CHAPTER VIII
EXPLANATION AND OBJECTIVITY IN HISTORY AND NARRATIVE SUBSTANCES

It might be worthwhile trying to solve some of the traditional problems in the philosophy of history with the help of the insight we have gained in the preceding chapters. Historical explanation and objectivity will be dealt with because current philosophy of history (in both the Continental and the Anglo-Saxon style) shows a strong predilection for these two topics. Moreover, when discussing the objectivity of history I hope to demonstrate that requiring the narratio to maximalize its scope above and beyond its descriptive content yields the best criterion for deciding upon the relative merits of individual narratios.

(1) Some general remarks on explanation. When do we explain? Explanations can only be asked for and given if it is conceivable that things might have been different from what they actually are or were. The assertion that things might have been different from what they actually are or were can have two meanings, the first of which being that all the regularities we have discovered up till now for objective reality might have been different. This, again, is an ambiguous statement. First of all, it may mean that we might have “covered” our actual world with regularities and physical laws different from those whose validity we shall presently believe in. Such a situation we can very well conceive of — in fact, it is even a condition for progress in scientific research. Science can only proceed when we are ready, if it should seem feasible, to “cover” reality with laws different from those we have accepted for the time being. Thus the acceptance of a different set of scientific laws does not in the least imply scepticism with regard to the possibility of explaining reality. Another possible meaning of the ambiguous statement is that nature itself shows a different and abnormal kind of behaviour. If such an abnormal world displays a certain order — like our own — there is no reason to doubt that we can ultimately find out about it. Consequently, in such a world specific states of affairs could also be explained.

But could we conceive of a dis-orderly universe? I do not have in mind a universe whose laws are unknown to us (an “idealistic” interpretation of the concept “dis-orderly universe”), but a universe that lacks order itself. Certainly we could form an idea of such a universe: we could imagine a universe ruled from one moment to the next by a different set of physical laws, with chance deciding which set it will be (God dices). It may be wondered whether scientists from an “orderly” universe will ever find out what is going on in such an astonishing world: probably they will only come to the conclusion that it is very hard to investigate this world scientifically. And a fundamental objection is that the
proposed idea for this dis-orderly universe is quite inept. It apparently has parliamentary legislation as its model. But physical reality is not “governed” by physical laws; neither will it be clear what this substrate could be that seems to be independent of those sets of physical laws but can be “governed” by each of them separately. The suggestion clearly is that nature, essentially, can be compared to a nation that is governed by continually changing laws.

I do admit that my model for a dis-orderly universe is a very naive one. However, physical laws are synthetical statements, so they might have been different. Thus, the idea of a dis-orderly universe does not seem inconsistent to me, although it may be true that the implementation of this idea will probably require much more sophistication than I have displayed here. Anyway, whatever model of a dis-orderly universe one may prefer, all I want to claim is that in such a universe the existence of certain states of affairs can no longer be explained. And we may conclude that explanations can only be given in worlds that themselves show a certain minimum amount of order (once more, the term “order” should not be interpreted here in an idealist way).

Fortunately, this kind of dis-orderly universe has nothing in common with the world that is the present object of the sciences. In nature and in the experiences of daily life we have discovered a large number of quite reliable general rules which are always a useful and even indispensable guide for human action. Hence, we may rather obviously claim that states of affairs in our world can be explained (for instance, along the lines of the CLM; it should be remembered that I have only stated that the CLM is not an acceptable model for the narratio).

Then, how could the phrase “that things might have been different” be interpreted from the perspective of our own world? It is of great importance to find an answer to this question, because, as was observed on p. 227, explanations can only be given if it is conceivable that things might have been different from what they actually happen to be. We may ask for explanations in our own world when thanks to our general knowledge of our world and the general concepts we use we can imagine that our world might have been different. It is not hard to imagine a world that is quite different from our actual world even though in this other world the same laws obtain and the same general concepts prove to be useful. In fact, these unchanging laws and general concepts are even indispensable when we wish to imagine a world different from ours. These general concepts and laws actually determine what different permutations of the elements of our world can possibly be conceived of. And the total set of these permutations yields the total set of all the possible worlds to which the laws and general concepts valid for our actual world can be applied. Our world being one out of this total set, we can meaningfully ask for explanations of states of affairs that obtain in our world (our world might have been different, i.e. might have been some other possible world). Thus we arrive at the curious conclusion that the very same laws and general concepts that help us to explain our world are also responsible
for the fact that we are sometimes at a loss in our world and look for explanations.

