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Forum Debate on Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen's **Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography**

Introduction

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Abstract

Is narrativism dead or still alive? Have all questions occasioned by the historical text been answered, so that philosophers of history must now turn to other problems? Or did narrativist philosophy of history have its blind spots that now demand their scrutiny? And if the historical text still has its secrets and mysteries, is narrativism capable of dealing with them? Or would we need for this a 'postnarrativist' approach? And, if so, what will this new approach look like and what can we expect from it? These are the questions put on the agenda by Kukkanen's *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography* (2015). In this forum debate five scholars (Brian Fay, Eugen Zelenak, Anton Froeyman, Frank Ankersmit and Daniel Fairbrother) comment on Kuukkanen's book. Pragmatism proves to be an important clue to their findings.

Keywords

Kuukkanen – (post-)narrativism – argument – pragmatism

1

In 1973 Hayden White published his *Metahistory*. The book marked the beginning of a new era in philosophy of history. The focus was now no longer on the epistemological issues occasioned by the writing of history that had preoccupied covering-law-modelists and their Collingwoodian opponents, but on the writing of history itself. 'Narrativism' was the result. Its success in philosophy of history was further stimulated by the so-called 'linguistic turn', whose first

triumphs in philosophy and in the reflection on the humanities more or less coincided with the publication of *Metahistory*. The previously predominantly epistemological paradigm was thus succeeded by a new one.

But according to many theorists the narrativist paradigm has now, in its turn, become subject to the law of diminishing returns. They point out that philosophy of history moved in the last decade from the narrativist preoccupation with the question of how we *write* about the past to the 'existentialist' issue of how we *relate* to it.¹ The shift meant a transition from a primarily philosophical approach to one inspired by an indefinite set of non-philosophical perspectives on how human beings interact with their past. The transition is, therefore, often suitably styled in terms of an opposition between 'philosophy of history' versus 'historical theory' or 'theory of history'.

So time has come to reconsider narrativism and to ask ourselves whether it exhausted all of its possibilities when it indisputably was the only game in town. Or can important and new work still to be done there? Clearly, that is a question we must face at this junction where 'philosophy of history' and 'the theory of history' started to move into different directions and to lose contact with, and interest for each other. If narrativism has come to its end, there is no other reasonable option but to unite all our forces in order to crack the secrets of how we relate to the past. If not yet, the philosopher of history cannot afford to ignore the question what narrativism may somehow have missed, and where it could further contribute to our understanding of historical writing. It could even be that the issues narrativism 'forgot' till this very day are of more interest than those that it did address in the past few decades.

Above all, without questioning for a moment the importance of what the new, existentialist paradigm put on the agenda of the theory of history, the basic fact remains that historians have written texts about the past at least since the days of Herodotus and Thucydides, that they still do so and in all likelihood will persist doing so for as long as the discipline of history exists. Our contact with our past may take many forms, forms that we cannot even fathom nowadays, but it is hard to imagine that the historical text, either spoken or written, will lose its privileged place amongst them. Put differently,

1 The paradigm can appropriately be described as 'existentialist' in the sense that our relationship to the past can be conceived of as an aspect of human existence (either individually or collectively). The paradigm addresses issues such as memory, forgetting, the Holocaust, (historical) experience, presence, (historical) time, transitional justice, the uses of the past, our dialogue with the past, the past as the 'other', the rights of the dead, the anthropological approach to the past, and so on.

narrativism can and should not be seen as just one more fashion or some temporary fad that can be easily exchanged for a new one if it momentarily seems to have exhausted its possibilities. The issues it discusses will never lose anything of their importance and interest for as long history will be written, even though they will often be addressed from a new and different angle. It's no different with nature! How we *relate* to nature has become an issue of great urgency in our age of the anthropocene, of global warming, pollution, the extinction of species, and so on. And quite rightly so! But it is highly unlikely that this will push the philosophy of the natural sciences out of business for the present and the foreseeable future. If only because the latter puts on the agenda problems about truth, falsity, the nature of knowledge and about how to justify it that can be traced back to the days of Plato and are, hence, as old as philosophy itself.

