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Narrative logic. A semantic analysis of the historian's language

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CHAPTER III

THE SENTENCE AND THE NARRATIO

(1) *Introduction.* Western philosophy has never shown much interest in the philosophical problems that surround the narratio. Exceptions are the Sophists of Classical Antiquity and some Renaissance authors such as Lorenzo Valla. In both cases an attempt was made “to deal with the impure”, “to shun the ideal sphere where pure reason and perfect justice resides” and to explore “the shifting and uncertain field of action and discourse”¹. Such intentions certainly favoured the development of a narrativist philosophy, which investigates the philosophical problems of narrative discourse. However, the voice of the Sophists was smothered by Plato in his quest for the “Eternally True”² and the Renaissancist’s interest in rhetorics and the narratio was effectively discredited by Cartesian philosophy and the success of the sciences.

Neither has contemporary philosophy shown much interest in the kind of problems investigated in this book. This is all the more remarkable because narrativist philosophy, of course, deals with a linguistic problem and philosophy in this century is strongly interested in linguistic problems. However, contemporary philosophy of language considers solely the problems caused by words, sentences or statements, neglecting almost entirely the study of sets of singular statements, i.e. stories or narratios. Yet at times a narrativist *route* has so strongly suggested itself that it is hard to see why it should not have been followed. Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* provides a good example. He argues that no adequate analysis of a sentence is possible without considering the context in which it occurs. Wittgenstein’s assertion that in a large class of cases the word “meaning” can be defined as “the meaning of a word is its use in the language”³ expresses his belief that words and sentences get their proper meaning (partly) due to the conditions of their utterance. It seems a very obvious thing to say that the sentences surrounding a particular sentence are, at the least, part of this context. This would be taking the narrativist course; Wittgenstein, however, preferred to define this context in terms of extra-linguistic conditions.

The reason why no attention has been paid to the narratio appears to me to be twofold. Firstly, there has been a belief, I think, that the most essential and interesting problems in the philosophy of language occur only at the level of words and sentences (or statements), at what might be called the “atomary” level. Secondly, although this was not explicitly stated, narratios were considered to be the “molecular” combinations of the more basic “atomic”, sentential elements and consequently narratios

1. Struever; p. 10
 2. Struever; p. 6.
 3. Wittgenstein (2); section 43.

were not considered to pose their own specific problems. I will not deal with the first assumption. It is a matter of taste and it may even be correct. Around the sentence and the statement there are whole areas of philosophical investigation that are of little or no interest from the point of view of the narratio: epistemo-logical problems, the question of analyticity or of the correct analysis of ethical demands, and so on. So there is a good case for the first assumption.

(2) *The sentence and the narratio.* Yet I disagree with the second assumption. Narratios are more than just conjunctions of sentences, and if a narratio is seen as a mere sequence of sentences something very essential is neglected.

Take a certain narratio N on (part of) the past, and number all its sentences: 1, 2, 3, ... etc. Form the text T_1 by arbitrarily changing the original order of the sentences; to preserve the truth of the individual sentences some relative and personal pronouns may have to be changed as well as some words indicating chronology like “then”, “after”, “before” and so on. Let us suppose that this correction has taken place in T_1 . If, then, a narratio is nothing but a conjunction of sentences, there would be no reason to prefer N to T_1 . Of course this is not the case. However, the “reductionist”, i.e. the defender of the view that narratios are nothing but conjunctions of sentences, might argue that it will always be possible to reconstruct N from T_1 , so we cannot attribute different cognitive statuses to N and T_1 ; in both cases we are concerned with a conjunction of sentences, although it may be somewhat easier to establish the cognitive content of N than that of T_1 . But that the sentences in N are arranged in a special way is merely a matter of convenience. That such a reconstruction of N out of T_1 should always be possible seems unlikely, but let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that it is. Even then, two objections can be made to the reductionist thesis. Firstly, it is certainly true that the individual sentences contain, amongst other information, sufficient evidence for what the reconstruction of T_1 has to be. But sufficient evidence for some conclusion — in this case for the reconstruction of N out of T_1 - is not identical with this conclusion - the reconstruction of N out of T_1 - itself. That branch of the philosophy of science that studies the cognitive status of theories is concerned with the explanation and interpretation of this difference. Thus, there is a certain gap between N and T_1 .

This leads me to my second objection to the reductionist position. I assumed that N was “the” reconstruction of T_1 . Yet more reconstructions (e.g. N_1 , N_2 , ... etc.) may be possible, so that the sentences of T_1 may permit of a number of “narrational” interpretations. However, if the reductionist is right, the same would hold for N itself. The conclusion should then be that we can never justifiably say that we have understood a narratio unless we have tried to make sense of all the possible permutations of the sentences of N (after the corrections mentioned above have been made for each permutation). This is obviously untrue. But let us now suppose that T_1 can be reconstructed in one way only, viz. by

reproducing N. Then N has a special status, which makes it different from T_1 or all other possible permutations of the given sentences. This means that by arbitrarily mixing the sentences of N we have eliminated something that N had and $T_1, T_2, T_3 \dots$ etc. do not have. And this can only be true if N is more than a mere conjunction of sentences.