Thanks to the generality of laws and concepts, we can form the idea of other possible worlds. In this connection, I think the assertion made in the previous paragraph should be narrowed down a little. It is certainly true that laws are indispensable for explaining our world. Nevertheless, the general concepts we use, whatever their origin, are already sufficient in themselves to enable us to conceive of other possible worlds. Moreover, the most successful explanations, i.e. the explanations that are based upon the results of the most theoretical exact sciences, always make use of general concepts whose meaning is determined by the general law-statements in which they occur. So we can say that we should have general concepts at our disposal in order to be able to ask for explanations. Without general concepts we can only blindly accept the world as it is. A world (even if it is ours) that is only spoken of with the help of proper names, while all general concepts — i.e. possible predicates — have been discarded, would be, of all worlds the one most bound by necessity: we could not even formulate and understand questions on such a world. Here everything must be as it is.

It is not hard to imagine what the language for such a world would have to be like. We can think of a language for our world which is modelled on our existing language, but which contains only the names of the statements we make. Thus the statement “P is red at t₁” is called “a”, the statement “Q is square at t₂” is called “b”, the statement “P is round at t₁” is called “c” and so on. People who are omniscient with regard to the history of our universe could have a meaningful conversation by only mentioning these names. Of course their memories would have to be very good too so that they could retain what all these names stand for. Indeed, they would have to be rather god-like creatures. These language-users would be convinced of the necessity and the fatality of everything that happened in their world, although it would be impossible for them to express such a conviction. Anyway, we know that this is how they experience reality. We may also assert that they will be solipsists because of the absence of contingencies in their world (see p. 186 ff.).

I am afraid that these god-like language-users would soon get into trouble. First, there is the problem of how their language could be learned. For instance, in order to distinguish the statement “a”: “P is red at t₁” from the statement “c”: “P is round at t₁”, the knowledge of general concepts seems indispensable. However, once they know what the two names “a” and “c” refer to, our language-users no longer need knowledge of general concepts. Knowledge of what a name refers to does not require general knowledge. Knowing the difference between what “a” and “c” refer to need not imply general knowledge: the generality implicit in these “modifications” (to say it in a Leibnizian way) “P-redness” and “P-roundness” is logically dependent upon the use of these names. We could imagine one of these god-like language-users making the bewildering
discovery one day that there is something which “P-redness”, “Q-redness” and “R-redness” have in common — and a world-picture falls to the ground. Consequently, if we add the supposition that our language-users must have learned their language in the ordinary way, i.e. with the help of general concepts and the like, but that they suddenly forgot how they initially acquired their knowledge of what these names refer to, everything seems to be in order again.

There is another problem. I said that “a”, “b”, “c” etc. were the names of statements. Most probably our language-users would consider this assertion regarding their language and their world a quite preposterous one. They would reject statements as logical monstrosities and argue that their names refer directly to reality, its “P-redness”, its “P-roundness” etc.. From their point of view names would refer to things in reality and “things” would be to them what aspects of things are to us. But can “a”, “b”, “c” etc. really be said to refer to these admittedly peculiar things? More particularly, can we be sure that no problems would arise with regard to the referential capacity of “a”, “b”, “c” etc.? For instance, after having removed the statements from our analysis, can we be quite convinced that a thing has a certain aspect only “once”? Why not twice, or a thousand times? That would require far more names, and it would be impossible to distinguish what each refers to. Furthermore, we should be aware that the names “a”, “b”, “c” etc. can have no meaning for our language-users (assuming that in a certain context names can have meanings at all). For the only meaning these names could possibly have - the meaning of the statements they refer to — could not be understood by our language-users. So they may have a great many names for one and the same state of affairs or aspect of a thing without ever being aware of it, which seriously threatens the referential capacity of the names they use. More importantly, these language-users could never be sure that they would use the right name for the right “thing”. Thus, if “a” refers to “P-redness at t₁” and “c” to “P-roundness at t₁”, how could they know that such names had not been misused, e.g. when “P-roundness at t₁” is referred to by “a”, assuming that both names actually apply to one or more aspects of reality? Their memory would be all they had to rely upon. And memory being the only criterion in disputes on what names refer to, it would seem to us that their language, contrary to what they would believe themselves, does not refer to reality but to their states of consciousness. Memories and not reality itself is what really is at stake in such disputes. The memories our language-users have when hearing such a name and not reality itself is what is referred to by these names. Of course, with a view to the argument in Chapter VI, section (3) where it was shown that statements as such do not refer to reality, this can no longer astonish us.

