effect was Hempel's central claim – explanations generally, and so historical explanations in particular, require recourse to generalizations (explicit or implicit) in order to connect the events explained to what is said to explain them. On the other hand, no universal generalization of the sort Hempel takes as necessary for explanation appear available to historians for this purpose. This makes the entire exercise 'philosophical' in the worst sense of the term, i.e., one which connotes nothing more than highly abstract speculation that never manages to intersect with or influence practice.

Thus, the central debate on the scientific status of historical explanation effectively disappears from discussion not because it concluded in victory for one side or another. The problem with the model as proposed for his-

⁶ Alan Donagan, "Historical Explanation: The Popper-Hempel Theory Reconsidered," *History and Theory* (1964) 4:3–26; Murray G. Murphey, "Explanation, Causes, and Covering Laws," (1986) *History & Theory* 25:43–7; John Passmore, "Explanation in Everyday Life, in Science, and in History," in G. Nadel, ed., *Studies in the Philosophy of History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965).

⁷ Peter Galison & D. Stump, ed. *The Disunity of Science* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), John H. Zammito, *A Nice Derangement of Epistemes: post positivism in the study of science from Quine to Latour* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2004).

⁸ Frank Ankersmit, "The Dilemma of Contemporary Anglo-Saxon Philosophy of History," *History & Theory* (1986) 25:1–27. See also his *Historical Representation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford U.P., 2001). Arthur Danto, "The Decline and Fall of the Analytical Philosophy of History," (in Ankersmit & Kellner, 1995), pp. 70–85.

tory resided in the fact that no matter how contested or championed, the model could never be fit to the intended subject matter.

Those disinclined to an apologist position for historical explanation continue to provide philosophical arguments for recognizing history as *sui generis*.⁹ But this tactic, unfortunately, leaves unexplained in turn why it counts as a kind of scientific knowledge. The hopeful idea that the core difference between historical explanations and the rest resides in a contrast between the temporal specificity of historical reasons and timeless generality of scientific laws proves less efficacious than imagined. The intended contrast turns out to be about whether the scope of the explanatory generalization is global or local. Moreover, the distinction between imputing regularities and discovering actual reasons cannot be successfully made. Put this way, the putative principled contrast collapses into the truism that explanations seek to identify regularities or patterns that account for outcomes. Without these one has only an unconnected listing.

Appeals to narrative as a form of explanation were tailored to historical practice at least insofar as they tied the seeming cogency and coherence of the accounts to the specific motivational details provided. Unfortunately, the very fact that the most compelling features of such narratives remained tied to whatever pull a good story has for a reader did not help clarify philosophical questions about explanation. So the status of narrative explanations qua explanation remains in limbo even after advocates for this form foreswear aspirations to scientific status.

Even worse, to leave it to the "plausibility" of a narrative to bear the burden of explanation locates that responsibility at a point incapable of bearing the strain. For in such cases the inferential license resides in subjective factors – e.g., appeal to a specific reader – and not in objectively discernible questions of form. So while discussions of "narrative form as a cognitive instrument" (Mink) arise as explicit challenges to purely logical demarcation criteria for explanation, the challenge to the friends of narrative remained one of how to understand its logical form. For without some such account, the licensing of inferential connections in history remains a mystery.

This absence of any clear criterion for a "correct" narrative structure – for specifying how in a narrative one event may be inferred from

⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

another – engenders what, in Hayden White's apt phrase, turns out to be an "embarrassment of plot." For what dictates the plot structure – the way things connect – must, it seems, come from the mind of the historian and the culture to which that person belongs. Answers to the question of how events connect appear to be then primarily a function of an historian's imaginative abilities, narrativizing skills, and literary resources.¹⁰

Histories on this view are more made than found, and so academic confidence in demonstrating an historian's ability to provide something like an objective explanation has effectively collapsed (Novick).¹¹ For no formal criterion for narrative structure stands as an analogue to derivability in formal models of scientific explanation. The problem is not that narrative fails a test imposed by some nonnarrative criterion for licensing causal connections. Rather, the issue is that it has none of its own.

So while the particular notion of how to connect events no longer emanates from some artificial philosophical model of idealized scientific explanation, accounting for connectivity remains a standing problem for philosophers of history. The debates about historical explanation post-positivist provide grim testimony to this assessment of the situation. The post-modernist/post-structuralist debates that incessantly fill the pages of leading journals make an equally strong, though very different, assumption about connectivity than did the positivists. For if the connectivity found in histories results from their narrative structure, then it appears the question of how to read a history so constructed can be subject to all the vagaries of reading a narrative generally.¹²

The privileging of any one perspective now is taken as an artifice the writer of the history adopts. On what principled basis can one deny or exclude claims to see the events through the eyes of others? So if the positivist model seemed to offer too restricted an explanatory repertoire because of formal considerations, the post-structuralist offers too many. Ironically, the reason is also formal; narratives can be constructed in many different

¹⁰ Paul A. Roth, "The Object of Understanding," in *Empathy & Agency*, ed. Hans Herbert Kögler & K.R. Stueber, ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000), pp. 243–69.