The reductionist may now be willing to abandon his initial extreme position without giving up the essence of his reductionist programme. He may even maintain that narratios are nothing but conjunctions of sentence, while adding, however, that the sentences of the narratios must also be arranged in a certain order. He may argue that this extra proviso does not represent an essential deviation from his original reductionist position; similarly there does exist some - sequential - order between the natural numbers, but whether we enumerate a specific set of natural numbers in conformity with this order or not, does not interfere with the informative content of our enumeration which is in both cases exactly the same. It is only for convenience sake that we prefer to enumerate numbers according to this order. But this is wrong: as soon as the reductionist claims the existence of one or more principles for “ordering” the sentences of the narratio, he claims the existence of something that can never exclusively be reduced to the bare sentences of a narratio themselves. Likewise the principle that “orders” the natural numbers cannot be found in these numbers themselves but only in something external to them - as, for instance, the relation “... is greater than...”. Therefore, speaking of an “order among the sentences of a narratio” contradicts the reductionist’s programme.

Moreover, when the reductionist refers to a specific “order” in the sentences of N, he apparently believes that, the cognitive content of the individual sentences of N (or of T_1 etc., for that makes no difference here) being what they *are*, there exists an intrinsic order connecting these sentences. This “order” openly reveals itself in N and we can have recourse to it if we want to translate $T_1, T_2 \dots$ etc. into a decent narratio (i.e. N). But how can we find out about this intrinsic order? As far as I can see only by saying something like this: if you have a set of sentences roughly with meaning A, it must be followed by a set of sentences roughly with meaning B, and be preceded by another such set with meaning C, and so on. Only if we know this can the correct order of the sentences given to us be confirmed (in the case of N) or established (in the case of $T_1, T_2 \dots$ etc.). But, and this is my main argument against this reductionist strategy, such sets of sentences themselves would already be little narratios, albeit of a less specific kind than the original one(s).

A similar objection can be raised against some recent proposals for text-analysis. Here four things are distinguished: a) the surface-structure of the text (the narratio as it is), b) the deep-structure (the “semantic core” of the narratio) and c) rules for text-transformation (that is, rules for how to proceed from b) to a)) and d) text-grammar (that is, rules for how to proceed from a) to b)). It is obvious that the deep-

structures are in fact identical with the less specific narratios I mentioned at the end of the preceding paragraph. The rules under c) are purely formal and the deep structures of narratios themselves apparently still have a narrative content. This is amply confirmed by the examples given by the adherents of this kind of text-analysis: their deep structures are always little stories with the details left out; the rules of c) may see to it that the details are put in the proper place. Understandably, therefore, these deep-structures are often called “stories” or “fables”. Therefore, when the reductionist is tempted to identify his “principles for ordering the sentences in a narratio” with the rules of c), he is once more fighting a losing battle: narratios have already infiltrated his ranks.

This method of text-analysis has further disadvantages. Firstly, these deep-structures are foggy things. Secondly, this method sets great store by the search for regularities in actual narratios. But I fear that the results of this search will not be very illuminating. It is as if somebody who wants to learn the rules of chess is satisfied by making a list of sequences of moves recurring in the games investigated by him. He will be unable to distinguish between the real rules of the game and mere regularities in the strategies of chess-players. Even when he discovers a number of regularities that *we* know to be identical with the rules of the game, *he* can never be sure of that.

There is however, a still more fundamental deficiency in this method of text-analysis. When we have read and understood a narratio, we know its *content*. Students of text-analysis have a tendency to identify the content of a narratio with its deep structure and it is only natural that they should do so. They point out that we can retell, paraphrase or epitomize a narratio. If we do one of these things, the content of the original narratio remains (largely) intact; at least we should preserve it as much as possible. The interpretation of such “transformations” of the original text is readily available: the same deep-structure (= content) is used to generate different surface-structures. But it is easy to show that the general and abstract narratios that form the deep-structure should not be identified with the content of the narratio. For if we want to give an account of a narratio (e.g. by making an abstract of it) we do our utmost to retain the specificity of the original narratio. Of course we shall omit many details, but we will keep all the details we consider indispensable for attaching content and original narratio alike to the particular historical situation referred to in the narratio. Making an abstract of a narratio is not tantamount to making it less specific. On the contrary⁴.

What I should like to point out, therefore, is that the “content of a narratio” cannot be related to particular sentences in it, and *a fortiori* not to the generalized content of particular sentences. It is *not one sentence*

4. It will be shown in a later phase of our argument that in contrast to the literal sentences under discussion here, metaphorical sentences can sometimes be successful in summarizing a narratio.

in particular, but *all* the sentences of a narratio together that determine this content, although *some* sentences are more determinative for the content of the narratio than others. Apparently, the concept “content of the narratio” cannot be reduced to the concept “the content (or, rather, meaning) of (a) particular sentence(s).” Hence, it follows that narratios cannot be reduced to sentences and that to understand the nature of the narratio we cannot restrict our investigation to the level of sentences.

(3) *Can narratios be (un)true? (I)*. As a consequence of the foregoing discussion it is now necessary to examine the relation between the truth of statements and the truth of narratios. If the content of the narratio cannot be reduced to the meaning of particular statements in the narratio, it is to be expected that the relation between “the truth of the narratio” and “the truth of its individual statements” is less clear than we might at first presume. Before proceeding, I would like to remind the reader that in this study it is assumed that the narratio consists of statements that are either true or false (see Chapter I, section (4)).