(2) Historical explanation. The anomalies of this hypothetical language consisting of only proper names disappear as soon as we replace our god-like language-users by ordinary historians. To liken historians to gods is, for that matter, not merely flattery. Leibniz appointed to God the task
(and the capacity) of figuring out what sequence of realized states of affairs would result in the most harmonious universe. Similarly, the historian has to figure out which sequence of statements on the past will result in the most harmonious narratio. Indeed, when the historian is writing history he may be regarded as a kind of god, although, of course, the Leibnizian God deals with actual states of affairs while the historian only works with descriptions of them.

This difference also suggests how we can solve the problem that brought the preceding section to such a sad conclusion. As we have seen, our god-like speakers could have meaningful discussions: although each of them knew all the possible statements on the past (or at any rate an enormous number of such statements), their discussions were not necessarily just idle enumerations of the recollections they all shared. We have described narratios as sets of statements on the past: so these god-like creatures could very well carry on a historical discussion similar to those actually carried on by historians. The difficulty, however, was that due to the lack of referential capacity of the names they used, their conversations ceased to be conversations on the past. They did not discuss the past, but their memories.

The trouble that arose at the end of the preceding section was caused by the disappearance of the statements from the scene. In narrative historiography we do not run this risk. For the statements in a narratio have a double function: 1) they individuate a Ns (and that is the sole function of narrative statements left in the language of the god-like creatures) and 2) they describe reality. Thus, the narratio, when we take its descriptivist aspects into consideration, does refer to reality (thanks to the subjects of its statements) and the ambiguities mentioned at the end of the preceding section cannot arise in the case of the narratio.

But let us now consider the narratio from a narrativist perspective. In its own peculiar way the narratio attempts to explain the past. Phenomena, however, are not explained as such but always in a description that has been offered of them. This implies that if we are looking for the explanatory force of the narratio we are, in fact, asking why we ought to accept a narrative account of the past. Is the logical form of narrative explanation such that we cannot but accept an explanation having this form? Similarly, we accept CLM-explanations of what historical research has discovered, since in such explanations the explanandum is logically entailed in the explanans. The necessity reigning on the linguistic level guarantees that phenomena in reality have been explained.

If we bear this in mind, our search for the explanatory force of the narratio is equivalent to the question as to whether necessity reigns in the narrativist universe. If, then, a Ns (the linguistic device we use for explaining part of the past) were to contain a different set of statements than the one it actually possesses, while essentially remaining the same Ns, we could not have confidence in the explanatory force of this Ns. Different sets of statements would correspond with different scopes and therefore with different aspects of the past. But if a Ns explains different pasts it
explains no past. Therefore, if Nss are supposed to explain the past, no looseness will be allowed with regard to what the properties of a Ns are (i.e. with regard to what statements a Ns contains). Nss have to be what they are. So asking for the explanatory force of Nss is equivalent to the question as to whether necessity reigns in the narrativist universe, that is, whether Nss might not be different from what they actually are.

So let us consider the problem of whether the properties of a Ns might be different from what they actually are. Of course, with regard to “things” other than Nss this question can usually be answered in the affirmative. However, and this is the crucial point, with regard to Nss such a question can never be answered affirmatively. Whichever Ns we may choose, none could ever be different from what it is, without ceasing to be the Ns it is. Nss are completely and unambiguously individuated by all their properties (i.e. all the statements they contain); as soon as one statement is omitted or added we have to do with a different Ns. Consequently, we cannot meaningfully ask whether Nss could have been different (such questions would require us to consider self-contradictory statements on Nss), they are necessarily the way they are. Thus, when the past (i.e. not Nss) is described in terms (of the narrative statements) of Nss, we can say that the past has been explained, because the Nss embodying such an explanation could not have been different. The explanandum (i.e. part of the past) is explained by that which defines the narratio’s scope (i.e. the statements contained in a Ns). And the necessity that reigns in the narrativist universe forces us to accept these narrative accounts of the past, just as the necessity that ties together explanans and explanandum forces us to accept explanations that conform to the CLM. Of course, what is explained (and might have been different) should not be confused with the logical structure of the explanations (which could not have been different): things in the past might have been different but this does not obtain for the Ns(s) which explain them. The immense complexity even of a simple narratio as an explanatory device when compared to a CLM-explanation, should not make us forget this. Lastly, it will be observed that narrative explanation does not support prediction.

