CHAPTER II
THE IDEAL NARRATIO

Our inquiry into the nature of the narratio would be facilitated if we could establish what a narratio in its ideal form looks like. If it is possible to cleanse existing narratio s of all their accidental contingencies and epiphenomena, the result of such a purification will be - we would hope - the narratio in its pure or “ideal” form. Then a simple inspection of this “ideal narratio” will yield all the relevant characteristics of the narratio we are looking for. In fact, many theorists of the narratio have adopted this “ideal narratio” approach. I propose to consider the results of their investigations in this chapter.

The procedure will be as follows. First I shall enumerate a number of “stipulative definitions” of the narratio representing the intuitions of different authors concerning the “ideal narratio”. Next, I shall try to determine the advantages and the deficiencies of these stipulative definitions.

(1) The Narratio answers all question. A first, rather naive, definition of the ideal narratio runs as follows: the ideal narratio is the narratio in which (implicitly or explicitly) an answer is given to all conceivable questions that may arise with regard to the subject-matter concerned. But then the narratio should provide a complete description of its subject-matter (see section (7) of this chapter for a further discussion of this requirement). To avoid this obviously unsatisfactory consequence and to give this definition at least a chance of success, we propose to distinguish between the “internal” and “external” questions to which a narratio may lead. “Internal questions” are questions evoked by the narratio itself; e.g. they may refer to possible inconsistencies in the narratio, or ask whether on the basis of the evidence adduced by the historian an interpretation different from the one proposed in the narratio should not be preferred. Internal questions can be posed only on the basis of something mentioned in the narratio itself; “external questions” may be formulated from any conceivable perspective. For instance, reading some general description of diplomatic and military events during the First World War, one may ask how much cheese was produced in Russia in 1915, while in this particular account of World War I there is no suggestion of cheese-production being at all relevant for an interpretation of the course of events. It will be hard to distinguish between these two kinds of questions in all cases but let us suppose that somewhere a dividing-line can be drawn. We can now eliminate the external questions, for as we shall see in section (7) it is not reasonable to expect a narratio to give an implicit or explicit answer to all the

1. Cf. R. Robinson, Definition, Oxford 1968; Robinson says on p. 19: "by "stipulative definition" I mean establishing or announcing or choosing one's own meaning for a word".
external questions it may give rise to. I do not know whether any philosopher of history has ever expressis verbis endorsed this view of the ideal narratio, but in his *Autobiography* Collingwood has come close to it. He wrote that for a correct interpretation of a text we should always be aware of the questions it was supposed to answer. Thus there is a tendency to see a text (the narratio) as essentially a sequence of questions (implicitly or explicitly formulated in the text) and answers. We could infer from this view of the narratio the requirement that the ideal narratio should answer all its internal questions.

This definition is defective because it identifies the ideal narratio with the most persuasive narratio. The art of persuasion is the art of eliminating or answering beforehand all critical questions that might be posed. Of course, an element of persuasion should be present in each acceptable narratio for if a narratio leaves us with more questions than we had before reading it we have little reason to be content with it; therefore the proposal contains at least part of the truth just like all the other proposals to be discussed below. Nevertheless, the most persuasive narratio is not necessarily the best or the ideal one. We can easily conceive of two competing narratios on a specific subject-matter, the first giving a satisfactory answer to all its internal questions while avoiding all the important questions that can be asked on the subject-matter, whereas the other answers at least a number of these questions, although sometimes unconvincingly.

An example is furnished by the historiography of the persecution of witches. In the 19th century historians such as Lecky believed that the persecution of witches was the consequence of the stupidity and the meanness of a superstitious clergy. This certainly was a consistent and persuasive explanation. Everyone familiar with the moral depravity of the clergy in the late Middle Ages was ready to accept that these unscrupulous and greedy men should quickly have discovered and exploited the mass-psychological opportunities offered by the persecution of witches. To use the terminology of the detective-story: motive, means and opportunity all seemed to be readily available once the paradigm of the greedy and superstitious clergy had been accepted. However, despite its persuasiveness and its capacity to forestall all subsequent questions, there are surely few historians who still favour this explanation. A few years ago Keith Thomas published his admirable book on the persecution of witches especially in England; he has shown that they were closely related to the late medieval process of demythologization of Catholic dogma. As the Church no longer wished to satisfy the layman’s need for magic the common man now projected the magic power he used to associate with the secular clergy upon the

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2. See Collingwood (2); pp. 30 ff.
unfortunate creatures who were to become the witches of the late Middle Ages and of the 16th and 17th centuries. No doubt, this analysis of the persecution of witches is much less persuasive than its 19th century predecessor: it raises a great many new and as yet unanswerable questions. Such as: why did the Church initiate a process of demythologization, why did the Church not block the new outlet chosen by a public desirous of magic, why was witchcraft so often associated with old women, and so on. Yet Keith Thomas undoubtedly provides a far better narratio of witchcraft than 19th century studies did. Of course, a narratio combining Thomas’s sophistication with the persuasiveness of Lecky’s account would be even more convincing. But the state of the historiography on witchcraft being what it now is, we prefer the less persuasive analysis to the more persuasive one. So our example shows that the best or ideal narratio is not necessarily the most persuasive narratio. Hence we have to reject the first proposal for a definition of the ideal narratio.

(2) The Pragmatist’s Proposal. According to this proposal the function of narratios is to facilitate our orientation in the world; consequently, the ideal narratio is said to be the narratio that is the most reliable guide for our actions. Let us imagine the following situation. A tells B a “narratio” of what happened at meeting M₁ where B was absent. Later on, B has to preside over the same company at meeting M₂ and wants to obtain its support for purpose P. The “ideal narratio” to be told by A to B of what happened at M₁ should provide B with sufficient information in order to have P supported at M₂. This is the suggestion behind the pragmatist’s proposal. However, a serious difficulty may arise. If one or more members of the board have changed their minds during the period between M₁ and M₂ the value of A’s “narratio” decreases considerably. In that case A’s narratio — if B adheres to it — may even prove to be a stumbling-block instead of the useful guide it was meant to be. So the pragmatist’s proposal seems to be a sensible one only in so far as the past (described in the narratio) and the present or the future (in which we act) are similar. Because the reason for the writing of history consists in showing where the past differs from the present, the pragmatist’s proposal seems to deny the very raison d’être of historiography.

But the pragmatist may point out that he has something quite different in mind. In his opinion the historian whose analysis covers a considerable span of time is in a better position than anybody else to go beyond the limitations of his own time and to see things in a historical perspective. He can interpret the present as the outcome of an evolution, a gradual process of historical change. Such a long-term view enables him to give his more hodiecentric contemporaries useful advice for political and social action. History can be compared with a book; the historian knows the contents of the book up to a certain point (the present), so he will make the best predictions on the outcome of the book. Being familiar with the general line of the story, he knows — as far as the present is
concerned — how to separate the essential from the circumstantial. Thanks to his knowledge of the past he is capable of laying the soundest possible foundation for present and future action. One could think, in this connection, of Tocqueville’s *De la Démocratie en Amérique* or Elias’s *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*. Consequently, the ideal narratio can be said to be the narratio that proves to be the most reliable guide for present and future action. Here the value of history as a guide for action does not spring from the similarity of past and present, as in the example of the meeting, but precisely from their dissimilarity.