The reductionist is not likely to object to using the phrase “truth or falsity of narratios”. We may expect him to hold that the concept “the truth of a narratio” is perfectly clear to him and that it is a function of the truth of the individual statements of a narratio. However, we encounter the following difficulty. A conjunction of statements is false if one of its individual statements is false, which implies that a whole narratio, possibly consisting of many thousands of statements, has to be rejected because of the falsity of only one of its statements. And this is excessive. We could, then, admit that there are *degrees* of truth and say that the truth-value of a narratio is a number between zero and one to be determined by the percentage of true statements divided by one hundred. This reductionist solution, however, will soon meet with further difficulties. Suppose we have two narratios N_1 and N_2 on one and the same topic, e.g. 17th century natural law. N_1 mentions the cardinal fact of the Stoic character of 17th century natural law but falsely states that according to Grotius the state of nature antedates civil society, whereas N_2 correctly represents Grotius’ views but fails to demonstrate the Stoicism of 17th century natural law. The reductionist is now obliged to prefer N_2 to N_1 . This of course he refuses to do and so he amends his theory by proposing that the individual statements should be judged by the importance of what they report. If a statement reports something important and is, moreover, true, it gets a higher mark than a statement that does not satisfy one or both of these conditions. And, he argues, if we bear this extra condition in mind when assessing the two narratios, N_1 will no doubt be judged the better one. So we now have two criteria for the truth of the narratio: 1) the truth or falsity of its individual statements and 2) the degree to which the evidence reported in the individual statements is essential for a correct understanding of what the narratio is about. However, as we saw in our discussion of the two narratios on 17th century natural law these two criteria may contradict each other. This does not brighten the prospects for the reductionist

view, for what *third* criterion could straighten out such a contradiction?

Because a discussion of this problem is bound to be quite hopeless I propose to concentrate our attention on criterion 2). Moreover, we have supposed that the statements in a narratio are true and assumed that the difficulty in writing narrative history is not in satisfying criterion 1) but criterion 2). Consequently, we could claim that a narratio is true if it reports everything, or to put it less categorically, almost everything that is essential for a correct understanding of the subject-matter of the narratio. Such a view has indeed been put forward by some philosophers of history. Fain, for instance, writes that saying that a narratio is true should be taken to mean that this narratio tells us the “relevant truth”⁵. And Fain continues: “relevancy, however, is not achieved in the law or in history by piling up facts. Relevancy, I shall suggest, is achieved as the resultant of a complex interplay between fact and conceptual framework”⁶. Later on, Fain gives a somewhat more accurate specification of his notion of “relevancy”. He writes that the relevant truth is attained when the facts, as reported, fit together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. We have met this convenient simile before, but Fain uses it in a different manner. He reminds us that there are two ways of assembling a jigsaw puzzle: “one can turn all the pieces picture-side down and endeavor to put the puzzle together by referring only to the configuration of the individual pieces [this apparently was what Mink had in mind (FA)]. Another method is to assemble the puzzle by attempting to ascertain how the information conveyed by the coloured side of a piece fits into the total picture”⁷. In this case it is not only the shape of the pieces that matters but also the contribution each piece makes to the total picture. We have a conceptual knowledge of the kind of object the picture of the puzzle shows (cows, goblins, 17th century ships and the like) and we apply such knowledge in assembling the puzzle. The suggestion behind this simile seems to be (I deliberately write “seems to be” for Fain does not indicate with sufficient precision in what respects he considers puzzles and narratios to be analogous) that the conceptual knowledge we have of our world serves as a guide when we try to tell the *relevant* truth. Just as we expect a red cap to belong near the goblin’s white beard we expect the historian of Romanticism to say something of neo-Platonism, Pietism, *Sturm und Drang* and so on. And if the historian lives up to these expectations we regard his narratio as conveying the relevant truth (provided, of course, that what he says in terms of statements is true).

A number of objections can be made regarding this view. Firstly, Fain does not show how to tell the relevant truth but how to write a consistent narratio. But it is easy to conceive of a consistent narratio of which all the parts form a closely-knit unity, which nevertheless does not provide knowledge we consider relevant (in any ordinary sense of

5. Fain; p. 247.

6. Fain; p. 247.

7. Fain; p. 249.

the word). Secondly, thanks to our knowledge of goblins we expect a red cap as soon as we perceive a white beard; but usually we do not have similar knowledge of the past. Before we start reading history we do not know what will be relevant for the understanding of a particular part of the past. The historian is supposed to tell us that. Of course we do not expect a historiography of Romanticism to inform us about the prices of grain in the 1680's. But if criteria for relevance are looked for at *that* level all historiographies can be said to tell us the relevant truth, for in this respect historians never fail to come up to expectations. Therefore, if the relevant truth about a historical phenomenon P is to consist largely of truths about P that the reader does not know to be relevant for an understanding of this phenomenon (and if this assumption were wrong, I would not know why people should read history at all) then Pain's simile of the jigsaw puzzle is plainly misleading. So this attempt to establish an acceptable interpretation of the phrases "the truth or falsity of narratio" is unsuccessful.

A somewhat similar attempt to define these concepts was made in an illuminating article by Gorman. Gorman, too, believes that the truth of the individual statements of a narratio is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for the truth (Gorman prefers the term "acceptability") of a narratio. In a very ingenious way Gorman contrasts two accounts of the life of William Joyce (the "Lord Haw Haw" of World War II) and then he argues that both consist only of true statements and yet they cannot both be true at the same time: he even describes them as "incompatible" (later on I will return to this strong qualification). Concluding that the truth or falsity of the individual statements in a narratio is an unreliable criterion for deciding upon its acceptability, he goes in search of a more appropriate criterion elsewhere.