Returning to the issue what narrativism did and what it did not do, it is not hard to track down what dropped out of sight when narrativism so successfully took over some thirty to forty years ago. A new paradigm always tends to over-react to the paradigm preceding it. It was no different with narrativism. When it took over the baton from the epistemological paradigm preceding it, it suggested, tacitly implied or even openly declared, all epistemological issues – and, hence, also those occasioned by how the historical text related to what it is about – to be of little and of an only subsidiary interest. Discussion focused almost exclusively on the historical text itself, its structure, its organization, its rhetorics and so on. The epistemological question of how a complex text as typically written by historians may, or fail to account for a complex historical reality was pushed aside by other preoccupations. The associations with literature provoked by the very term 'narrativism' made matters even worse. For it goes without saying that literature could not possibly be a helpful guide if one wishes to find out about the epistemological criteria historical texts may be expected to satisfy.

I give two, though quite different examples of the shortcomings of recent discussion in the narrativist paradigm. In the first place, Keith Jenkins's theoretical writings owe their wholly unique place in contemporary historical thought to the fact that they offer an uncompromising radicalization of all the anti-epistemological tendencies inherent in narrativism I mentioned just now – even when resulting in the *reductio ad absurdum* of an 'anything goes' in historical writing. All cognitive restraints on historical and all belief in the possibility of any kind of historical truth are rejected by Jenkins with an indeed remarkable and ruthless consistency. His historical theory thus ended up in the self-defeating theory that no theory of history is possible, and in the alleged corollary that the demise of theory must imply the demise of historical

writing itself as well.² If philosophy cannot justify historical knowledge on *a priori* grounds, it follows that history is written in a cognitive vacuum in which neither truth nor falsity can breathe. So the sad message is that historical writing itself and philosophy of history have to be interred in a common grave.

A similar move having, in practice, much the same consequences, can be found at the complete opposite end of the philosophical spectrum. I have in mind here the writings by Paul Roth that obtained a certain notoriety for their uncompromising attacks on philosophers of history not sharing their author's Quinean post-positivist, or 'naturalist' agenda. For naturalists – such as Quine and Roth – there exist no *a priori* determinations of what makes a discipline into the discipline it is, nor any such criteria for what is to be considered true and false in it. All such determinations and criteria are defined by the actual *practice* of the discipline. Naturalism, thus conceived, has some funny implications. Firstly, it robs philosophy (of science) of its traditional *raison d'être* since the practice of science itself now is the first and the last word. When the practitioners of the empirical sciences have had their say, the philosopher has nothing substantial to add to that. Though, as Quine himself insists, one empirical science has a privileged place amongst them all, namely cognitive psychology. For cognitive psychology (and sciences such as neurophysiology or evolutionary biology) may offer a causal explanation of how biological creatures like us came to represent the world as we do. Having heard as much, one may wonder whether this stand should truly be the inescapable outcome of more than two thousand years of philosophical debate about the nature of knowledge, or to see here, instead, one more *reductio ad absurdum*. Next, there is the issue of normativity. Traditional epistemology was openly normative: it defined the criteria claims to knowledge ought to satisfy. Quine is unwilling to abandon normativity altogether. However, this is not easy to reconcile with Quine's exchange of epistemological justification for a causal analysis of the origins of our beliefs. This is clearly not the place to pronounce on Quine's naturalized epistemology. Nevertheless, the foregoing will make amply clear that for philosophers of history adopting Quinean naturalism – such as Roth – the philosophical investigation of the relationship between the historical text and what it is about is outlawed *a priori* no less than was the case with Jenkins.³ In both cases the rejection of the *a priori* results in an (*a priori*) ban on the reflection on the nature of historical writing and knowledge. 'Les extrêmes se touchent'.

2 K. Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History*, London 2008.

3 As I argued in my 'Reply to Professor Roth: on how antidogmatism bred dogmatism', *Rethinking History* 17 (2013): 570–585.

