

Re-establishing Analytic Philosophy of History

Paul A. Roth (UCSC), paroth@ucsc.edu

Basic dilemma: More generally, while disputes about the nature of science and logic based on differing histories prove ongoing, what makes for the goodness of historical argument remains unexamined and unexplicated. But this continuing neglect of historical explanation imperils and impedes philosophical self-understanding. For a concern with history as a systematic form of empirical inquiry inevitably links analytic philosophy of history and philosophy of science. And inasmuch as philosophical developments starting in the 1960s fundamentally alter the relationship between history and philosophy of science, a dilemma arises.

If philosophers of science deny explanatory legitimacy to narratives, they fail to account for why differing histories of science exert a critical influence on a philosophical understanding of science. If philosophers of science accept narratives as explanatory, they still owe an account of why. In short, failure to accommodate narrative explanations marks an important deficit in philosophical self-understanding.

There needs then to be a refounding of how philosophy of history and philosophy of science interconnect, one that recognizes if not a priority of the former *vis-à-vis* the latter, then at least their near parity. Moreover, this dilemma holds *a fortiori* for how philosophy of history relates to other areas of philosophy as well.

Danto's Thought Experiment: What makes 'narrative explanation' something other than an oxymoron by Danto's own lights concerns how the term 'narrative' figures in his justly famous Gedankenexperiment regarding an Ideal Chronicle and so the role Danto attributes to narrative sentences (another Danto coinage). Danto's narrative sentences demonstrate that all statements true of a time *t* could not be known true at time *t*, even by a being with perfect apprehension of all that happens as it happens. For truths about *t* continue to accrue after *t*; e.g., (A): "The Thirty Years War began in 1618." Danto observes that (A) is true of 1618 but not knowable as true then even by a being with perfect knowledge of all that happens at each moment in 1618. Knowledge of this truth has nothing to do with some notion of correspondence between statements and states of affairs, since *ex hypothesi* no "facts" alter regarding any moment in question. So much the worse, then, for any hope of an Ideal Chronicle.

Danto terms sentences like (A) 'narrative' because they relate a later event to an earlier one in a way that indicates a conceptual/theoretical connection. Narrative sentences reveal something known true of an earlier time in light of a later. Additional truths continue to accrue to past times just because the passage of time reveals what antecedents of later happenings were latent in earlier ones.

Put another way, narrative sentences create new events under novel descriptions. Historical events only exist as events under a description, and descriptions continuously emerge and change retrospectively. In short, historians look to explain an event as it exists under a particular description, a description that ties to a retrospective and so what I am here terming a “narrative perspective.”

Non-detachability thesis: Mink helps fill out what this holistic characterization of narrative implies by what I shall call the non-detachability thesis. “But despite the fact that an historian may ‘summarize’ conclusions in his final chapter, it seems clear that these are seldom or never detachable conclusions . . . The significant conclusions . . . are ingredient in the argument itself . . . in the sense that they are represented by the narrative order itself. As ingredient conclusions they are exhibited rather than demonstrated.” (Mink, 79; see also 172; 11) In a sense elaborated below, events explained by histories exist qua events only as constructions of those histories. Primarily as a consequence of this feature narratives explain only by virtue of the narrative order itself.

Non-standardization thesis: In short, there exists no analog in history to what permits “normal science” in Kuhn’s sense. Nothing answers to normal history, because there exists no theory that normalizes historical events in this respect. “Danto’s argument depends on bringing out with maximum forcefulness the point that there are many descriptions of an event, and no standard or complete description.” (Mink 139) Indeed, non-standardization underwrites non-detachability at least in the following way. Because there exists no standardized way of demarcating either event types—e.g., revolutions—or specific historical events—e.g., The American Civil War, these become non-detachable from histories that discuss them. No prior theories function to “standardize” such events, and neither do they constitute natural kinds. Thus, historical events “exist” only as part of some narrative or other.

Non-aggregativity thesis: Aggregation presupposes that all the events could belong to some one narrative. Yet in order to aggregate, events would have to be detachable and standardized, but narratives allow for neither. There can no more be a single story than there can be an Ideal Chronicle, for new and different events and new and different stories constantly come into being. (Mink 197) “The Past” cannot as a result exist as a static object about which one may hope to know more and more, as in Kuhn’s image of normal science. For nothing now licenses an assumption of The Past conceived as an untold or partially told story, but always nonetheless the *same* story, a human past narratable *sub specie aeternitatis*.