There are a number of difficulties. Firstly, we may object that the extrapolation of historical trends into the future is a very risky procedure. The pragmatist may agree with this objection but will point out that this agreement does not contradict his proposal: he merely has to concede that it is not in the present but only in the future that we can decide which narratio was the ideal one. Next there is the problem of how to translate the knowledge contained in books like that of Tocqueville or Elias into present or future action. Even if we are warned against certain political dangers it does not mean that we always know how to avoid them. But let us assume for the sake of argument that such practical problems can be solved. A more serious problem is this. The pragmatist’s definition of the ideal narratio did not mention any ethical standards. Yet I strongly doubt whether the pragmatist can dispense with such standards. Does not the decision as to what is the best guide for action at least partly depend upon ethical criteria? If so, the search for the ideal narratio will have no chance of success as long as we do not know for certain what ethical rules we ought to obey. However, the pragmatist will answer that ethical standards determine which goals we will set ourselves; to assess, on the other hand, which narratio, which guide for action is best suited for attaining these moral goals, does not necessarily require ethical standards. Similarly, if someone uses scientific theories for some evil purpose, it cannot be said that these scientific theories were a poor guide for his actions. Unfortunately, our having every reason to assert the contrary is nearer to the truth.

However, if a politician such as Lenin, Stalin of Hitler pursues some morally disreputable line of political action and — as is very often the case — appeals to history to justify his policy, we feel strongly inclined not only to express our moral disagreement with his moral goals but also to state, that this politician has found the wrong guide in history. Because our moral point of view is different, we also tend to reject his view on history. Apparently, unlike scientific views, views on history are never merely instrumental in obtaining a morally inspired goal, but they are always materially co-determined by (these) moral goals. Our moral ideals influence what we see in the past. The reverse is also true: our knowledge of the past partly determines the moral goals we strive for. Our view on the past and our moral goals are much more intricately linked together than in the case of scientific knowledge. The reason probably is, that scientific knowledge shows us that there are a number of
possible courses of actions, whereas historical knowledge rather makes us aware of the limitations of our capacity to organize our social world. Scientific knowledge increases the number of ethical and political goals we can opt for; historical knowledge, on the other hand, narrows down this number and thus rather suggests the selection rather than the production of ethical and political values.

No doubt the pragmatist will advance the following time-honoured argument Every view on the past may contain two elements: 1) a factual analysis of the past, 2) an ethical interpretation of these facts. In theory both elements can always be distinguished. Insuperable disagreements in the field of historiography concern the ethical and not the factual part of historiography: accounts of the past. But it is possible to restrict historiography exclusively to its factual component; consequently narrations can be written that are equally acceptable to the adherents of different ethical positions. So we can conceive of a number of value-free narratives and decide, next, which of them is the best guide for action.

However, even if the possibility of such value-free narratives is taken for granted — which is, I believe, a very generous concession — it is unlikely that ethical and political values can be left out of consideration when we have to decide which narration provides us with the best guide for action. Ethical and political ideals inspire to the conception of different wished-for future worlds, each with a corresponding preference for a specific kind of narration on the past, even when these are all supposed to be value-free. Whoever wants to realize the ethical goal G will be interested in narrations on the past written from the perspective of G. Marxists and liberals learn entirely different lessons from the past and consequently they will present different accounts of the past in their attempts to argue for these lessons. Thus, because of the different ideals we may have concerning the future, we shall necessarily end up with different answers to the question as to what interpretation of the past is the best guide for action. Therefore, discussions on this questions will unavoidably drag us into the morass of ethical discussion. I emphasize that it was different views on the future that impeded general agreement on what is the best interpretation of the past. I do not believe that it is a priori impossible to decide on the relative merits of narrations on the past that have been inspired by different ethical and political values. I refer to Chapter VIII, section (4) for a discussion of this problem.

Despite its shortcomings, it cannot be denied that the pragmatist’s proposal does have some more inviting aspects. We do not act in a vacuum, but always in a historical context; so up to a certain point, knowledge of the past is indispensable for rational action. Thus, it is not wholly unreasonable to say that the rationality of our actions gives some indication of the adequacy of our insight into the past. But as we have seen, knowledge of the past does not solve everything: moral goals will be necessary although they may wither away into a few vague and universally acceptable moral rules (such as the wish to avoid wars or social clashes and so on) when society becomes more complex.
This consideration explains, perhaps, why the pragmatist’s proposal has had so many adherents. No doubt Nietzsche was its most extreme defender. He strongly insisted that the historian should serve Life — “das Leben” — that is, present and future action and to that end should not even recoil from tampering with the truth\(^4\). In the twenties and thirties of this century a number of so-called “presentist” historians, foremost among whom were Beard and Becker\(^5\), agreed with Croce that historiography inevitably is and should be (the “is” and the “should be” very often go together in their discussions) determined by “present needs and interests”. In their opinion it is the historian’s task to write in such a way as to show people living now how to solve their social and political problems. More recently roughly the same line of argument has been defended by the philosophers of the Frankfurter Schule seeking to reunite theory and praxis. In their opinion sociological and historical knowledge (theory) shows us unambiguously what social reality is like and, therefore, how we have to act (praxis). They even maintain that such knowledge itself is instrumental in realizing the future, for knowledge of what exists changes what is known\(^6\). In a somewhat clearer manner the same point has recently been made by Howard Zinn\(^7\) who advocates a “radical history”, which critically exposes the cruelties and the ideologies of the past, so that we may learn how to act in order to achieve a better and more human future.

(3) \textit{The simplest narratio}. The third proposal for a definition of the ideal narratio runs as follows: the ideal narratio is the simplest, most elementary narratio. The proposal suggests that the narratio is a kind of narrative molecule composed of a set of narrative “atoms”. These “atoms” are the most fundamental entities in the narratio and we should study them in order to obtain adequate knowledge of the narratio.

My problem with this proposal is that we do not really recognize items functioning as “narrative atoms” in the narratios we encounter in

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textbf{4.} When emphasizing the creative grasp of the historian Nietzsche tends to speak with contempt of "die gemeine empirische Wahrheit". See F. Nietzsche, \textit{Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historik für das Leben}, Stuttgart 1970 (Reclam); p. 58.
  \item \textbf{5.} "Presentism" was defined by Carl Becker in 1912 as "the imperative command that knowledge shall serve purpose and learning be applied to the solution of the problems of human life". Quoted in H. Zinn, \textit{The politics of history}, Boston 1970; p. 17.
  \item \textbf{7.} The programme for a "radical history" is circumscribed in H. Zinn, \textit{The politics of history}, Boston 1970; p. 35 ff..
\end{itemize}
historiography. Do we come across a great number of self-sufficient “narrative atoms”, adroitly arranged, when reading a narratio? I do not think so. From the individual sentence to the narratio taken as a whole we do not come across very obvious breaks; metaphorically speaking, we wander through a continuous density. Moreover, the problems historians have to struggle with in constructing their narrations lie at the macrolevel rather than at the microlevel introduced by this proposal. Therefore, its prospects are not bright. This will become clear when we examine a further specification of this model.

(4) The CLM-ist’s proposal. This proposal is based on the idea that, the narratio being a kind of argument, the ideal narratio should be a very well-knit argument that every reasonable reader is forced to accept. It enjoys considerable popularity among narrativists; in fact the first interpretation of the narratio after Walsh’s and Gallie’s analysis of the narratio runs along these lines. The argumentative element of the narratio is identified with a logical structure supposedly present in all narrations. The well-known “covering law model” (CLM) is thought to represent this logical structure; as a consequence, the narratio is associated exclusively with its explanatory function. In order to illustrate this proposal I will now expound the views of M. White and A.C. Danto.