Finally – and paradoxically – sometimes naturalist philosophers of history, such as Roth, nevertheless go on to defend *a priori* positions about historical writing, as if their naturalism had not *expressis verbis* forbidden them to do so. For example, Roth advocates a philosophy of history based on the evidently *a priori* conviction that historical texts are, essentially, narratives as these had been defined more than fifty years ago by Arthur Danto.⁴ Inconsistency is thus piled on the cult of irrelevance. Moreover, the *a priori* conviction is demonstrably false. Take an arbitrarily selected page from a historical narrative. Even if the page contains narrative sentences à la Danto it is not necessarily a narrative itself. For much the same reason(s) why Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* is a painting, whereas some arbitrarily selected square inch of that painting is *part* of a painting but not a painting *itself*.

Kuukkanen's recent book *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*⁵ must be located at that junction of the philosophy and the theory of history I mentioned at outset of this introduction. Precisely this endows the book with its unique importance. I would not hesitate to say the discussion and the reception of this admirable book may well be decisive for the philosophy of history's foreseeable future. It may tip the balance between, on the one hand, an exclusive interest for the questions that the existentialist paradigm of how we relate to the past has put on the agenda and, on the other, a continued scrutiny of the epistemological/philosophical problems of historical truth and objectivity, and of how to define the relationship between the historical text and what it is about. In this way the book may even invite a redirection in philosophy of history – a feat rarely achieved since White's *Metahistory*. Finally, the book is unique in the attention it pays to actual historical writing: philosophers and theorists of history have often been accused of discussing history without relating their views to actual historical practice. One of the many merits of this great book is that it offers a detailed analysis of books such as E.P. Thompson's *The making of the English Working Class* (1991) and C. Clark's, *Sleepwalkers. How Europe Went to War in 1914* (2012). This, then, is what made the editors of this journal decide to devote a forum debate to Kuukkanen's book.

4 P. Roth, 'Reviving Analytic Philosophy of History' (unpublished); id., 'Evaluating Narrative Explanations' (unpublished).

5 J.M. Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*, New York 2015.

2

All contributors to the debate agree that Kuukkanen's main claim is that historical texts must be regarded as offering arguments rather than representations of the past. This is the book's 'anti-representationalist' message. It is most warmly and enthusiastically welcomed by Fay, similarly by Zeleňák (though there is, as we shall see, a certain ambiguity in his account of the book), Froeyman has his reservations, and it is much the same with Ankersmit and Fairbrother (in spite of their profound respect for Kuukkanen's book).

In his most elegant and engaging essay Brian Fay – former chief editor of *History and Theory* – warmly praises Kuukkanen for having introduced a wholly new way of looking at historical writing. He even compares Kuukkanen to the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*. For Wittgenstein language is not representational in the sense of re-presenting states of the world in a linguistic form. Words should rather be seen as tools, or instruments we make use of within ongoing social interactions. Fay discerns a similar shift in Kuukkanen's book: historical texts are not depictions, or representations of some object in the past, but 'are more accurately to be understood as stages in an ongoing discourse itself embedded in an ongoing activity bent on getting others (...) to look at the past in a different way (...)'. At the same time Fay insists that we could not possibly ignore the fact that historical texts typically have the form of narratives and that the questions arises why this is so. And he adds that the insights of theorists such as Walsh, Danto, Gallie or Mink can be of help here – as Kuukkanen would probably agree.

Zeleňák fully agrees with Fay. So much is clear already from the title of his essay, depicting narrativism in a not very complimentary way as 'an illness in need of a cure (by rational evaluation)'. Nevertheless, just like Fay, Zeleňák is willing to recognize that narrativism should be praised for having brought up in its heyday a number of novel issues concerning the nature of historical writing. But narrativism is, by now, no longer a progressive research program, as Lakatos would have put it some forty years ago. Zeleňák is convinced that Kuukkanen's book offers us such a new research program and he argues this claim by comparing it to Behan McCullagh's discussion of the correspondence and the coherence theory of truth in the latter's book entitled *The Truth of History* of 1998 (though McCullagh is generally not regarded as a narrativist).