Gorman suggests that the acceptability of a narratio be made dependent upon the "relevancy" of its individual statements. Next, he tries to find a criterion for the relevancy of individual narrative statements. He is convinced that there is a "rational standard" for this relevancy, but apart from a not very helpful digression on such "rational standards" in the sciences (e.g. Popper's falsifiability criterion), he says nothing substantial on this point. However, it should be noted that according to Gorman these "rational standards" — whatever their nature — decide upon the relevancy of statements for the narrative account as a whole (i.e. not upon their relevancy for understanding a historical phenomenon).

Consequently, for Gorman (and Pain's conceptions show a similar tendency) the relevance of statements is not dependent upon their relation to historical reality itself but upon their place or function in the narratio taken as a whole. His suggestion that the concept "the truth of the narratio" be assimilated via "the acceptability of the narratio" with "the relevancy of its individual statements" would thus induce us to neglect the question of the correspondence between the narratio and historical reality when we consider the truth or falsity of a narratio. This

would violate even the most liberal interpretations of the word “true”. Gorman will be obliged to allow that novels can be “true” even if they are entirely fictitious.

One might try to repair the damage by identifying the relevance of statements with the degree to which the information they convey is essential or important for understanding actual historical phenomena. In this way the relation between the narratio and historical reality could be restored. However, we have seen in Chapter II, section (8), that such a strategy will be unsuccessful.

(4) *Can narratios be (un)true? (II)*. We may conclude that the attempt to legalize the concept “the truth of the narratio” by taking it to mean “the relevant truth on the subject the narratio is about” has little chance of success. Let us, therefore, try another approach. There are four theories of truth: the correspondence, the coherence, the pragmatist and the performative theory of truth. Each of these gives an analysis of what we mean when we say that a statement is true. We shall now attempt to apply them to the narratio and see what the result will be. If none of the four theories can be usefully applied to the narratio we are obliged to conclude, I believe, that the concept “the truth of the narratio” should be rejected.

According to the performative theory of truth, the phrase “... is true” is redundant: there is no cognitive difference between (1) “p” (where “p” is a statement) and (2) “p is true”. Only, when we say or prefer to say (2) instead of (1), we *perform* a kind of “speech-act”, wishing to express our agreement with p, or to remind someone of p and so on. But from a cognitive point of view the phrase “... is true” is redundant: it adds nothing to whatever we fill in in place of the dots. So we could safely eliminate the word “true” from our dictionary. But, of course, if we did so, we should eliminate our problem as well. Thus the performative theory does not bring us nearer to a solution of our initial difficulty.

What about the pragmatic theory of truth which actually develops Goethe’s well-known dictum: “was fruchtbar ist, allein ist wahr”? According to this theory statements are true when they prove to be a reliable guide for (scientific) action: we have only “differences in practice” (Peirce⁸) to rely upon when we discuss the truth of statements, theories and so on. If P_1 and P_2 have contrasting opinions O_1 and O_2 on subject-matter S (P_1 believes O_1 to be true, and P_2 believes O_2 to be true) their different *handling* of S (and related subject-matters) is the clearest indication of their disagreement. The statement that P believes O to be true simply means that P is inclined to a particular line of action in situations on which O has some bearing (the corollary that truth is always concerned with *people* who believe something and act accordingly, has been

8. The pragmatic theory of truth draws its inspiration from Peirce's declaration: "(...) there is no distinction of meaning so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice". Quoted in G. Ezorsky, *The pragmatic theory of truth*, in P. Edwards ed., *The encyclopedia of philosophy* Vol VI, London 1967; p. 427.

accepted wholeheartedly by most defenders of the pragmatic theory of truth, in particular C.S. Peirce). In short, action based upon a particular belief is the best indication of what exactly that belief is. Consequently, an accurate appraisal of the action to which a particular belief gives rise is the best criterion for deciding upon the truth of that belief. Successful action is inspired by true belief.

It is not my intention to discuss here the merits of each of the four theories of truth. I just take them as they are and try to find out whether their application to the narratio makes sense. Nevertheless, I must point out that whatever one's opinion of the pragmatic theory is, it cannot reasonably be denied that it is best suited to the experimental, and more particularly, the *applied* sciences. Surely, when physicists adhere to different theories, the way in which they arrange their experimental tests will differ too. It is not unlikely a) that the character of the tests is the best indication of the nature of their disagreement and b) that the most successful experiments (or applications of the corresponding theories) are inspired by those theories which we are most justified in calling "true".

But it is not so obvious at all that the application of this truth-theory to *history* should be equally plausible. The historian does not submit his subject-matter, the past, to tests: it is not in his power to experiment with the past. He cannot arrange certain aspects of the past in such a manner that he gets specific answers to specific questions. As a result, it is difficult to see what sort of correspondence there could be between a historian's experimental handling of the past and his views on the past. According to the pragmatist's conceptions it would therefore be impossible to distinguish truth and falsity in history.

I must emphasize that my point should not be regarded as a complaint about the historian's incapacity to experiment; Nagel was entirely right when he warned against the tendency to exaggerate the indispensability of experiments and underlined that in sciences like astronomy truth may be attained by other methods as well⁹. Yet - and that is my point here — it is hard to see, how the pragmatic theory of truth could be adapted to suit these essentially non-experimental sciences. It might be suggested that the manner in which a scientist or a scholar investigates the universe or history constitutes the scientific or historiographical practice from which we are able to infer his opinions on what is true or false. But the fact that someone has a certain belief is insufficient evidence for the truth of what is believed.