White draws a distinction between “chronicle” and “history”. The chronicle gives a factual account, not only of events but also of conditions of a more general character, such as the material circumstances under which people lived in the past. The facts mentioned in the “chronicle” are causally related by “history”. The chronicle answers questions like “and what happened then?”, history answers questions like “what was the significance of this event, that is, how can it be causally related to certain other events?” If the narratio taken as a whole is to be “true”, two requirements should be met: 1) the facts mentioned in the narratio should be accurately described in it, 2) only on the basis of well-confirmed empirical laws may the causal relation between the facts mentioned in the narratio be said to exist. The narratio (chronicle and history together) thus has the following form: A → B → C → D ...etc, where “A”, “B”, “C”, “D” etc. denote particular facts. In every phase of the narratio one resorts, usually only by implication (cf. Hempel’s “explanation sketches”) to the “covering laws”: a → b, b → c, c → d, etc., where “a”, “b”, “c”, “d” etc. refer to the class of phenomena to which A, B, C, D etc. respectively belong. And for the narratio to be true, both the truth of the statements describing the facts and the validity of the “covering laws” are required.

Danto’s analysis of the narratio bears a close resemblance to these ideas of White’s. Danto like White, does not see the narratio as a

10. It should be noted that the implication-sign in "a → b" expresses an empirical claim, while "A → B" expresses a logical implication.
totality but as a complex of — what he calls —, “narrative sentences”. The properties of the narratio can only be determined by a study of the narrative sentences that make up the narratio. Danto’s book is essentially an attempt to establish how the present-bound perspective of the historian is responsible for the content of the narratio and for the way in which those individual narrative sentences are formulated. Much of what Danto says on that subject is, in my opinion, sound and valuable, although he sometimes has a tendency to overstate his case. Nevertheless, I will not go into this aspect of Danto’s theory of history, because it is of no consequence to the present investigation.

What do, in Danto’s view, narrative sentences and the narratios formed by them look like? In general we can be sure, Danto says, that narrative sentences report the beginning and the end of a process of change of a specific object that more or less remains itself during the period of change. In its most elementary form, therefore, the narratio will have the following appearance: (1) x is F at t₁; (2) H happens at t₂; (3) x is G at t₃. A narratio of this form is called by Danto a “narrative argument”, Danto emphasizes that such a narrative atom can be easily rewritten in the form of a deductive explanation as defined by the CLM. He agrees with Scriven that the covering laws used in the narrative argument will often be little more than “truisms” and can be omitted in the exposition of the argument in the narratio. What is so fascinating in history, and what makes history differ from the sciences, is the attempt of the historian to describe the past in such a way that the events mentioned can be causally related by Scriven’s truisms precisely in the descriptions that introduce them in the narratio.

It is not astonishing that Danto sees important similarities between narrative arguments and deductive explanations (in conformity with the CLM). In both cases we find (1) that the object of change remains more or less the same, (2) that it is not permissible that the conclusion contains more than the premisses, (3) that it is permissible to add premisses irrelevant to the narrative argument or the deductive explanation themselves. On the other hand - and it is here that the views of White and Danto diverge — there is, according to Danto, also an important disparity between the narrative argument and the deductive explanation.

A narrative argument consisting of: (1) a thing s is in state A, (2) event e exerts some causal influence upon s, (3) as a result of which s is in state B, may schematically be represented as: “\[
\begin{array}{c}
A \\
\times
\end{array}
\]”. Thus we can conceive of the following molecular argument, which mentions a) three events e₁, e₂ and e₃ causing changes in s and b) the three states B, C and D brought about by these events. It is Danto’s contention that “ in a molecular narrative, each unit /./ is covered by a general law

11. A number of Danto’s views on the nature of his "narrative sentences" has been effectively criticized by M.G. Murphey, Our knowledge of the historical past, New York 1973; pp. 113 ff.
12. Danto; p. 252.
(...), but there need not be any general law which covers the entire change. We can only explain how s came to be in state D when we take into account the individual changes caused by each of the individual events e1, e2 and e3. After e1 took place we had no reason whatsoever to expect that e2 would happen and the same is true for e2 and e3. Hence, s’s being in state D cannot be explained by a general law of the type (x) (Ax → Dx). Danto concludes from this that when we deal with molecular narrative arguments, narrative arguments and deductive explanations are no longer analogous.

I agree with Danto that there is no general law (x) (Ax → Dx), but neither are there laws of the type (x) (Ax → Bx), (x) (Bx → Cx) etc. as Danto seems to believe. It is e1 and not s’s being in state A which causes s to be B. There are laws of the type (x) (Px → Bx, (x) (Qx → Cx) etc. where “P”, “Q” etc. refer to the facts that e1, e2 etc. have happened to s. Obviously, these laws do not validate a more comprehensive one that subsumes them all.

On the other hand, Danto contradicts his previous assertion that no such comprehensive law is possible by rightly pointing out that we can conceive of a general law of the following type: (x) (P_{t-3}x & Q_{t-2}x & R_{t-1}x → D_t x), where the indices t-3, t-2 etc. indicate the temporal order in which the events e1, e2 etc. have manifested themselves. Of course this general law can be used in a deductive explanation of s’s being D at t. Thus even Danto’s own account allows for deductive explanations analogous to narrative arguments. It is true that Danto’s analysis of the narratio is more subtle than White’s: Danto inserts a kind of breathing-space between the individual phases of a process of change. As a consequence his account allows for the influence of causes operating “from the outside”, as it were. According to White’s description of the narratio each phase in a process of change is itself the cause of the phase following it. And this is unrealistic. However, as we have seen, even Danto’s philosophy of the narratio does not succeed in emancipating narrative arguments from deductive explanations: it is always possible to translate one into the other and vice versa. In the end, therefore, Danto’s and White’s positions are equal. Danto’s account of the narratio is a refinement of White’s, but not a radical departure from it.

A number of objections can be raised regarding these attempts to construct the ideal narratio along the lines of the CLM. In the first place there is the problem of the subject of change that is supposed to remain more or less the same during the change. This requirement is plausible enough as long as we are dealing with the rather commonplace examples used by Danto (like most philosophers) to illustrate his thesis. Indeed, a car or a table can be said to be the same car or table after being damaged. Although, even here, as recent discussions on “identity through change” suggest, one easily gets involved in a host of complicated problems

13. Danto; Chapter XI.
regarding which there exists more disagreement than consensus. But what about, for instance, Germany between 1815 and 1871 when it changed from a purely geographical notion into a fully integrated nation-state? Is there only one subject of change, or two, or — possibly — thirty-nine, thirty-nine being the number of German states left after the reorganization of Germany by Napoleon and the Vienna Congress? And if we opt for two subjects of change what, then, has become of one of them by 1875 when apparently only one of the two has survived? Has the other simply disappeared? I will not go further into this matter now, because in Chapter V it will be analyzed more thoroughly than is possible at the present stage.

Secondly, almost everything hinges on the acceptability of the CLM. I have no intention of discussing extensively the advantages and the shortcomings of the CLM as an explanatory model. The literature on the CLM written since Hempel’s famous article of 1942 has assumed such dimensions that such a discussion would require little less than a sizable volume. It will be sufficient to state here that the value of the CLM as an explanatory model for the exact sciences has already been called into question lately. The CLM demands that a deductive relation should exist between explanans and explanandum; but it appears that this relation is absent in many explanations that scientists accept without demur. In consequence of the looseness and the ambiguity of the concepts used by historians, this gap between explanans and explanandum is even greater in history. In spite of his professed adherence to the CLM, Danto is quite ready to admit this.

