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## NARRATIVE IN HISTORICAL EXPLANATION

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The topic of narrative in historical explanation excites controversy because of deep disagreements regarding what makes such narratives genuinely explanatory. This entry reviews two areas of philosophical controversy regarding the status of narrative in historical explanation: epistemological and metaphysical issues.

In this context, “narrative” connotes a presentation in a story-like fashion of presumably related events that result in a particular outcome. Two sets of philosophical issues have dominated debate about narratives qua explanations. One concerns formal and epistemological issues, the other metaphysical ones. (1) Formal and epistemological concerns typically ask after theoretical articulations of assumed connections and so impose justificatory demands on relationships cited as explanatory. (2) A fundamental metaphysical issue with regard to narrative in historical explanations centers on narratives per se as a form of representation of the reality of the past.

1. Regarding the first set, a standing concern has been that what narratives often suggest as *causes* involve un- or undertheorized connections, such as *reasons* of various sorts. Relatedly, a narrative might appear to explain by providing information unique to a period and its thought. But then, the very reasons presented as explanatory seemingly count against integrating such an explanation with those generalizing and integrative models of explanation

familiar from the natural sciences. So questions remain about how narratives explain.

In the heyday of logical positivism, when an assumption regarding a common logical form to properly scientific explanations reigned supreme, narratives were explanations in some derivative sense, one that depends on a received account of scientific explanation. Formally, narratives were stigmatized as at best “explanation sketches” (a term used by Ernest Nagel). To vary a bit C. G. Hempel’s famous example, suppose that someone narrates that the water in his car radiator froze and then the radiator burst. The person concludes by saying, “I forgot to put in antifreeze.” But this brief story only explains because it can be “converted” into an account that justifies the connections—for example, the temperature at which water freezes and the tensile strength of the radiator. By contrast, when Raul Hilberg summarizes a key thesis of his magisterial narrative of the Holocaust, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, he pointedly denies that acts eventuating in the creation of death camps followed from one another in any predictable or preordained way. Rather, such a narrative explanation can only chart, in Karl Schleunes’s phrase, the “twisted road to Auschwitz.” This typifies a historian’s sense of a narrative, at least insofar as it denies that a narratively presented sequencing of events even possibly “converts” to some more generalizing form of explanation such as those found in the natural sciences.

Questions regarding form—what elements a proper narrative explanation must contain—and epistemology—what theory underwrites the imputed causes—generated a division of views that persists

unabated. Epistemologically, some defend narrative explanations as a distinctive format for teleological or purposive explanations. Another epistemological approach construes narratives as a *sui generis* form of explanation. On this view, narratives either represent a special cognitive act, as Louis Mink holds, or achieve their “explanatory effect” because, in a view famously advocated by Hayden White, such story forms play a special role in our cognitive economy.

Mink’s influential account emphasizes narrative as a mode of comprehension that differs categorically from the type of explanations that the natural sciences offer. Mink’s position can be distinguished from those who, following Hayden White, emphasize narrative as an imposition of order by means of cultural poetics. For White, the writing of history should be understood as just a special case of literary creation and thus should be analyzed in that spirit. Mink, in contrast, emphasizes that the key formal characteristic of historical narrative as a type of explanation resides in the fact that it consists of a special form of *retrospective* of sense making. For an important feature about knowledge of the past, as Arthur Danto’s work establishes, involves the fact that statements true of the past could not be known as true (or known at all) at that time. Danto’s canonical example is “The Thirty Years War began in 1618.” Although now true of what happened in 1618, this statement became true of events in 1618 some 30 years after the fact. What happens later creates truths of times past that yet were not true or knowable at just those times. And while Mink’s position does not exclude consideration of cultural poetics, its emphasis falls on historical narratives as retrospectively fashioned accounts of events already lived.

2. A second currently debated question flows directly from the formal considerations urged by White and by Mink and parallels the realism/anti-realism debate in the philosophy of science, at least in the following respect. For both White and Mink emphasize histories as human fashionings—that is, narratives as *constituting* historical events. But the question then arises whether this implies that narratives *per se* (and not just their individual statements of fact) cannot be true, in the sense of correctly representing *the* past. (Use of the definite article is key here.) What happens to the realist intuition that narrative histories could possibly represent the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen* (“as it really was”)?

Indeed, such metaphysical/representational questions about historical narrative explanations have now come to the fore in philosophical debates about the reality of the past and narrative as a form of representation of this assumed reality. Mink anticipated the unsettling implications of what happens to an understanding of human history in the absence of a belief in any “master narrative” or “universal history.” Once a belief in a universal history goes, no single narrative can claim metaphysical precedence. As a result, history cannot be imputed a determinate structure perceivable *sub specie aeternitatis*. In sum, debates about narrative in historical explanation begin as ones of form or epistemology. But the sharpest philosophical challenge that emerges from these discussions has been to the metaphysical assumptions underlying belief in the reality of the past—in other words, to the idea that human history has any independent determinate form.

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See also Causation in the Social Sciences; Explanation, Theories of; Explanation Versus Understanding; Historicism; *Naturwissenschaften* Versus *Geisteswissenschaften*; Philosophy of History; Realism and Anti-Realism in the Social Sciences

#### Further Readings

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## NATURALISM IN SOCIAL SCIENCE

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Naturalism in the social sciences—namely, that the subject matter of the social sciences should be seen as an element of the natural world and could be explained accordingly—has an ontological face and a methodological face: that social institutions

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