Of course we could decree that only explanations of the CLM-type should be called “explanations” but this would be a very parochial approach indeed. For historical narratios do explain the past in a way that has satisfied many generations of historians and a wide lay-public for a long time. Moreover, as was shown in the preceding paragraphs, logic forces us to accept (historical) explanations that are given in terms of Nss. And if we are ready to accept the historical, narrative explanation as a proper sort of explanation, we can conclude that we are able to explain the past without having recourse, either implicitly or explicitly, to general law-statements. It is a well-known fact that the CLM-debate always got into difficulties because of the obvious absence of general laws in historical explanations. In spite of many ingenious adaptations, the efforts to bring the CLM sufficiently close to historical practice have always failed. Now we know what caused the échec of the CLM: a set of singular statements may be
sufficient to give a historical explanation. And we are now also aware of
the deeper cause of the CLM-ist’s predicament: for him, “explaining”
could only be the explanation of the presence or absence of certain states
of affairs in reality. However, the historian can also explain the past in
another way, viz. by “seeing it in the terms” of a certain Ns. At this level
narratios are self-explanatory. Once more, I do not deny that the CLM may
have its value on the level of historical research, but as soon as we reach
the level of the writing of narrative history another explanatory model that
dispenses with general laws takes over.

Lastly, the difference between the correct logical form of a narrativist
explanations and its implementation in the case of individual narrative
explanations should not be neglected. All acceptable narrativist
explanations should conform to the logical model just expounded, and they
do so when a Ns is individuated in the corresponding narratio. But that
does not imply anything with regard to their relative merits in the eyes of
historians. Although two narratios may fulfil the requirements mentioned
above, the historian may on account of specific historiographical
considerations, prefer one narratio to the other. And a similar claim also
holds for the CLM. This may be illustrated by the following time-
honoured example. It is asked why the flowers in a garden have died. The
following explanations can be conceived of: 1) the soil was too dry, 2)
too little rain had fallen, 3) the gardener had forgotten to water the
flowers. Each of these three explanations is unexceptionable from the
perspective of the CLM; nevertheless, the third explanation is very likely
to be the one we are interested in. For explanations to be acceptable it is
a necessary condition but not a sufficient one that they should be
formulated in accordance with some explanatory model. The CLM and
the narrativist explanatory model that was sketched above both belong to
the realm of logic or of the philosophy of science and not to that of actual
scientific or historiographical practice. Thus, our narrativist explanatory
model should never be seen as an instrument that can help us in
deciding on the relative merits of individual historical explanations.
Evolutions in historiography are not inspired by attempts to approach as
much as possible the pure form of the narrativist explanatory model. The arguments that make historians prefer one historical, narrativist
explanation of the past to another one have nothing to do with the claim
made in this section concerning the proper logical form of narrativist
explanations. As soon as we confuse the job of the philosopher with
that of the historian we will find ourselves in a terrible muddle.
Philosophical arguments can never be decisive in historical discussions.

(3) Some general remarks on subjectivity and objectivity. Unambiguous
literal statements can be said to be either true or false. In Chapter III
we rejected the proposal to speak of the “truth” or the “falsity of
narratios”. Instead of the terms “truth” and “falsity” I shall propose the
terms “objective” and “subjective” as indications of the relative
acceptability or adequacy of narratios; these terms can also be used to
appraise the kind of statements mentioned on p. 179. Both in ordinary
speach and in philosophical language these terms do already have many of the connotations I wish to give to them in this connection. Nevertheless I hesitate to use the concepts “objective” and “subjective”, since they are as a rule exclusively associated with discussions on the rôle of values in history.