Thirdly, the covering laws which the historian is supposed to apply when he explains the past in the way stated by the CLM have a very shaky foundation and generally allow of numerous exceptions. A substantial part of the discussions on the CLM is concerned with the question of how the covering laws demanded by the CLM could best be made more flexible in order to agree with historiographical practice. To that end, Gardiner introduced his so-called “porous generalizations” that permit “a broad margin of exceptional cases”, Rescher and Joynt invented the “limited generalizations” that are “rooted in transitory regularities, deriving from the existence of temporally restricted technological and institutional patterns”, and much energy has been devoted to a variety of

14. The identity through change of cars and tables is most often defended by the invocation of spatio-temporal continuity. It has, however, been argued that spatio-temporal continuity is an unreliable criterion, cf. J. Nelson. The view which is diametrically opposed to Nelson’s, i.e. the view that a thing may remain the same thing even if it is subject to the most catastrophic changes, has been defended by Mrs. Price.
15. E.g. Hesse; p. 258.
16. Danto shows that some historical phenomenon we have come across in the past and want to explain (the "explanandum") can most often only be explained in some very general description of that phenomenon. Cf. Danto; pp. 220 ff..
18. C.B. Joynt and N. Rescher, The problem of uniqueness in history, in G.H. Nadel,
statistic and probabilistic interpretations of the CLM\textsuperscript{19}. It has even been argued that in most cases the covering laws applied by historians have no empirical content at all\textsuperscript{20}. It is astonishing that in spite of these difficulties with the CLM philosophers should have been so reluctant to abandon the model. For, although a remarkable Collingwood-revival can be observed in recent years, I think most philosophers of history in the analytic tradition are still adherents of some form of the CLM. Even the fact that most working historians have always condemned these discussions on covering laws as rather foolish has done little to alter this state of affairs.

I admit that the CLM is not likely to be ever conclusively rejected. Models like the CLM are a kind of “legislations” for the way in which historiographies ought to be constructed rather than reconstructions of how history actually is written. And one cannot refute a law by not obeying it. This is, by the way, the reason why I speak of the CLM in this chapter and not at a later stage when I shall expound my own proposal for a system of narrative logic and possible alternatives are considered (see Chapter V and VI). The CLM-ist does not start his interpretation of the narratio by accepting the narratio as it actually is, in order to establish some system of narrative logic\textsuperscript{21}. He follows the opposite route, which, admittedly, is a much easier one to take. Philosophers like Popper, Hempel, Mandelbaum, White Danto and many others borrowed the model from formal logic (“modus ponens”) and the philosophy of the exact sciences, convinced as they are that formal logic and the reasoning in the exact sciences are the sole depositors of the rules for valid argument. Next they tried to cram the narratio into this model. Since then, philosophical writing on the nature of the historical explanation has been like an attempt to cover a double bed with a single-bed sheet: every effort to get things right in one place has caused something to go wrong somewhere else.

Let us suppose for the sake of argument that the CLM will eventually prove to be an acceptable explanatory model for most of the sciences. Even then, White’s and Danto’s attempt to characterize the narratio in terms of the CLM has little to recommend itself. According to the analysis proposed by White and Danto, the cognitive heart of the narratio lies in a

\textsuperscript{19} E.g. Nagel; pp. 555-558.
\textsuperscript{20} See M. Scriven, Truisms as the grounds for historical explanations, in Gardiner ed., \textit{Theories of history}, New York 1959. In this article Scriven argues that the covering laws used by historians are immune to falsification, because they always have the following form: if the conditions mentioned in the antecedens of the law have been \textit{sufficiently} satisfied, the consequence follows. Thanks to the qualification "sufficiently" in the historian’s covering laws, all counterexamples can be ruled out as irrelevant.
\textsuperscript{21} Weingartner has argued that the adherents of the CLM and their adversaries mostly talked at cross-purposes because of their different starting points. See R.H. Weingartner, The quarrel about historical explanation, in R.H. Nash, \textit{Ideas of history}, New York 1969.
relation between the sentences that make up the narratio (i.e. in their being causally relatable — as far as the facts mentioned in them are concerned). The CLM does not require anything specific with regard to the content of the sentences of the narratio. Of course this is not quite correct: the content of the individual sentences should be such that they can be deductively related by means of general statements. But in the view of the CLM-ist the content of these sentences is rather a kind of variable, for which anything can be substituted as long as the deductive structure of the CLM is not violated. It is, however, not difficult to show that this is hardly an adequate condition for constructing a narratio that satisfies even our most modest demands.

Let us take simple narratio that conforms to the CLM-ist’s requirements and consists of the fact-mentioning statements, A, B and C. Suppose A, B and C mention the facts a, b and c respectively. Suppose, furthermore, that A, B and C can be mutually related in a CLM structure by means of the following covering laws: (x) (αx → βx) and (x) (βx → γx) where α, β and γ denote the kind of phenomena to which respectively, the events a, b and c belong. We can substitute for sentence B any sentence (or set of sentences) B’ if only the fact b’ mentioned in (the set of) sentence(s) B’ belongs to the class of events denoted by β. It is not hard to contrive an example to contradict the CLM-ist’s claim. Suppose that sentence A describes Hitler’s decision to invade the Netherlands in 1940, while sentence B states that German soldiers cross the Dutch frontiers and occupy the Netherlands, and sentence C that parts of the Netherlands are destroyed during the hostilities. It is simple to bring this narratio in line with the CLM-scheme: the relevant covering laws can easily be reconstructed by the reader and we may reasonably suppose that they are well-confirmed. We can replace B by a description B’ of the neuro-physiological condition of the German soldiers who took part in the invasion of the Netherlands. Then B’ contains a description 1) of the neuro-physiological state of the German soldiers as a consequence of Hitler’s marching orders and b) of the neuro-physiological processes in the soldier’s brains that initiated their actions aimed at the destruction of parts of the Netherlands. Perhaps one should go into further detail and investigate the exact relation between the descriptions under a) and b), but I do not think this is necessary. Anyway, after substituting B’ for B (which is permissible according to the CLM-ist interpretation of the narratio) we get a very odd narratio starting with a story concerning Hitler’s plans to attack the Netherlands, Belgium and France, then dishing up a ridiculous aside on the neuro-physiological condition of German soldiers and ending with an account of the bombardment of Rotterdam. It will be obvious that although every phase of this would-be “narratio” can be causally related to what preceded and what followed, we are left with a hybrid piece of language utterly unacceptable as a narratio. So we may safely conclude that for something to be a narratio, the condition that it should conform to the CLM is insufficient.

Neither is conformity with the CLM a necessary condition for a certain piece of language to be a narratio. We can easily conceive of a perfectly
intelligible narratio that nevertheless does not show a CLM-structure as stipulated by White and Danto. I agree with Haskell Fain who advanced a sufficiently convincing argument to that effect. Take the following four-stage micro narratio (I admit that this narratio is an extremely simple one, but if such a simple narratio does not need a CLM-structure, the CLM-ist’s requirements are even less plausible for ordinary, more complex narratios): (1) Mr. Smith opened the garage doors, (2) he started up the engine of his car, (3) he drove out of the garage, (4) he got out of his car and closed the garage doors behind him. Nobody will contest that this narratio, although it is short, is perfectly acceptable. And Fain rightly concludes: “after Mr. Smith of the story opened the garage doors, he started up the engine. It is perfectly plain that the relationship between those two incidents in the story is not that of cause and effect. Opening the garage doors did not, causally speaking, start the engine (though it could have startled the dog). Incidents of a story may be causally related, but narrative coherence between episodes can be achieved in the absence of causal connection between incidents.” Maybe a Danto-ist philosopher of history will not be wholly convinced by this example and Fain’s conclusion. He may reply that all Mr. Smith’s actions do causally depend upon his intention to drive his car into the street. He will propose therefore the strictly causal explanation: (1) every car-driver who wants to leave his garage without damaging his car or his garage will successively perform the actions a to n, (2) Mr. Smith wants to drive his car into the street without damaging his car or his garage, so it follows that Mr. Smith will perform the actions mentioned in the sentences (1) to (4).