Intriguing is the end of Zeleňák essay. Zeleňák chides Kuukkanen for sometimes sinning against his own non-representationalist program, thus suggesting to be an even more radical advocate of non-representationalism than Kuukkanen himself. For example, he criticizes Kuukkanen for failing to abandon the scope-criterion by pointing out that the criterion 'has represen-

tationalism built in its genetic code. Is it not part of the logic of measuring explanatory scope that historical works represent what they are supposed to explain?'. Indeed, the argument seems to be unexceptionable. It is all the more worrying, therefore, that it can be turned around as well. For if the scope criterion 1) is correct and 2) must be regarded as part and parcel of representationalism, it follows that representationalism must be true. The only alternative is, if I'm not mistaken, to drop the scope-criterion altogether. But in that case one will face the dilemma between 1) finding a believable alternative for the scope criterion in order to assess historical texts as a whole (which may be far from easy) or 2) abandoning together with the scope-criterion the requirement to conceive of the historical text as a whole (thus returning to the pre-narrativist phase in philosophy of history of, say, the 1960s). Well, perhaps the future will show us what is the best way out of this difficult conundrum – if there is one.

Two lines of argument can be discerned in Froeyman's discussion of Kuukkanen's book. Kuukkanen assumes that the books and articles written by historians are, basically, arguments for a certain 'historical thesis', for how we should conceive of a certain part of the past. Froeyman admits that this will often be the case; however, not necessarily so: 'historical writing can do many things, and proving theses is certainly one of them. But there is much more: history can, for example, describe, evoke, create a sense of wonder or indignation, or try to move us to act'. Next, Froeyman has his reservations about Kuukkanen's claim that historical texts should not be regarded as representations of the past (as 'representationalists' had always argued), but as 'presentations of historical theses'. Froeyman puts it as follows: 'after all, even if historical theses are regarded as objects of their own that can be presented to the reader, don't we still have to say at a certain point, that these theses are *about* the past? And doesn't that mean that they are representations of the past after all?'

Ankersmit elaborates Froeyman's objection a little further by pointing out that arguments are not produced at random, but always in order to prove some claim, some assertion, some thesis, or other. And so it is here: what's the use of an argument, if it is not an argument in favor or against a certain representation of the past? Furthermore, as this suggests already, we should avoid the mistake of seeing historical texts as either arguments, or representations. Why could both not go perfectly well together? Is this not typically the case in most of what we say and write? What compels us to accept this hyperbolic and counter-intuitive polarization between argument and representation? In fact, in several of his books Ankersmit (a stubbornly unrepentant representationalist) addressed at length the issue of what kind of arguments give for their representations and that guide them when having to decide

between alternative representations of the past. Next, with regard to the arguments historians use to support the validity of their representations of the past, Ankersmit discerns between the informal kind of argument we may find in scientific texts and the more interesting 'formal' kind of argument entailed by the 'form' in which knowledge is presented. For example, in physics knowledge is presented in the *form* of mathematical equations – knowledge claims in physics therefore must therefore be based on sound mathematical argument. No physical theory survives the discovery of mathematical error. Similarly, it can be argued that since historical knowledge takes the *form* of historical representations scope is the *formal argument* deciding about representational validity.

Kuukkanen rejects the (Leibnizian) holism of representationalism stating that the identity of historical representation is defined by nothing less than all the sentences contained by it with the argument that dropping a few inconsequential sentences from a historical representation will leave it basically the same one it was. Fairbrother has three arguments against Kuukkanen's anti-holism. In the first place, he demands us to consider a weaker variant of the holist thesis: 'exclusively, the complex sum of these statements [contained by the representation (F.A.)] is a sufficient condition for its meaning'. As Fairbrother goes on to say: this leaves open the possibility 'that the complex sum of statements forming a hole text could include some unnecessary statements and still determine the text's meaning. So this might be a compromise between the holist and the anti-holist view of historical representations. Fairbrother has a second, more basic objection to Kuukkanen's anti-holism. Kuukkanen argues his anti-holism by pointing out that no one could memorize a whole historical text; he infers from this indisputable truth that there should be no room for this notion of 'the whole historical text' in the reflection about historical knowledge. But, as Fairbrother comments, this is a confusion of 'logical with mental objects': the holist is not (obliged to) upholding a claim about what human memory is, or is not capable of, but a claim about the logic of historical representation. And then there is no room for psychologistic reservations about holism. The historical representation is a logical or intensional (with an 's' and not a 't') object, and not a mental or psychological object. What is true of historical representation is determined by logic and not by empirical contingencies of the functioning of the human mind.