In my opinion it is necessary to distinguish between two contexts: “... is subjective” (a) and “... is influenced by moral values” (b). That this distinction ought to be made is already clear from the fact that texts but not human beings (e.g. historians) can be called “subjective” (a), whereas human beings and not texts can be influenced by values (b). Admittedly, when a historian is influenced by values (b), his historiography can be subjective (a), but that does not alter the fact that we should be careful to keep these two contexts apart. Moreover, a historiography may be “subjective” for a number of reasons other than that its author was influenced by values. Indeed, aesthetic preferences, stylistic habits, lack of imagination or congeniality with a certain subject-matter or just sheer incompetence may also make an author’s historiography “subjective”. As a matter of fact, it is quite astonishing that the term “subjective” should always have been linked so exclusively with ethical and political values.

Anyway, the terms “subjective” and “objective” belong to the domain of the narratio: they are terms that express something about the relative acceptability or adequacy of narratios — even in common parlance. When we speak of “being influenced by values, by aesthetical preferences, by certain interests” and so on, we are trying to find some psychological explanation for the relative merits or shortcomings of a particular narratio. And even though what is said in context (a) will usually have its correlate in context (b), that should not lead us to neglect the distinction between the two contexts. Even if the content of the narratio could be completely explained by resorting to the psychological, sociological, ethical and aesthetical characteristics of its author, the distinction would not be obliterated. For the “objective” narratio ought to be conceived of in cognitive terms and not in psychological, sociological or aesthetical ones. We may conclude that even in common parlance the term “objective”, when applied to a narratio, refers to its cognitive adequacy and not to parts of the personal biography of a historian. Therefore, we do not conflict with the connotations which the terms “subjective” and “objective” do already have when we use them as indications of the relative merits or shortcomings of narratios as narratios.

(4) Subjectivity and objectivity in history. When we use the terms “subjective” and “objective” two things may come to mind 1) the narratio itself, and 2) the correspondence between the narratio and historical reality. It may seem doubtful that component 1) should be really indispensable. Couldn’t we qualify some arbitrary list containing true statements on the past as “chaotic, but objective”? In other words, at first sight it seems sufficient for a narratio to be objective, that its statements should correspond with the actual states of affairs in
historical reality. Hence, no additional demands in the sphere of component 1) would seem necessary. Yet, I don’t think that this idea will generally meet with agreement. It could be argued that this arbitrary list of statements is subjective because the selection of the statements to be included was not guided by historical reality. Therefore, the list in question is already at variance with component 2), the component which was initially thought to be sufficient. Thus, when we are considering what is meant by the phrase “the objective narratio” the narratio itself will have to be taken into account as well. We cannot restrict ourselves to merely considering the correspondence between the individual statements in a narratio and those parts of historical reality described by them.

It may be argued, however, that I have interpreted component 2) in a very specific sense. Component 2), which requires the correspondence between the narratio and historical reality, was interpreted — at the end of the preceding paragraph — as a correspondence between the individual statements of the narratio and historical reality, which is an interpretation not necessarily justified by the wording of component 2). Another possible interpretation is that there ought to be a correspondence between the narratio when taken as a narrative whole and historical reality. Then the “objective” narratio should be defined as the narratio which in its totality corresponds to historical reality. I presume that most historians and philosophers of history will be reasonably satisfied with this proposed definition of the “objective” narratio. Of course, they may differ with regard to details, but on the whole it will be acceptable to most of them.

However, with a view to the claims of narrative realism it is not very hard to identify the mistake in the above proposal. The idea that the historian should offer a narrative “translation” of what the past really is like is the misunderstanding that this and similar proposals have in common. For there are no translation-rules which, when carefully applied, can guarantee the objectivity of a narratio. The past is not simply reflected in the narratio; therefore the phrase “the correspondence between the narratio when taken as a narrative whole and historical reality” is devoid of meaning. Our previous arguments refuting the phrases “truth” or “falsity of the narratio” and the notion of the “lack of fixity” that exists in historiography between accounts of the past and the past itself can be recalled in this connection (pp. 71 ff.). The foregoing considerations and especially our continued resistance to narrative realism may have demonstrated that the concept “the objectivity of the narratio” can be given no acceptable content if only component 2) is taken into account. So, in order to give meaning to the concept “the objectivity of the narratio” we shall now have to concentrate on the first component.