¹¹ Peter Novick, *That noble dream: the "objectivity question" and the American historical profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

¹² Brian Fay, P. Pomper, R.T. Vann, ed. *History and Theory: Contemporary Readings* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998).

"voices."¹³ Absent some general account of historical causality or logical form, what basis can be found for preferring one perspective to another? For those looking for a way to philosophically underwrite some account of historical explanation, the demise of positivism proved to be more of a case of going from the frying pan directly into politically fueled fires. (Novick)

Explanation on all accounts involves how matters connect. An underlying causal or unifying account provides licit connections for scientific theories; a formal account of explanation provides a standard of adequacy of the move from explanans to explanandum. Histories lack both an underlying unity of theory and explicit marks of formal adequacy. The problem for historiography concerns not one of stating the explanatory schemas historians employ, but in either accounting for apparent absences ("The Case of the Missing Generalization") or for apparent excesses ("Every Man His Own Historian").

What the debate over the form of explanation obscured, and what now appears as central, concerns not a matter of how to formalize explanation, but of how to account for the constitution of events to be explained. It is rather by understanding differences in the constitution of the events for which explanation is sought that insight can be gained regarding disparate forms of historical explanation. The puzzles surrounding the proper form of explanation prove to be ancillary to a constituting of what to take (or may taken) as objects of explanation.

What emerges from this perspective proves revealing of how a key philosophical issues dominating the previous debate masked those issues that arguably belong at the center of accounts of historical explanation. History and science alike both engage in accounting for what happens by assimilating the seemingly foreign and unfamiliar to sense-making patterns. The appearance of a difference in kind more plausibly emanates from two less noted features. First, the Book of Nature has no plot; histories do. Second, scientific explanations must integrate; historical explanations need not. The first point encapsulates the thought that notions of human agency and purposiveness prove integral to explanations in histories but not in science. The second acknowledges that histories need not and do not add up to a single, cohesive explanatory pattern. Scientific explanations should be mutually compatible and cumulative. That is, what marks the fundamental point of contrast involves the theoretical status of the events explained.

¹³ Wallace Martin, *Recent Theories of Narrative* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell U.P., 1986).

The need to integrate restricts from the outset the candidates for explanation in science. Dependence on a ~~plot~~, conversely, entails that historians identify the relationship between what explains and what is to be explained retrospectively, i.e., what the past contains depends in key respects on what questions the historian has about it. Their theory determines what questions scientists may reasonably hope to answer; the historian's questions determine how aspects of the past will be grouped as events.

Histories constitute events with an end in view; that which is to be explained in turn retrospectively serves to constitute those events taken to be possible causes. But what creates the event to be explained resides in the interest of the historian, and likewise for those antecedent events looked to as possible causes. This point incorporates two very important philosophical insights. From Arthur Danto¹⁴ one learns that what happens at later times informs on what can be truthfully said of earlier times. One can group aspects in the life of an individual, e.g., as the childhood of the man who became the commandant of Treblinka, under a description true of the person at a particular time but not known (or knowably) true at that time. What happens at later times adds to the stock of true statements that can be made about the past. If what Franz Stangl did as an adult calls for explanation, an inquirer may then constitute Stangl's pre-Treblinka life as a series of particular events, ones that might yield clues that explain his career choices.

But it is the later fact that then serves to constitute events – e.g., his relationship with his parents, etc. – that an historian potentially uses for purposes of explanation. None of the events to be explained or used for explanation represent kinds that have standing in some general theory of the world. What Goldstein describes as “historical knowing” or “constitution” incorporates the same feature about how present knowledge actually adds to what existed in the past as identified in Danto's discussion of “narrative sentences.” Stangl's career has no existence as an event until an act of inquiry makes it one. By talking about the past under that description, the event comes to be and to be a subject of study.¹⁵

Louis Mink makes a related and similarly important point when he notes that the claim of narrative as basic to representing history does not

¹⁴ Arthur Danto, *Narration and Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

¹⁵ Leon J. Goldstein, *The what and the why of history: philosophical essays* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1996), *Historical knowing* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976); Ian Hacking, *Historical ontology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); *Rewriting the soul:*

require for its validity that any particular piece of history writing be a narrative. As Mink observes, Huizinga's *The waning of the Middle Ages* or Burkhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* do not count as narrative histories by the usual conventions. But as Mink goes on to note, by their very titles these works embed themselves within the context of a general narrative, one that gives them their subject and locates their significance. Historical events come to be events only through being located in this retrospective gaze.