I do not think that the CLM-ist’s objection is fatal to Fain’s position. One should realize that it is a teleological argument that the CLM-ist rewrites in terms of the CLM. Firstly, the CLM-ist is probably mistaken in expecting a teleological argument to do the work for him: adherents of the so-called “Logical Connection Argument” such as A. Donagan, G.H. von Wright and F.A. Olafson have insisted that there is an essential difference between teleological arguments and the CLM. But in his brilliant study R. Martin has effectively questioned this view, so I shall not go into this objection here. I draw the reader’s attention to the fact that narratios only rarely and certainly not typically have a teleological character. Therefore, it may be possible in some cases to rewrite a narratio in terms of the CLM, but more often than not this is impossible. If we say for instance that the French Revolution runs from the noble revolt in 1788 to the downfall of

22. Fain; p. 283.
23. Fain; p. 302.
24. According to Von Wright, the general rule in accordance with which teleological or intentional explanations are given is not an empirical but a logical rule. His argument is that one cannot verify the antecedens of this rule without verifying the consequence and vice versa. See Von Wright; especially pp. 115 ff.
25. Martin; pp. 173 ff. See Ankersmit (2) for a detailed discussion of the views of Von Wright and Martin on teleological explanation and the Logical Connection Argument.
Robespierre in 1794, then the downfall of Robespierre certainly is the *end* of the French Revolution (and the last episode to be mentioned in a narratio on the French Revolution) but decidedly not its goal. A general hypothesis relating the goal and the means of attaining the goal (as intended by the general hypothesis mentioned under (1) in the preceding paragraph) supplemented by the premiss that someone or something wants to attain the goal, constitutes in general an insufficient basis for structuring the narratio simply because historical phenomena usually have no goal. It may be observed, incidentally, that even where a translation into a (teleological) CLM *is* possible, the resulting translation has a lack of precision which makes it much less attractive than the original narratio. Look again at Mr. Smith and his car. The original narratio differentiated clearly between the phases (1) to (4) and was probably supposed to do just that; the CLM-ist rendering of the original narratio, on the contrary, casually lumps these four phases together into an indefinite catalogue without paying attention to each phase separately.

How, then, we may ask, can “narrative coherence between episodes be achieved” in the narratio? The answer is given, according to Fain, by the traditional speculative philosophies of history. We should see the historical past as a thick, massive pipe, consisting of several layers, each corresponding to a particular speculative philosophy of history. Thus, there is the layer of intellectual history that got its *raison d’être* with Hegel’s philosophy of history (all history is the history of the Idea striving for its self-realization), there is the layer of economic history based on Marx’s speculative interpretation of history (all history is the history of the dialectical struggle between the *Produktivkräfte* and the *Produktionsverhältnisse*\(^26\)) and so on. Corresponding to each speculative philosophy of history there is a particular intersection through the “thickness” of history - as Fain maintains - so that all the incidents within a particular intersection can be narratively related. So the speculative philosophies of history steer the historian through the chaos of the historical past and show him which incidents (events) he has to select so that a narrative coherence between those incidents can be achieved. Similar ideas have been put forward by Munz in his recent book\(^27\).

This is a very interesting proposal that certainly contains more than a kernel of truth: if a historian were to jump arbitrarily through these different layers his narratio would lack all intelligibility. Nevertheless as anyone who has read historical studies knows, historians in fact move

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26. For a very clear and convincing exposition of Marx’s ideas on the relation between the *Produktivkräfte* and the *Produktionsverhältnisse* see W.H. Shaw, *Marx’s theory of history*, Stanford 1978; especially Chapter 1.

27. Just as Fain Munz assigns to speculative philosophies of history the task of indicating which aspects of the past can be meaningfully related. See Munz (2); p. 252: "the real purpose of a philosophy of history is (...) to increase the number of intelligible relationships".
with considerable freedom through these different layers and probably the best historical writing is that in which this is done most successfully. I think, therefore, that something is wrong with Pain’s metaphysical “Schichten”-theory. It should be noted that there is an ominous resemblance between Fain’s theory and Descartes’ doctrine of the two substances. Descartes argued that there were two substances to which ultimately all our statements about reality could be reduced (“res cogitans” and “res extensa”); Fain likewise postulates the existence of a number of metaphysical layers in the historical past that cannot be reduced to one another. It is therefore to be expected that Fain’s “historical Cartesianism” is open to the kind of criticism that has recently been formulated - for instance by Ryle or Strawson - regarding the Cartesian body-mind dichotomy. It could be pointed out that historians use a great number of what may be called “saddle concepts” (such as “revolution”, “colonialism”, “socialism” and so on) that belong to different metaphysical layers at one and the same time. Apparently, the separation between the layers is not so clear-cut as Fain wishes us to believe.

Let us return to our discussion of the CLM-ist’s interpretation of the narratio. From the foregoing we may conclude that being in conformity with the CLM is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for a piece of language to be an acceptable narratio: we can conceive of a set of sentences that satisfies the CLM-ist’s requirements and is nevertheless not a narratio; on the other hand we have found — with Fain — that there are many intelligible narratios that do not show a clear CLM-structure. Of course I am ready to admit that some narratios do have the CLM-structure; but to infer from this that a CLM-structure always is or should be present if a set of sentences is to be an intelligible narratio, is a step we are not permitted to take. Such a move would in many respects be similar to supposing that reality actually is as cubists usually tend to represent it; but even if a consistent application of the cubist’s view of reality should eventually come exceedingly close to how we see reality, this would not justify the claim that forms in physical reality really are square-like. Therefore, the CLM-ist’s thesis that all narratios should ultimately show a CLM-structure, because such a structure is present in (parts of) some narratios, is a fine example of what we might call — if I may coin this term - “methodological metaphysics”; that is, the same sort of unreasonable preference for a certain methodological model which ordinary metaphysics has always had for one specific aspect of reality. This is not the way an unprejudiced philosopher should proceed. He ought not to be satisfied with a methodological model (such as the CLM) that is so little in conformity with actual historiographical practice. We may conclude, then, that we should reject the CLM as a model for the ideal narratio.

Finally, I recall that this discussion on the virtues of the CLM as a model for the ideal narratio started with the hypothesis that there is some resemblance between narratios and arguments and that the argumentative
element thought to be present in narratios might be identified with the logical structure of the CLM. However, it is highly doubtful whether such a hypothesis is satisfactory and whether such a similarity between narratios and arguments does in fact exist. Unlike arguments, narratios have endings but no conclusions. The ending of a narratio is not a kind of shorthand of what was told before; nor is it possible to reconstruct a number of premisses that would lead up to the ending of the narratio in the way this can be done in an argument. Suppose we want to know the energy exercised by an electrical field around a charge $Q$ when this field pushes a charge $q$ from $P_1$ (at $r_1$ from $Q$) to $P_2$ (at $r_2$ from $Q$). With the help of the integral-calculus we can establish that this energy $W = f_0qQ \left( e^{r_1} - e^{r_2} \right)$, where $f_0$ is a constant. What I wish to stress is that for an interpretation of the formula just mentioned we do not need to know how it can be proved. Anyone who knows what the variables stand for can work with this formula even if he does not know how it can be derived. Knowledge of the “argument” that leads up to the formula is, so to speak, irrelevant to the meaning of the “conclusion” of the “argument” (i.e. the equation for $W$). This is definitely not the case when we are dealing with narratios. In so far as we can say that a narratio has a conclusion (and most narratios do not have one in the proper sense of the word) such conclusions are rarely, if ever, “detachable” from the narratio as a whole (Mink). Take for instance the well-known Pirenne-thesis, that from an economic point of view the Middle Ages do not start until the 8th century. This thesis cannot be “detached” from the whole of Pirenne’s book, for a proper interpretation of the thesis we have to know Pirenne’s book fairly well, and every time a historian comments on it or uses it he will have to leaf through the book. If, then, arguments have “detachable” conclusions, whereas narratios cannot be “detached” or isolated from their conclusions (if any), it seems wrong to suppose that narratios should essentially be a special kind of argument.