Following a suggestion made by Kupperman in a somewhat similar context, we could interpret the concept “the objective narratio” in either of two ways: 1) in an absolute sense (i.e. there is one and only one

---

objective narratio on and around a certain historical topic, and this objective narratio can serve as a criterion for establishing the objectivity of other narratios on or around the same historical topic), and 2) in a relative sense (there is no objective narratio that is given to us as an absolute criterion: we only possess a number of narratios on or around a historical topic and by comparing them mutually we may hope to find out which of them is most objective). Let us first scrutinize the concept “objective narratio” when taken in the absolutist sense. It may seem that the idea that there could be such an absolutely objective narratio could very well be criticized using the same arguments as we used to contest narrative realism and the claim that component 2) could give meaning to the concept “the objectivity of the narratio”. But I am afraid that we shall not get away with things so easily. We have always argued that no narratios come into being thanks to the application of translation-rules, so even the objective narratio in the absolutist sense (assuming that there is such a narratio) cannot be said to have been constructed with the help of these translation-rules. Consequently, a repetition of our critique of the translation-rules can be of no help in this connection.

We can interpret the concept “the objective narratio” in the absolutist sense in two ways. Either there are rules that ensure the constitution of the objective narratio in the absolutist sense or there are rules or criteria that enable us to single out this narratio from others. The first interpretation has already been rejected in the previous chapter, when it was shown that general rules never yield the Nss proposed in narratios. With regard to the second interpretation we must be aware that the number of possible narratios on or around a historical topic is infinite. Hence, it is always logically conceivable that next to a certain narratio, which we at first regarded as the objective narratio in the absolutist sense can be put another narratio that satisfies even better the criteria for the objective narratio in the absolutist sense. We can never be sure that a particular narratio really is the most objective narratio on a topic in the absolutist sense. This argument can be seen as the ultimate defeat of the attempt to come to some acceptable definition of the concept “the Ideal Narratio”.

That leaves us with the second interpretation of the concept “the objective narratio”: only if a number of narratios (i.e. Nss) are at our disposal can we select the most objective one of this set. Here we shall not encounter the difficulties that confronted us when we were considering the first interpretation of the concept. In fact, I am convinced that this not very exciting criterion of the objectivity of narratios is the most reasonable one. It may be asked, then, how we can establish the relative objectivity of narratios. That is, how do we select the most objective narratio from a set of competing narratios on or around a historical topic? Because in this discussion on the objectivity of the narratio we have restricted ourselves to component 1), we must read this question as follows: what criteria enable us to select the most objective narratio from a set of competing narratios on or around a historical topic when we consider these narratios purely from a narrativist perspective, that is, without taking into account in this context
their “correspondence with historical reality” (the second component)?

Once again we have to remember that the narrative statements of a narratio have two functions: to describe historical reality and to individuate a “point of view” (or Ns). Clearly, the “correspondence with historical reality” is secured by the first function. Thus our argument in the preceding paragraphs proves that the “objectivity of the narratio” has to be associated with the “point of view” function of the narrative statements of the narratio. It must be noted that whenever we compare narratios it is not their “points of view” but their scopes which are compared. In contrast to their scopes, narrative “points of view” do not have a common background in terms of which they can be compared. We can meaningfully compare two narratios on Louis XIV (e.g. one by Goubert and one by Voltaire) even when their “points of view” (i.e. their respective Ns as individuated by the statements of the narratio) have nothing in common. Similarly, when it is said that one has a better view of a landscape from position P₁ than from P₂, it is not these positions themselves but what is seen from them that can sustain the assertion. As a consequence, when we accept that it is the historian’s task to provide the most comprehensive account of (part of) the past, we should say that the best, the most adequate or the most objective narratio out of a set of competing narratios on or around a historical topic is the narratio of which the scope beyond its descriptive content has been maximalized (other things being equal). Before considering the scope-maximalization criterion, I wish to make a few comments that may clarify my intentions.