Thirdly, Fairbrother turns to Kuukkanen's 'separability-claim': i.e. the claim that a historical thesis can, in principle, be separated from the arguments given in favor of it. The anti-holism of the claim will be obvious: if thesis and arguments are separable, they do not form a unitary whole. Fairbrother's rejoinder is as follows. According to him Kuukkanen claims that the thesis is

not truth-functional as such; the implication being that whatever the thesis says or expresses cannot be established independently of the historical representation in question and the arguments presented there in its favour. To put it metaphorically, the thesis is helpless without the support it has in the representation itself and is, in this way, subsumed in it. Fairbrother describes this state of affairs by stating that the thesis is a 'summary' of the representation: a trustworthy summary is present already in what it summarizes. Clearly, this runs against the separability-claim and pleads, therefore, in favour of the holist case.

The forum debate ends with Kuukkanen's reply to his five critics. It would be tactless and improper if I were to interfere with his right to have the last word in this debate. So I shall refrain from commenting on his reply in order to ensure that the reader will approach it with an open mind. Nevertheless, I enumerate the themes Kuukkanen addresses in his reply: the debt to narrativism, representation and aboutness, truth, holism, internalism and externalism, argument, narrativity and rational pragmatism. For this list is a useful and welcome guide for what themes deserve special attention in future debate about narrative, representation and related topics.

3

Is there a lesson in all this? I think so. One cannot fail to be struck by the extent to which pragmatism is the 'independent variable' in these five comments on Kuukkanen's book. Fay highly praises the book because it follows pragmatism in its rejection of representationalism. His essay is not coincidentally entitled: 'From Narrativism to Pragmatism', and he is profoundly pleased by Kuukkanen's appeal to well-known pragmatist philosophers such as Wilfred Sellars and Robert Brandom. Zelenák does not explicitly mention pragmatism in his essay, but his affinity with it manifests itself when he expresses his disappointment about Kuukkanen's tendency to sometimes fall back on a 'community-transcending' rationality. And, indeed, an appeal to that kind of rationality is cursing in the pragmatist and naturalist church. At the end of his essay Fay also admits having been unpleasantly surprised by Kuukkanen's concessions to *a priori* argument. Ankersmit and Fairbrother, on the other hand, have no self-refuting *a priori* objections against *a priori* argument. If it works, and if it may help us see something we otherwise would remain blind to, they're happy to appeal to *a priori* argument. Even more so, they believe that some basic formal characteristics of historical representation can only be revealed by *a priori* argument. Hence, their implicit or explicit resistance

against pragmatism. And, lastly, Froeyman seems to be indifferent to the whole issue – perhaps the wisest attitude.

If this is correct, it follows that one's assessment of Kuukkanen's book will to a large extent depend on whether one is, or is not an advocate of pragmatism – and pragmatism surely is an honourable philosophical option, no doubt about that! And, next, on whether one believes that historical writing should be seen through one specific philosophical lens only (whether this is pragmatism or any *other* philosophical tradition). Pragmatists will recognize themselves in the book and, therefore, be very happy with it; non-pragmatist philosophers of history perhaps a little less so. A complication being that, as we saw a moment ago, Kuukkanen himself is far from being a dogmatic adherent of pragmatism and far too prudent to surrender unconditionally to one philosophical tradition or another. Which is one more virtue of this great book!