One last objection of an altogether different kind can be made to the CLM-ist’s proposal. When discussing historical explanation Scriven writes: “that an explanation is essentially a linkage of what we do not understand to what we do understand”\textsuperscript{29}. It might be argued, however, that the historian’s task is not to render familiar what is strange or unknown to us but to do precisely the reverse. This typically historian view has been defended by M. Foucault and will also be supported in this study. In the course of this book I shall attempt to show that the historian’s language is essentially an instrument that estranges us from our own or our cultural identity. Real historical insight is not gained by reducing the past to knowledge we already have here and now (e.g. the theories of the social sciences) but by deepening the gap between the past and the present as much as we can.

\textsuperscript{28} Mink (1); pp. 638 ff.
\textsuperscript{29} M. Scriven, Truisms as the grounds for historical explanations. P. Gardiner, \textit{Theories of history}, New York, 1959; p. 449.
(5) Mink’s proposal. The next proposal for a definition of the ideal narratio has been taken from the perspicacious and stimulating writings of L.O. Mink on the narratio. According to Mink, in the narratio historical events and conditions are seen together, synoptically, in one single, cognitive grasp. What is separate in the past itself has to be caught by the historian in the unifying synopsis of the historical narratio.

How can such a synopsis be attained? Mink mentions three different ways in which we can order our experiences (he calls them “modes of comprehension”) viz: 1) the categorical, 2) the theoretical and 3) the configurational mode. The categorical mode of comprehension gives the conceptual framework for recognizing different things as belonging to the same category; the theoretical mode of comprehension tries to subsume incongruous phenomena under one and the same theory (even if they belong to different categories from the point of view of the first mode). For instance, within the second mode of comprehension the rusting of iron and the burning of a piece of paper are phenomena covered by one and the same theory (the theory of oxidation in this case). The configurational mode of comprehension — and this is the mode characteristic of the writing of history — is quite different from the first two modes. Here we have a synoptic seeing together of things that from the perspective of the first two modes (to which the protagonists of the socio-scientific approach to history would like to restrict historiographical representation) would seem entirely incompatible.

This synopsis can be realized within the configurational mode of comprehension, Mink says, when the individual narrative components of a narratio fit together “configurationally”, just like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Such a configurational fitting together of all the different narrative components can be achieved when one tries as much as possible to link the (sets of) sentences of the narratio to one another within “a network of overlapping descriptions”. Mink’s intention may be clarified by means of the following example mentioned by Mink himself. Take the phrase “A accepts an offer”; this statement only makes sense when an offer has previously been made to A. Because the description of someone (in this case A) accepting an offer always presupposes the offer’s having been made, the description of A’s accepting an offer overlaps a description of the situation in which the offer to A was made. Therefore, Mink considers the phrase “accepts an offer” to be a “typical story-statement” (as contrasted with, for instance, “sending a telegram”). Thanks to its implicit reference to events not explicitly mentioned in the utterance itself, these “story-statements” possess a kind of “unsaturatedness” (my term) that makes them natural links in a narrative chain of “overlapping descriptions”. The interlocking descriptions link the individual (sets of) sentences together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. It is obvious that

30. Mink (2); pp. 184 ff.
31. Mink (3); pp. 550 ff.
32. Mink (3); p. 556.
the ideal narratio is, from this perspective, the narratio whose individual constituent parts fit together best.

I think that this proposal for the definition of the ideal narratio will fail because it is based upon an inadequate, though interesting, attempt to characterize the narratio. Is Mink’s theory on the role of this “network of overlapping descriptions” really an acceptable model for the narratio? I do not think so. It seems to me that Mink’s theory demands both too little and too much. Let us start with the “too little”. The old-testamental genealogy: “Abraham begot Isaac, Isaac begot Jacob, Jacob begot Juda and his brother, Juda begot Perez and Zerah of Thamar, Perez begot Hezron, Hezron begot Ram, Ram begot ... etc.” can be transposed as follows: “Isaac was the son of Abraham, Jacob was the son of Isaac, Juda was the son of Jacob, Perez ... etc.”. Nobody can be a son without there being some one who is or was his father. So all these descriptions of “Isaac”, “Jacob”, “Juda” ... etc. as “... was the son of ...” do overlap in the way demanded by Mink. Nevertheless, there will not be many people who consider this genealogy to be an acceptable narratio: there is no unity of subject-matter, it has no story-line and so on. So, for an acceptable narratio — and a fortiori for the ideal narratio — more is required than that its component parts can be linked together by means of “overlapping descriptions”. Besides, as our example makes clear, Mink’s theory on the overlapping descriptions has a marked predilection for relational predicates; predicates, that is, which need at least two particulars to yield true statements. But there is little reason to believe that everything a historian might have to say, will in all cases be translatable into terms of relational predicates. As a matter of fact, in Chapter VI it will be shown that narrative logic has a strongly Leibnizian character. Consequently, in accordance with the relevant tendencies in Leibniz’s logic, the narratio is a form of knowledge that tries to get rid of relational predicates as much as possible: the historical narratio should explain historical things without recourse to anything outside themselves, as the well-known historist dictum goes. From this point of view relational predicates that link different “historical things” together are a serious hindrance to an optimal narrative representation of the historical past.

On the other hand Mink demands too much. This need not astonish us: the raison d’être of a narratio is to tell us things that could not be known or expected on the basis of what has already been said. New elements, from the outside as it were, have to be brought into the narratio continually, if the reading of it is to make sense. One may conclude therefore that the narratio sui generis has to mention things that go beyond the maximum that can be said within Mink’s “framework of overlapping descriptions”. Mink could object, however, that when new particulars, situations and so on are introduced, unknown or unexpected things may very often be said, even when their introduction only occurs under the aegis of “overlapping descriptions”.
For instance, to take Mink’s own example, the fact that it was Henry who made the offer may be said to constitute a “new” fact. Yet this example already shows that such a reply will not be convincing. For like the proper name “Henry” all terms indicating particular individuals etc. introduced within the framework of overlapping descriptions will have a referring and not a descriptive function (only the overlapping descriptions in question have a descriptive function). And from the present perspective, that which refers is, so to speak, a terminus, i.e. a break in the chain of “story-statements” interconnected by overlapping descriptions. Only if one could conceive of a description that can be repeated (or paraphrased) in each sentence of the narratio, could Mink’s proposal be put into practice. But I have no idea what such descriptive terms would look like — and even if they did exist they would certainly lead to very odd narratios.

Nevertheless, we should not pass too severe a judgment upon Mink’s proposal. If we take it to mean that a certain connection should always exist between the individual sentences of a narratio, we can only agree with him. Reading him this way, we can say that for Mink the ideal narratio is the clearest, most readable narrative account of (parts of) the past. And certainly, if there is to be such a thing as an ideal narratio, clarity and readability will be among its foremost qualities. However, as we all know, clarity is not enough for a narratio to be acceptable. We must bear in mind that narratios are always accounts of what happened in the past. In our search for the ideal narratio we have not yet considered the obvious question of what in the ideal narratio, the relation should be between (historical) reality and its narrative representation. Therefore, the next three proposals for defining the ideal narratio will try to determine the ideal relation between (parts of) the past and its narrative account.