If the pragmatist accepts this objection he may confront us with the following situation. When a researcher proposes interpretation I_1 of (part of) the past while rejecting interpretation I_2 , his adherence to I_1 will surely give rise to a different kind of inquiry into that part of the past than if he had accepted I_2 . Even in historiography, therefore, disagreements entail differences in research-practice. After comparing the

9. Nagel; p. 452.

results of different “handlings” of the past inspired by different interpretations of the past it is possible to determine which “handling” of the past has been most successful and then we have our “true” narratio. Actually, I have no quarrel with this suggestion, except that it tacitly abandons the whole idea behind the pragmatic theory of truth. For how can we determine what the most successful “handling” of the past is? Not by assessing the “practical” results of such “handling”. Indeed, we can form an opinion about the truth of, for instance, mechanical theories, by checking whether or not bridges constructed with the aid of these theories tend to collapse. But we can only select the most successful “handling” of the past by comparing its results with other interpretations of the past which we already possess. Not *reality* but other *interpretations* of the past are our arbiter. So coherence with other interpretations of the past is the ultimate test for the truth of a specific narratio, if we subscribe to the pragmatic theory of truth as amended above. This, however, is no longer the pragmatic but the coherence theory of truth. We may conclude, therefore, that the pragmatic theory of truth is either not applicable to the narratio (if we restrict the theory to its proper domain, the experimental or applied sciences) or that it degenerates into a coherence theory of truth if we do apply it to the narratio.

We shall now investigate the correspondence and the coherence theories of truth. As these are the most widely held theories at present, we may surmise that they have most chance of yielding an acceptable interpretation of the concept “the truth of the narratio”. I shall start with the correspondence theory. Austin’s formulation gives us access to some of the most interesting implications of the theory when applied to the narratio. That is why I begin with Austin’s representation; a more general account will be given later on. Austin writes: “a statement is said to be true when the *historic* state of affairs to which it is correlated by the demonstrative conventions (the one to which it “refers”) is of a *type* [i.e. is sufficiently like those standard states of affairs (FA)] with which the sentence used in making it is correlated by the descriptive conventions”¹⁰. The gist of this definition is that *sentences* in contrast to *statements* do not depend for their contribution to truth or falsity upon the conditions of their utterance (compare the sentence “I am in pain” uttered by myself and uttered by others, or uttered by myself on different occasions). The *descriptive* conventions specify this general or standard type of state of affairs. A *statement* on the other hand refers to a specific historic state of affairs and is tied to it by the *demonstrative* conventions (for instance, when *I* say at *t* “I am in pain”, then it is *Ankersmit* who is in pain at *t*). A statement, then is true when the historic state of affairs to which it is tied by the demonstrative conventions is sufficiently like this “standard” state of affairs that is specified by the descriptive conventions of the sentence.

10. Austin; p. 122.

In ordinary constative statements that can be either true or false, this “standard” state of affairs is most typically determined by the meaning of the words. If we say “red” in the sentence “x is red”, the descriptive conventions determine the meaning of this word by specifying a band of a certain width in a colour-spectrum of a certain richness (if x is purple and if the spectrum is so richly differentiated as to contain the colour purple, the statement “x is red” is false, assuming that in *this* case something cannot be both red and purple; if the descriptive conventions for the use of the word “red” are such as not to account for what we might call “purple”, the statement is true). Let us assume that all this is acceptable for the kind of statements contained in the narratio as stipulated in Chapter I, section (4).

For narratios, however, things are different. Firstly, a distinction analogous to that between statement and sentence cannot be made with regard to the narratio. If anything, the narratio shows a certain resemblance to statements (but not to sentences) because it cannot refer to different historical circumstances. A narratio cannot be used to characterize a particular class of historical states of affairs - and if a “narratio” does, something is wrong with it. Narratios always account for one specific historical situation only.

Secondly, it might be argued that for narratios there are also certain descriptive conventions that determine the limits, so to speak, within which the actual past should lie if the narratio is to be true. However, we cannot speak of “descriptive conventions” in connection with the narratio. Words like “red”, “circular”, “heavy” etc. have their “descriptive conventions” because we can, at least in principle, use these words in many different contexts, but it is nonsense to say that narratios are used in different contexts. In a way, a narratio is like a word that is spoken only once. Or, to be more precise, although narratios contain true statements and although true statements can be made on them, they cannot be used for making true statements (like words) and thus we cannot conceive of “descriptive conventions” for their correct use. If, then, we cannot say that there is a certain *type* of historical states of affairs corresponding to a narratio in a way reminiscent of sentences, it follows that we have no standards for the appraisal of the truth of narratios similar to the standards postulated by Austin. For what would such a standard be like? Supposing a historian writes a history of British colonial expansion in the 18th century, what standard of truth do we have in order to make a judgment about the truth or falsity of the historian’s account of this historical phenomenon? Of course each individual historical narratio on this particular topic may be considered an attempt at establishing such a standard. And if I am allowed to commit myself for once to using the word “true”, every ordinary historian believes his narratio to be true. However, unlike sentences and statements, narratios do not have some kind of narrative “meaning” that serves as a standard for deciding upon their truth or falsity.