Scientific explanations do not constitute the objects of their study in this way. Scientific explanations can strive for generality precisely because what allows of explanation – the bursting of a car radiator, for example – can be identified as falling within the purview of what science expects to be able to explain. Kuhn astutely suggests that a chief reason that science succeeds as well as it does in solving problems (providing explanations) resides in its ability to identify the sorts of problems that even potentially allow of a solution. Explanations may prove elusive; but theory assures that one is there.

Emphasis on the role of the historian in constituting the events an historian looks to explain and uses to explain should heighten appreciation of the liabilities incurred by the very questions historians choose to ask. For no reason exists for believing that the events that interest those inquiring into human affairs do or should correspond to the types of events that *any* science might connect in some regularized way. Although this lesson has been made familiar in the philosophy of mind due to arguments by Davidson, and in philosophy of science proper due to arguments developed by Cartwright, the analogous arguments in the philosophy of history, though present in some thinkers (e.g., Goldstein; Mink), have not been given the attention and weight they deserve.¹⁶

Consideration of the status of what an historian looks to explain shifts the key focus for any discussion of historical explanation to the events an

multiple personality and the sciences of memory (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), *The emergence of probability: a philosophical study of early ideas about probability, induction and statistical inference* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975); Paul A. Roth, “Narrative Explanation: The Case of History,” (1988) *History & Theory*, 27:1–13; Gitta Sereny, *Into That Darkness* (New York: Random House, 1983).

¹⁶ Nancy Cartwright, *The Dappled Word* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Donald Davidson, “Mental Events,” in *Experience & Theory*, ed. L. Foster & J.W. Swanson (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1970).

historian sets for the task of explanation. This points to the important parallel between the insistence of Goldstein and Mink that historians constitute the events they seek to study and what Donald Davidson refers to as “anomalous monism.” There exists no *a priori* reason to expect that the events that interest historians should map onto any categories that happen to be those for which scientific theories even potentially could provide the requisite connecting regularities.

The point here is that the notion of an event and that of a fact were never fully problematized by Danto. In key respects, even White takes events as unproblematized atoms for narratives. In this regard at least Mink and Goldstein have claim to making a significant philosophical advance. For they do appreciate how understanding natural sciences in light of their history impacts directly debates in historiography. Problems arise concerning, e.g., charting progress across incommensurable scientific theories where the events or facts described in one have no status in the theory that supercedes it. Histories, unlike scientific theories, rarely stand in a successor relation, but rather live along side on another. For such cases, no arbiter for what constitutes reality exists.

In retrospect, early (and neglected) works by Murphey¹⁷ and by Goldstein mark the first serious attempts to view philosophy of history through the lenses of an emerging holistic (but still analytical) philosophy of science. Murphey’s book develops a view of history as a type of theory about the past in which people and events have the status of posits used for purposes of organizing experience. But Goldstein’s work in particular stands out as advocating the position that the historian constitutes whole cloth the events of historical interest. However, these contributions were largely overlooked. Analytic philosophy of science, identified as it then was with Hempel, simply comes to be written off as irrelevant to historical practice. In addition, the near simultaneous publication of Hayden White’s important theoretical intervention and the emergence of the Foucauldian paradigm for (re)doing history effectively swamp any influence that the philosophy of science might have hoped to exercise.

Not until the emergence of Ian Hacking’s work, which combines insights from Foucault and the analytic tools of philosophy of science, did a viable philosophical paradigm for historical practice emerge. Hacking looks at

¹⁷ Murray G. Murphey, *Our knowledge of the historical past* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973).

how events or concepts come to receive scientific status. Like Goldstein, Hacking operates with a notion of event as constituted. The past changes through redescription precisely because what happens later leads to creating or recreating the past through constituting events.¹⁸ Past happenings appear anew by redescription in terms of interest. Danto’s great insight and Hacking’s further development play off this point. So, for example, when Raul Hilberg pens the dark and somber observation that “When in the early days of 1933 the first civil servant wrote the first definition of ‘non-Aryan’ into a civil service ordinance, the fate of European Jewry was sealed,”¹⁹ he for all intents and purposed creates an historical event, the Holocaust. So described, the Holocaust organizes human doings over a region of space and time. In such ways do historians create an event retrospectively and then create and order others as a consequence.