In the practice of history scope-maximalization can be achieved in the following way. Narratios are ways of seeing the past. So what a set of narratios on roughly the same topic have in common - what I shall call their “conventionalist” component - is not part of the way each individual narratio in the set proposes to see the past. Only in so far as there are differences can we speak of ways of seeing the past. We can be sure, therefore, that the “point of view” proposed in a narratio can only be identified with those parts of the narratio in which it differs from other narratios. For obvious reasons the same is true for the scope of the narratio, so that reducing the conventionalist component in a narratio may be said to be equivalent to enlarging its scope. Those narrative components that continually recur in narratios on or around a certain historical topic will eventually give way to in-tensional typifications. As a consequence the narratios with a conventionalist component will split up into an un-historical part in which reference is made to one or more individual things of a certain type and another truly narrative part embodying the scope of the narratio. The most objective narratio, the narratio having the widest scope, is the least conventionalist, the most original narratio. Thus, the essential duty of the historian is to be original and to refrain as much as possible from repeating what his predecessors in the investigation of a particular topic have said. The requirement that the historian should maximize the scope of his narratio could be interpreted as a plea for an “integral history”, i.e. a historiography that subsumes in one narratio all that has been found by
the subdisciplines of history on the intellectual, political, social or economical “layers” of the historical past. Specialization leads to subjective historiography (of course, I do not deny that more often than not, a close investigation of the details of the past is a necessary condition for the production of an objective narratio). But in historiography specialization should always be regarded with the utmost suspicion; it could best be seen as “une terrible necessite”.

To maximalize the scope of a narratio is not merely to claim for a narratio a more comprehensive “image” or “picture” of the past than for competing ones in the absence of an argument for this claim. In historiography a historical thesis and the arguments in favour of it are inseparable (cf. pp. 46-7). Conclusions cannot be detached from their narrative support. Consequently, we cannot assert of a narratio both a) that it is badly argumented and b) that it has a wide scope. These two statements are mutually exclusive. Historiography knows no lucky guesses.

One of the most curious implications of the preceding argument is that other narratios are indispensable for deciding on the scope, and therefore on the objectivity of a narratio. It is impossible to decide on the objectivity of a narratio if only one (or a standard) narratio is available on a topic. In other words, the more Ns have in common in a particular phase of the development of historiography, the more manifest is the decline of historical knowledge (the essence of which is to formulate “points of view”) in such a period. The victory of narrative realism (under the guise either of an exclusively socio-scientific historiography or of a historiography drawing its inspiration only from speculative philosophies of history) would initiate such a decay of historical knowledge. Under such circumstances the prevalence of one view of the past has resulted in the disappearance of any view of the past. And this is not merely an interpretation but a description of a state of affairs in historiography: “points of view” on the past can only exist as long as there are other “points of view”. Ns can only be recognized as such if their specificity is acknowledged and actively striven for. Being aware of the possibility of other views of the past is an essential part of the meaning of “having knowledge of the past”. For example, the more narratios we have on the French Revolution the deeper our insight into it will be, not primarily because each narratio will mention facts not mentioned in others but because only the presence of other narratios enables us to draw the contours and to recognize the specificity of the view of the past presented in each narratio. Historical insight is only achieved when the contours of our view of the past are as clear as possible (of course, this always is a matter of degree). Therefore, the realization of a “full” narrativist universe would be the requirement for complete historical knowledge. In such a full universe in which Leibniz’s principle of plentitude has been realized, the presence of each N is a necessary condition for the specificity of each other Ns contained in the universe.  

2. We might paraphrase Leibniz as follows: "For everything is a plenum, so that all
Thus we can subscribe to the Leibnizian theses 1) that each substance is a reflection of all the other substances and vice versa and 2) that a perfect universe is the richest universe. The omission of only one substance from it, the missing of only one link in this “Great Chain of Being”, renders the remaining substances imperfect and obscure. In short, the scope of a Ns is predominantly determined by other Nss and not by itself. And the degree of perfection of a Ns depends on the degree of perfection of the narrativist universe of which it is part. In the same vein we might add that 1) an optimal awareness of the identities of other people and 2) a maximal variety in these identities are the necessary conditions for the development of our own identity. This implies, of course, a critique of the atomistic individualism characteristic of most of liberal political theory.