Next, I should like to give this discussion a somewhat more general

character. My argument will be fundamentally the same as the one just given, but because of subsequent adaptation it has a wider import. Let us formulate the correspondence theory in a more conventional way than was done by Austin. According to the correspondence theory, then, a statement is true if it corresponds to the specific state of affairs it is about. If we substitute “narratio” for “statement”, this becomes: a narratio is true if it corresponds to the specific state of affairs it is about. This, I think, is unacceptable. For, when the correspondence theory is applied to narratios, it causes a peculiar ambiguity that is absent in the case of statements. Take a wholly unambiguous statement, albeit as complicated as can be imagined. It is a most convenient property of statements — as far as they are unambiguous and thus can be either true or false - that they always unmistakably identify what state of affairs they are about. *If*, I emphasize, *if* we deal with statements that are either true or false, we always know exactly what states of affairs, or aspects thereof, do correspond to the statement in question. Next, we can turn to (actual) reality and find out about the truth of the statement. Therefore, statements that we can characterize as either true or false (and admittedly there are many that do not have this property but these, of course, are immaterial to our discussions on the application of the concept “truth” to the narratio) always unmistakably define one or more aspects of reality. And that they should do so, is an important, if not the most important condition for their being true or false.

However, when dealing with the narratio we have to do without such comforting clarity. What is the historic state of affairs that corresponds to a narratio? If H_1 and H_2 both write a narratio on British colonial expansion from 1702 to 1963, they both write, allegedly, about the same complex state of affairs; nevertheless, their narratios may be widely different. Should we then say that, for instance, H_2 apparently does not know what British colonial expansion from 1702 to 1763 was and, therefore, has produced an erroneous narratio? But what makes us so sure that H_1 is correct about what this colonial expansion was? We cannot simply establish or “show” that we are right, we can only *argue* our claim. Once more, we have no standards here. Historical discussions are not decided by just checking if the right narratio has been attached to the “right thing” in the past. We cannot compare the “right things” in the past to a number of paintings we know only from their descriptions in a museum-catalogue. To verify which description belongs to which painting we could simply go to the museum. A similar solution, unfortunately, is impossible in the case of historical discussions.

There is a curious lack of fixity in the correspondence between the narratio and the past represented in it. The narratio does not select - in a way known and accepted by all who speak the language in which the narratio is written — a specific and well-defined number of aspects of the past agreed upon by all readers of the narratio, aspects which could subsequently be inspected in order to decide upon the truth of the narratio. The reader may now be inclined to observe that each individual

statement is, as we have assumed, either true or false and that its being either true or false is and ought to be a criterion for the truth of the narratio of which it is a part. I would like to recall, however, that we rejected this naive view at the outset of our discussion on the truth of the narratio. As a consequence of this lack of fixity, we cannot pretend to know precisely, after having read a narratio, what “the case was”. Cognitively, narratios have — so to speak - a “soft underbelly”, And this is where they differ most conspicuously from statements. That explains why we cannot speak of “good” or “bad” statements in the way we can meaningfully speak of “good” or “bad” narratios. The statement is able to express its meaning exactly and completely, whereas an element of ambiguity seems unavoidable when we deal with complex historical narratios. We can know for certain whether or not the paraphrase of a statement correctly represents the meaning of the original statement, but we can never be quite so certain in the case of a narratio. We consider language to be perfectly suited to its task as long as we are dealing with separate statements, but we seem to put an unbearable pressure on it when we use it narratively. Language, it seems, in its “evolutionary” struggle for the representation of reality has achieved the sentential but not yet the narrative representation of reality. In the narratio the statements “do more”, apparently, than just unite their separate meanings. They impart to the narratio a cognitive value that should be distinguished from the sum of the meanings of the individual statements.

What has been said just now should not be interpreted as a complaint that there is a regrettable conceptual anarchy existing in history. We shall see in Chapter VII that the narratio not only describes the past (in the way statements describe reality) but also proposes a “meta-phoric” view on historical reality. The fact that the narratio does these two things at one and the same time is responsible for the lack of fixity between the narratio and historical reality. To demand that this lack of fixity should be removed from the narratio is tantamount to demanding that all narrative use of language should be eliminated. Criticizing the narratio for this lack of fixity is measuring the narratio with the yard-stick of the statement. However, the narratio can be very precise both in its descriptive and in its metaphoric component. The narratio can only be accused of lack of precision if the wrong criteria (i.e. those of the statement) are applied and if it is claimed - albeit correctly - that the fixity in the relation between the statement and the historical state of affairs to which it refers is absent in the narratio.

Although it is as yet impossible at this stage for me to give a full exposition of my view of the matter, I should like to add a short comment on this lack of fixity in historiography, or, to put it differently, on the remarkable absence of standards of truth in the case of the narratio. Historians write histories about events like the French Revolution, British colonial expansion in the 18th century, persecutions of witches in the 16th century and so on. Fortunately historians and their public do not object to such and similar concepts, for without them the

writing of history would become impossible. In daily life we know how to individuate things (to which we have given names) by means of identifying descriptions. We do not hesitate to assume that in history the situation is similar. What else could the French Revolution be than the social and political upheaval at the end of the 18th century in France that shattered an ancient monarchy and led to the rule of a new class? This is why we (subconsciously) believe that we all have the same thing in mind when we use the name “French Revolution”. The undeniable fact that all existing historiographies on the subject frequently overlap corroborates this belief. Yet this is an unsatisfactory definition of the situation. The referent of the name “French Revolution” (let us for the moment accept that there is such a referent - later on we shall see that this is not the case) cannot be “picked out” from other “things” in the past as can be done with the referents of more ordinary proper names. The various uses of the proper name “French Revolution” show a certain analogy with Wittgenstein’s well-known “family-resemblances”: “what still counts as a game and what no longer does? Can you give the boundary? No. You can *draw* one; for no one has so far been drawn (but that never troubled you before when you used the word “game”)”¹¹. This analogy suggests that *if* we should wish to speak of (un)true narratios we should have to choose between saying either that *every* narratio is true (because it belongs to the “family” of narrative descriptions of a subject-matter S) or that *every* narratio is false (in so far as every narratio pretends to be the exclusive delineation of S)¹². Both alternatives are equally absurd and that again tells very strongly against the proposal to use the phrase “(un)true narratios”. How odd it is that when we use this phrase historiographical discussions on the truth or falsity of narratios turn into a philosophical debate!