Robustly causal histories can be written, but only when the events of interest have been chosen for that purpose, i.e., the purpose of relating historical changes as they interest humans and the connective factors typically elicited by scientists in their studies of the natural world. Human history taken as a category of received science has received sophisticated development in works exploiting biological or ecological explanations, e.g., Diamond,²⁰ or works marshalling resources from rational choice theory. Diamond actually looks only at those events that might link to some powerful scientific/causal theory, and then can argue about what happens when these events intersect with ones of human interest. But his way of proceeding is to start with what can be assimilated to events like this. The history that concerns him builds from these, not from some prior disciplinary training in seeing the world as structured “historically.” In the former case, Diamond explains large-scale differences in paths of historical development, e.g., answers to questions such as why Europeans more successfully exploit technologies either invented by or known to non-European (e.g., Asian) civilizations. Diamond explains these difference, complete with reference to certain “natural experiments,” by reference to large-scale environmental factors.

¹⁸ Paul A. Roth, “Ways of Pastmaking,” *History of the Human Sciences* (2002)15:125–43.

¹⁹ Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, Rev. and Definition Ed. (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985).

²⁰ Jared Diamond, *Guns, germs, and steel: the fates of human societies* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997).

So confident is Diamond in his approach that he entitled his final chapter “The Future of Human History as a Science.” But this focus, however interesting, mistakes the core epistemological issue in the fabrication of historical explanations. For the form of explanation and debates around those forms ultimately concern not the presence or absence of generalizations, but of the type of events that an historian seeks to explain.

Because the interests of historians constitute the objects they would like to explain, these events may just crosscut categories of objects or events that can be explained in language of the natural sciences. That the resulting explanations look, by comparison to natural scientific explanations, gappy or inadequate simply turns out to be an artifact of the approach taken. But it should also come as no surprise that they seem wanting when compared to, e.g., the story of why the radiator without anti-freeze bursts one cold night. Nothing in this implies that historical explanations are *sui generis*. It merely reflects the fact that histories typically consist of human excerpts of the flow of nature. It remains an open question whether aspects so excerpted can be given anything more than the equivalent of a “folk psychological” account.

In this important regard, the “problem” with historical explanations quite literally becomes one of our own making. For previous general challenges to the epistemic legitimacy of historical explanations lose their point in the absence of a demarcation criterion or a received logical form of explanation. Kuhn’s insight that received science serves to determine which problems can potentially be solved proves especially germane here. No theory of events usually assures historians in advance (some do, e.g., Marxists) that the way they look for events to connect must correspond to some actual process connecting those events. Indeed, where such theories are on offer – how Luther’s toilet training influenced his relation to the Church, for example (Erikson) – skepticism abounds. (I leave as an open question here what counts as a theory in the requisite sense of the term.) In more typical cases, such as Sereny’s efforts to account for how and why Stangl followed the life path he did, rely entirely on (not implausible) assumptions dictated by human interests and related folk psychological elements. (But see also Maier) In any case, only in the context of a theory do events exist and have explanations.²¹

²¹ Erik H. Erikson, *Young man Luther; a study in psychoanalysis and history* (New York: Norton, 1958); Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd Ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996); Charles S. Maier, *The unmasterable past: history, holocaust, and German national identity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1988).

Mindblind Philosophy of History

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Abstract

Historical explanation after Hempel came to be discussed in terms of a contrast between nomic explanations and rationalizations, and later between cause and narrative. This period can be taken as an historical parenthesis, in which the notion of cause narrowed and the notion of historical understanding as empathic dropped out. In the present philosophical landscape there are different models of cause available, especially in the causal modeling literature, and a revived appreciation, through the philosophy of mind and in light of such discoveries as mirror neurons, of empathy. The newer causal modeling literature foregrounds the problem of confounding or overdetermination, but solves it in ways inimical to historical explanation. Empathy, however, represents an alternative solution, available to the historian, in which causal relevance can be assessed and established in terms of its role in the reenacted experience of the historical subject. This suggests the idea that the art of history is using historical evidence to show what people might have thought and felt under past circumstances, in ways that engage our capacities to mind-read – capacities established by cognitive science.

Keywords

empathy, historical explanation, confounding, mirror neurons, causal modeling, simulation

As Roth points out in his discussion of the development of the problem of historical explanation in the philosophy of history after Hempel,¹ many of the issues about historical explanation have involved a contrast between

¹ Carl Hempel, “The Function of General Laws in History,” in Patrick Gardiner (ed.) *Theories of History* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1959), pp. 344–356.