(6) The completeness proposal. What is more natural than the proposal that the ideal narratio should give a complete description of (part of) the past, or that any question that the narratio might give rise to should be answered by the statements of the narratio themselves or by what could be derived from them (see section 2)). In such a case the relation between (historical) reality and its narrative representations surely is optimal. Of course, no historian and no philosopher of history has ever seriously defended the view that historians ought to construct narratios that give a complete description of the past. But weaker versions of this proposal are not unpopular. It is sometimes argued that the more complete a narrative account of the past, the more it approaches a complete description of the past, the more true or acceptable it will be. Descartes once wrote that historians proceed in a most arbitrary way, because they always omit certain things that nevertheless happened. Apparently this argument has deeply worried
many historians ever since. More than a few historians complain that they have to “select” and that by doing so, they have to violate historical reality. It has often been pointed out that this view ultimately depends on the fallacy of the “internality of all relations”, that is, the idea that we only have knowledge of a thing if we can produce a complete account of all the relations this particular thing has with all other things. Perhaps no philosopher of history has ventured so far in this direction as Michael Oakeshott: “history accounts for change” he writes, “by means of a full account of change. The relation between events is always other events, and it is established in history by a full relation of the events. The conception of cause is thus replaced by the exhibition of a world of events intrinsically related to one another in which no lacuna is tolerated. (...) In history “pour savoir les choses, il faut savoir le détail”. And the method of the historian is never to explain by means of generalization but always by means of greater and more complete detail”.

According to this view, the best narratio, therefore, is the most detailed historiography; the historiography, that is, which comes closest to a complete description of (parts of) the past. And the, albeit not attainable, ideal narratio is the narratio that gives a complete replica of the past. I should like to underline the fact that those who defend the undiluted version of this proposal and those who adhere to weaker variants do not differ with regard to what should be seen as the ideal narratio, they only disagree on the degree of attainability of the ideal. Of course this already puts the adherents of the weaker variants into an uncomfortable position: what is the use of an ideal that can never be attained? Whether their position is only uncomfortable or even flatly self-contradictory depends on the kind of arguments given for the unattainability of the ideal. Both the weaker and the stronger version can, however, be shown to be unsatisfactory because there is a serious inconsistency in the notion of a complete description of (part of) the past. Some writers argue that a narratio can be compared with a map: just as we do not want a map to register every blade of grass we have no need of narratios that mention even the most obviously insignificant detail of the past. A map should not be a copy of reality; if it were we could just as well look at reality itself. Being an abstraction of reality is just what makes maps so useful. The same goes for historiographies: we expect the historian to tell us only what was important in the past and not the “total past”.

However, for the sake of argument, I introduce here a hypothetical person naive enough to maintain that although we should devote more attention to important things in our narratios, we should nevertheless ni n'augmentent la valeur des choses, pour les rendre plus dignes d'être lues, au moins en omettent-elles presque toujours les plus basses et moins illustres circonstances: d'où vient que le reste ne parait pas tel qu'il est”; see R. Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, Paris 1966; p. 37.

34. Oakeshott; p. 143.
35. Nagel; p. 577.
mention all the known or knowable details of the past - be it only in
footnotes. At least the ideal narratio must do so. We may answer him in
the following manner. If a complete description of the past is possible,
there must be a certain object-language with a certain vocabulary that
does the trick. Let us suppose the required object-language is $L_O$. Then
we can say that every property of (part of) the past is expressible in $L_O$.
If $L_O$ succeeds in providing us with a complete description of the past
while $L'_O$ does not, the reason for this can only lie in the nature of the
object-matter of the two languages (i.e. the historical past itself). And we
may conclude: “being completely describable in $L_O$ (and not in any other
object-language like $L'_O$) is one of the properties of (part of) the past”
(2); for if the past were completely describable in either $L'_O$ or $L''_O$ and so
on, it would certainly have to be different from what it is now in some
relevant aspects. How else could we explain the very special position of
$L_O$? To each language corresponds a particular kind of universe that is
completely describable within that language (if, for that matter, complete
descriptions can be given; and let us suppose this to be so at this
stage of our argument). Because (2) mentions a property of (part of) the
past it must — on account of (1) — be a sentence of $L_O$. But statements
on what is and what is not describable within $L_O$ cannot be made in the
object-language $L_O$ itself, but only in some meta-language $L_m$, which has
at least $L_O$ as its object. Thus there is some property of (part of) the past
that cannot be expressed within $L_O$ but only in, for instance, $L_m$. This is in
contradiction to (1). Therefore, the notion “complete description” has to
be rejected as self-contradictory. And the same goes of course for all
other weaker and stronger attempts to define the ideal narratio in terms of
(maximally) complete descriptions.

(7) The archivist’s proposal. If then, complete descriptions are
impossible we could adopt a more modest position and define the ideal
narratio as the narratio correctly reporting every scrap of information the
archives contain on a certain aspect or part of the past. It is obvious
that, in contrast with the preceding proposal, this one is content with
too little. Suppose we have at our disposal only one or two facts
(mentioned by Herodotus) on a certain Empire in Antiquity; can we
reasonably say that mentioning just these one or two facts is the ideal
narratio on that Empire? The mistake in this proposal is that it confuses
the past with knowledge of the past; when we ask for the ideal narratio on
a historical phenomenon, we wish to know how to represent the past itself
and not how to display our knowledge of the past (should we or should
we not mention everything we know of the past?).

(8) The essentialist’s proposal. Lastly, I shall consider a proposal
for the definition of the ideal narratio that has an impressive plausibility
and seems to be in conformity with all reasonable and common-sensical
intuitions about the narratio. In fact, it is a more practical and realistic
variant of the “complete description” suggestion discussed in section
(6). Its adherents state that, a complete description being impossible,
historians should indicate what is important or essential for a correct
understanding of the past. Thus, the ideal narratio is defined as the narratio that narrates the essence of (parts of) the past. This seems an unexceptionable proposal and only few historians will find fault with it. It correctly circumscribes what every historian attempts to discover in his investigations; moreover, it takes a pleasant, non-committal position between specificity and vagueness. It is therefore remarkable that - as far as I know - it has never been thoroughly defended. Perhaps its merits are believed to be so very obvious that nobody has ever thought it necessary to undertake such a defence. Indeed, in much theorizing on history this proposal is implicitly accepted. Many philosophers of history have studied in great detail what is or what should be seen as important or essential in the past; more particularly, they have asked what criteria can be given for establishing what is or was important in the past. They have distinguished, e.g. between the importance of events/conditions for other events/conditions or examined the “intrinsic” importance of events/conditions, formulating in this manner a double set of criteria for the importance of events or conditions. This only makes sense on the basis of the premiss that the historian should primarily show in his narratio what was important or essential. But this premiss has never been explicitly argued for.

Like all the other proposals for the definition of the ideal narratio, this one also can be expected to contain a kernel of truth. Surely, the historian must be interested in what is important or essential in the part of the past he studies; he must not bore his reader with the enumeration of irrelevant facts. However it does not follow that we can derive from this perfectly true observation on the purpose of history an acceptable definition of the ideal narratio. What is part and parcel of a particular purpose does not necessarily aptly characterize its nature. For instance, the fact that musicians always hope to procure aesthetic pleasure for their audience, does not shed much light on what exactly they try to do. Moreover, take the sciences: does the physicist attempt to answer the Aristotelian question of what is important or essential in nature? And if he does not do so, why should the situation be different in the historian’s case?