The curious character of historical terms (and the remainder of this book will be devoted to an exploration of the nature of these terms) gives us another clue for understanding why traditional theories of truth fail to be applicable to the narratio. Apart from the correspondence between the individual statements of a narratio and historical reality (this correspondence is beyond doubt), we cannot speak of a particular, “narrativist” correspondence between the narratio in its totality and the historical reality related in it. If we have to choose between two competing narratios N_1 and N_2 on S we cannot solve our problem by simply looking at S and establishing what the “correspondence” between S and N_1 and N_2 respectively is - for the notion “S” itself has an ambiguity that is an exact correlate of the differences between N_1 and N_2 . The fact that something similar can be said of scientific theories only lends extra support to this view. Therefore, when we are considering the content of

11. Wittgenstein (2); section 68.

12. It should be noted that our concern is not: “if a is given to us (e.g. the French Revolution) what can or should be said on it?” but rather “where lies the line of demarcation between a (e.g. the French Revolution) and not-a (e.g. the Ancien Régime)?”

narratios, we cannot demand a correspondence between states of affairs in reality and their *narrative* representation. So much for the correspondence theory, which we may now dismiss with equanimity.

That leaves us with one last candidate: the coherence theory of truth. According to this theory a statement is true if it coheres with a system of other statements that we are prepared to accept. It is easy to see what this means for the narratio. The main problem, I believe, will be to clarify what is meant by a “coherence of narratios”. When do narratios (fail to) cohere? That statements (fail to) cohere is acceptable to anybody. But can we say the same of narratios? In this connection I would like to recall to mind the article by Gorman, referred to on p.65 of this book. The two narratios on the life of William Joyce, both consisting of true statements only, did not cohere according to Gorman. He even called them “incompatible”, without explaining, however, what he understands by this term. Webster gives the following definition of “incompatible”: “incapable of appearing or of being thought together or of entering into the same system, theory or practice (incompatible ideas): incapable of harmonious association”¹³. I note in passing that the “incapability ... of entering into the same system” in Webster’s definition labels the notion of (in)compatibility” as a good candidate for a criterion of truth, when truth is understood in accordance with the coherence theory. If thinking a excludes thinking b, thinking them together involves a contradiction. And saying that the conjunction of two statements leads to a contradiction is equivalent to saying that the *truth* of a excludes the *truth* of b (and vice versa). Thus we define the relation of incompatibility between a and b as follows: a and b are incompatible when a’s being true implies b’s being false and vice versa. Or, whoever uses the word “incompatible” always bears in mind the words “true” and “untrue”. If we apply all this to narratios, that it is permissible to speak of the “incompatibility” of narratios is also sufficient support for the view that narratios can be characterized as either true or false. So the most plausible procedure now is to investigate whether Gorman was justified in characterizing the two narratios in William Joyce as “incompatible”.

I will state forthwith my own position. I admit that we can speak of the “incompatibility of narratios”, but reject that this should lead to the conclusion that narratios can be either true or false. No doubt I have caused some confusions by so abruptly contradicting what has just been said. I hope to show, however, that I have not involved myself in a contradiction. What made Gorman speak of the “incompatibility” of the two accounts of Joyce’s biography? Although he does not say this explicitly, the context in which he uses the word “incompatible” suggests that he has in mind the relation between the respective narratios and the effect — in a moral sense — they produce on the reader. Thus the first of the two biographies seems to imply that Joyce was unjustly condemned. The second narratio, on the other hand, convinces us that Joyce should

13. *Webster's third international dictionary* Vol II, Chicago 1971; p. 1144.

have been hanged. Joyce's judge had to choose between condemning and not condemning Joyce to be hanged. Indeed, there is an "incompatibility" between the two alternatives. I believe, then, that the term "incompatible", which was correctly used in the description of the relation between the two possible courses of juridical action with regard to Joyce, was taken by Gorman from its proper context and used to characterize the narratio that served as the factual justification for each course of action. But we are not permitted to make such a move. The incompatibility between the two verdicts is due to certain distinctions made in the legal system. These distinctions have a different origin and function than those the historian discerns in reality. For the judge is not a historian, he is not interested in Ranke's "wie es eigentlich gewesen" in its own right, but in the question of how a legal rule and what legal rule applies to a certain case. One could say that the penal code provides the judge with a large number of "standard narratios" and when pronouncing his judgment, the judge has to decide whether what actually happened was more like one or more like another "standard narratio". I emphasize that these "standard narratios" are of course not narratios in the proper sense of the word: because of their hypothetical character they do not relate actual historical phenomena; they do not even offer generalizations of them. I nevertheless venture to call them "narratios" (albeit "standard narratios") because they constitute the best narrative analogue I can think of to Austin's "sentences" when the latter are contrasted with "statements": the way "standard narratios" correlate with a general type of situations specifically described by narratios in the proper sense of the word has a close resemblance to the way sentences correlate with statements.