Let us investigate the proposal more closely. If it leads to difficulties this may be due to the vagueness of the concepts “important” or “essential”. Therefore, our investigation into its merits would primarily require an enumeration of all possible interpretations of these concepts. As each interpretation implies a different definition of the ideal narratio such a procedure would easily fill another chapter. I believe, however, that there is no need to follow this approach: in whatever way the concepts “important” or “essential” are interpreted, each definition occasioned by these interpretations is open to a fatal objection.

First we will have to clarify the phrase “essence of the past” or “essence of part of the past”. Where is this “essence” if there is such

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a thing? Surely not in the past itself. The past itself has no “essence”: there are no episodes or aspects of the past which for the historian’s convenience bear the label “this is the essence”. The phrase “the essence of (part of) the past” is not an identifying description of one or more parts of aspects of the past itself - if it were, the writing of history would be a very simple affair. We should compare the phrase “the essence of (part of) the past” with phrases like “the length or the weight of object O” and contrast it with phrases like “the top or the back of object O” (only the latter phrases refer to parts of O). It refers to a conceptual thing and not to something in the past itself. Whoever says “this is the essence of (part of) the past” points to an interpretation of the past and not to part of the actual past (although, of course, in these interpretations reference is made to the past itself). The “essence” — if anything — is always a construction of the historian. Our definition must therefore take this form: after having diligently studied his sources and secondary literature the historian has “something” in his mind (to be called the “essence” of the part of the past he studies) and subsequently he represents this “something” in his narratio. This sounds plausible, but, in fact, it is not. It implies that we are not dealing with only one thing (the narratio) but with two things (the narratio and the “essence” of which the narratio is the narrative representation). And this is odd. Take a painter: the painter either paints what he sees (a landscape or Louis XIV), or he paints a picture. Both statements are reasonable enough. But we cannot say that, apart from the landscape and the picture, there is a third thing “the essence of the landscape or of the face of Louis XIV” that is painted by him. One does not paint “essences”. If anything, we can just assert that his picture - as it is — shows us what the painter thought to be the essence of the reality he has painted. But again, the painter paints a landscape or a physiognomy and not the essence of a landscape or a physiognomy. Similarly, we can say of the historian that he either represents reality in his narratio, or that he constructs a narratio, but not that he gives a representation of the “essence” of the past. Nevertheless we may assume that the historian’s narratio shows us what he thinks the “essence” of the part of the past narrated by him to be. What I mean to say is that there are not two things 1) the “essence” of the past, and 2) the narrative representation of this “essence”. There is only one thing, or rather, one kind of thing, that is: narratios. We may for some reason strongly prefer one particular narratio to many others available on a certain topic and therefore value it as one containing the “essence of part of the past”, but - and that is my main point - when we speak of “essences” of the past it is always narratios that we speak of and nothing else. If the notion “the essence of part of the past” has any meaning at all, this is only when it denotes a narratio. Even when a historian before starting to write his book has something in his mind of which he says to his colleagues: “I already have the essence of my subject-matter in my head”, even then he refers to some embryonic narratio.
Let us go back to our definition. The ideal narratio has been said to be the narratio that reports the essence of the past. As the phrase “the essence of part of the past” always refers to a particular narratio, we have two possibilities: either the narratio referred to by the phrase “the essence of part of the past” is identical with the ideal narratio, or it is not. In the latter case we define the ideal narratio as the narratio that reports a narratio that is different from the ideal narratio. This is nonsense, of course. If, on the other hand, the ideal narratio and the narratio referred to by the phrase “the essence of the past” are identical, we define the ideal narratio as the narratio that is a report of the ideal narratio. This definition is either circular (when we say that the narratio that reports the ideal narratio is identical with the ideal narratio) or self-contradictory (when we prefer to decide otherwise). So this promising proposal for defining the ideal narratio also leaves us in the cold.

(9) Conclusion. We have studied eight proposals for defining the ideal narratio. Most of them were developed from suggestions made in existing literature on the philosophy of history. Possibly even more proposals can be constructed, but at the present stage my inventiveness — and, no doubt, the patience of the reader — is exhausted. We have found that all these proposals show their own fatal deficiencies.

I don’t think that any further attempt to define the ideal narratio will be more successful. The general mistake behind the “ideal narratio”-approach is, in my opinion, that it necessarily starts from some apriori intuition about the narratio and then declares this to be the fundamental or “ideal” structure of the narratio. But such apriori intuitions are always abstractions from the properties of actual, existing narratios, and each of them rules out a great number of these properties as merely uninteresting, accidental epiphenomena. Yet, however intelligent and plausible the arguments may be for some intuitive abstraction, we can never prove its acceptability by resorting only to the nature of actual narratios. Such arguments, therefore, only show which narratios are preferred by individual theorists of the narratio. And these are not facts about the narratio but about the literary or historiographical taste of these narrativist philosophers. In fact, the conspicuous dangers of arbitrariness and dogmatism should put us on our guard against the “ideal narratio”-approach, the more so as they remind us of the unavailing discussions on “the essence” of the human being or “the ideal human being”.

It should be noted that the philosophy of science has passed through a similar stage and from the reactions of philosophers of science to it, we might conclude that we ought to study the practice of history and investigate how actual narratios are written by individual historians. In the remainder of this book, however, we shall steer a prudent middle course between these two extremes. We shall neither rely upon an apriori intuition about the logical structure of the narratio (the “ideal narratio”-approach), nor restrict our investigation to an analysis of the history of historical writing; instead we will start with non-narrative elements (i.e. individual statements) and attempt to construct narratios
out of these. In other words, I will try to answer the Kantian question how narrative knowledge of historical reality is possible, assuming only that historical reality can be described by constative, singular statements that are either true or false. This book can be seen as an attempt to develop a Critique of Historical Reason - a project put by Dilthey on the agenda of the philosophy of history. Actually my approach is not wholly Kantian but more akin to Strawson’s so-called “descriptive metaphysics”37: my primary concern is not how knowledge of the past is possible, but rather how the linguistic instruments we use to express such knowledge determine its nature.

I emphasize the pronounced formalist character of this method. What will be said in the subsequent chapters is based on only one assumption, i.e. that knowledge of the past and of social reality is expressed in (series of) singular statements. As a consequence, the account of the narratio given here is supposed to be acceptable to the participants in any conceivable kind of social reality, if only statements are used for its description. What will be maintained also obtains for the inhabitants of some planet in the Andromeda-galaxy, even if they differ from us in their psychological constitution and social structure in every possible way we can think of. I am convinced that present philosophy of history and of the social sciences make far too many material assumptions. For instance, it is argued that social behaviour is essentially “rule-guided behaviour” (Wittgenstein or Winch), or that human beings act rationally and can, in principle, understand each other (hermeneutic theory), or that human actions are always inspired by certain goals (teleological explanations), or that human behaviour follows the guide-line speculative philosophers discover in the past, or that human thinking and actions can be reduced to deep-structures (structuralism) or that they are always determined by social “figurations” (Elías). And this list can be expanded at will. However,

37. See Strawson (1); p. 10. Here Strawson offers the following characteristic of "descriptive metaphysics": "For there is a massive central core of human thinking which has no history - or none recorded in histories of thought; there are categories and concepts which, in their most fundamental character, change not at all. Obviously these are not the specialities of the most refined thinking. They are the commonplace of the least refined thinking and are yet the indispensable core of the conceptual equipment of the most sophisticated human beings. It is with these, their interconnexions, and the structure that they form, that a descriptive metaphysics will be primarily concerned".
the influence of such intuitions must be avoided at all costs; in fact, they should once and for all be *radically* removed from the philosophy of history. If anything, such assumptions belong to the domain of history or of the social sciences themselves. Philosophy can only survive and be useful when it minds its own business and stops meddling in the affairs of historians and social scientists.