However, and here the analogy comes to an end, the "standard narratios" supplied by our ethical or legal systems do not provide us with criteria for the truth or falsity of the actual narratios. On the contrary, the idea of a "scientific historiography" — as German scholars like to call it — arose at the beginning of the 19th century only after ethical interpretations of history had been conclusively rejected. In the light of our discussion we might interpret this historiographical revolution as resulting from a growing awareness amongst historians of the specificity inherent in the narratio, or to put it metaphorically, as a growing preference for the statement over the sentence (in Austin's terminology). And this growing awareness, in its turn, could only come in the wake of a new insight into the differences between the procedures followed by judges and those followed by historians. The judge reasons from his (standard) narratios towards the past, the historian from the past towards a narratio; the judge's narratios are ready-made, the historian's are made to measure. Ethical or legal systems do not provide the "standards" or "paradigms" which the historian applies in order to reach the truth.

To resume the argument: the notion "coherence" obliged us to discuss the problem of the "incompatibility" of narratios. However, we

found that the use of the latter term in historiography is only justified when ethical or legal interpretations are our goal. Because nearly all historians agree that such interpretations should be avoided, we must conclude that the attempt to justify the concepts “the truth or falsity of the narratio” via the concept “incompatibility” has been unsuccessful.

Let us start once more at the very beginning. Our difficulties arose from the attempt to interpret the word “cohere”: when do narratios (fail to) cohere? White clarifies the term as follows: “coherence within a larger system requires that the members of the system are related to each other by ties of logical implication as the elements in a system of pure mathematics are related”¹⁴. Obviously, the requirement is far too rigorous to be applicable to history. It is absurd to say that Peter Gay’s history of the Enlightenment is true (or false) because it is logically implied (or not) by the narratios of, for instance, Cassirer or Venturi on the subject (if one believes that narratios on the same subject should supply the logical implication), or by Hazard’s book on the crisis of the European mind from 1680 to 1715 and Jones’s *Revolution and Romanticism* (if one believes that the logical implication ought to be established on the basis of narratios dealing with different though closely related topics). Even if we relax the requirement and read “by ties of logical implication” as “by ties acceptable to all reasonable persons” while eliminating entirely the reference made to pure mathematics, there remain difficulties. This is a consequence of a weakness inherent in the coherence theory of truth. It is sometimes argued that whereas the correspondence theory states the *meaning* of the word “true” the coherence theory only shows how to proceed in order to *establish* truth or falsehood. That this is a very sensible suggestion is evident when we realize that the coherence theory only makes sense if we already have at our disposal some statements that we believe to be true. Only then can we speak of a coherence of other statements within this body of true statements. But if we do so, we give ourselves the right to use the words “true” and “false” well before our inquiry into the merits of the coherence theory has actually been begun. In the case of statements, this is not so reprehensible a procedure: it seems quite innocuous to take the truth of some very simple statements for granted. We have to start somewhere, in any case. However in relation to narratios we are not allowed to do this. We want to know if it is at all legitimate to say of narratios that they are either true or false. And if we have to assume that at least some narratios are either true or false in order to legitimize the concept of the truth or falsity of narratios, then we have already accepted the thesis whose acceptability was here *sub judice*.

I think we may conclude from the foregoing discussion that we cannot and should not speak of the “truth or falsity” of the narratio in the way we speak of the “truth or falsity” of statements. In one sense, nevertheless,

14. A.R. White, Coherence theory of truth, in P. Edwards ed., *The encyclopedia of philosophy* Vol II, London 1967; p. 130.

the phrase “(un>true narratio” can be meaningful, viz. in the case of ethical or legal reasoning where “standards” on which to model narratios are available. If a narratio correctly answers all the questions arising from the “standard narratio” used with regard to a specific, historical occasion, it is not wholly improper to say that the resulting narratio is true. In so far as historiography differs from ethical and juridical reasoning, such locutions are not permitted. Our discussions, then, have made sufficiently clear, I hope, that the phrases “the truth (and falsity) of a narratio” are phrases that have to be rejected.

Of course we cannot prohibit the use of the words “true” and “false” in a narrative sense and it is not my wish to improve upon ordinary language. The purpose of my discussion was solely to demonstrate that in a *philosophical* argument the phrases “the truth (and falsity) of a narratio” should be shunned. At least, it should be realized that the terms “true” and “false” when used to characterize narratios have a meaning quite distinct from the meaning they have when used to characterize statements. I am very well aware that we have a natural tendency to use the words “true” and “false” to indicate the value of narratios because if there are several narratios on the same subject, their quality is bound to be different. Most people will probably agree that for all its merits C.H. de Wit’s account of the last years of the Dutch Republic is of a lesser quality than Leeb’s *Ideological Origins of the Batavian Revolution*. For want of a better term one has come to use the terms “true” and “false” on such occasions: “Leeb has come nearer to “the truth” on the dotage of the Dutch Republic than de Wit (or, for that matter, Schama in his recent book)”. However, in order to avoid misleading analogies in a *philosophical* exposition it is better to adopt a separate term to indicate the quality of the narratio. Henceforth, I shall use the words “true” and “false” only for statements, and as their narrative analogues I propose the terms “subjective” and “objective”. A good quality narratio, which in ordinary language would be said to be “true” will be called “objective”, a poor quality narratio being called “subjective”. Of course, the terms “objective” and “subjective” are already in use. Therefore it will be necessary to cleanse them of some of their customary connotations; after this has been done, they will turn out to be admirably suited to serving as the narrative counterparts of the statemental concepts “true” and “false”. However, it will only be at the end of Chapter VIII that a close examination of the expression “the objectivity of the narratio” can be undertaken.