Freedom of thought therefore is an essential methodological requirement for the very possibility of historical knowledge. Moreover, the past has to be covered with a network of narratios whose overlappings enable us to decide on the objectivity of narratios on relatively new historical topics. This also explains why historiography is actually much more of a collective enterprise than e.g. physics, although history is mostly written by solitary academics in the seclusion of their studies. One single man can discover truths about nature, but the possibility of knowledge of the past requires the presence of and the opposition to competing insights in a much more dramatic way. Consequently, the function of the so-called “forum the scientists”\(^3\) is quite different from that of the “forum of the historians”. The former decides on the acceptability of the results of scientific research, while the latter is a necessary point of departure for gaining historical knowledge — and as such it is absolutely indispensable. This is why historiography is rightly considered to be part of the culture or civilization of a period, whereas physics is not.

In Chapter II, section (2) we saw that different morally inspired views of the future generate different interpretations of the past. Since each interpretation was meant to further the cause of some model of the future, rational discussion did not permit us to decide on the merits of these interpretations. However, when ethically inspired interpretations of

---

3. De Groot; Chapter 1, section (1; 3; 5): the "forum" of all the scientists specialized in a certain domain of science decides upon the acceptability of theories and/or hypotheses.
the past are not measured with the yard-stick of the future societies they help to construct, it is not a priori impossible to evaluate their objectivity. Because I have separated the terms “objective” and “subjective” entirely from the causes that may give rise to narratios either objective or subjective (e.g. the moral beliefs of the historian), it is not contradictory to say that an objective narratio has been inspired by certain ethical or political values. Ethical values (or other extra-historical conditions) may inspire the historian to write a specific (kind of) narratio on the past, but that need not prevent us from deciding on its (their) relative objectivity. The scope-criterion is as effective in this case as in any other. I think, therefore, that it is both unnecessary and unreasonable to demand of the historian that he should shed all his ethical and political commitments when he starts to write history: adherence to an ethical position may occasionally yield narratios with an unusually wide scope. “No bias, no book”, as Michael Howard succinctly put it. It is a platitude to say that the moral condemnation of the totalitarian state has done much to deepen our historical knowledge of this phenomenon. Of course, ethical commitments are not a necessary condition for maximalizing the scope of narratios, nor is their scope enlarged by the mere utterance of moral beliefs.

This is in accordance with the practice of historical discussion. The objectivity of historical accounts that are inspired by ethical or political values can very well be assessed in historical discussions, even of accounts in which the influence of values is most pertinent and very clearly visible. Thus, it is often said that precisely his adherence to certain ethical or political values has blinded or opened the eyes of a particular historian regarding certain aspects of the past. In many such cases the influence of values may not be merely causal (in the sense of having caused the historian to take a certain view of the past). Historical “points of view” — which determine, as we have seen, the entire structure of narrative accounts of the past — may often be inextricably tied up with political or ethical values. Many narratios lose their internal consistency when robbed of the political values which structure them. Moreover, there is a natural affinity between the narratio and ethical or political values. The metaphorical component of a narratio defines a “point of view” suggesting a particular kind of action. The same can be said of ethical and political values. The narratio is the trait d’union between description and normativeness: on the one hand we have a set of descriptive statements, on the other a course of action is recommended.

We might even toy with the idea that historiography may enable us to test ethical and political values. If a certain set of political or ethical values were to consistently yield more objective narratios, narratios with a

5. See also Schöns (2): p. 268, “Through the processes of naming and framing, the stories make what Rein and Schönhave called the ‘normative leap from data to recommendations, from fact to values, from ‘is’ to ‘ought’ .”
wider scope than those inspired by another set, this would certainly be a strong argument in favour of the former. I agree that the fundamental weakness in historiographical knowledge lies in the fact that the assessment of the scope of a narratio will also be influenced by values. The fact that the scope of a narratio can only be established — as we have seen — by comparing it with other competing narratios requires familiarity with specific historical traditions. Such historical traditions are closely connected with the political and ethical ideals of the cultural and national “Umwelt” in which they arise. Nevertheless, the scope-criterion itself is not logically connected with ethical or political values and is therefore, in essence, value-free. So all that historians and philosophers of history can do is to hope for an open-minded and uncensored historical discussion. Once more we are confronted with the methodological necessity of the freedom of historical inquiry.

I shall now consider the most obvious objection that can be raised regarding my proposal to define the most objective narratio of a set of competing narratios on or around a certain topic as the narratio of which the scope beyond its descriptive meaning has been maximalized. It will be argued that the obligation to maximalize the scope of the narratio requires the historian to suggest as much as possible, but explicitly to say as little as possible. This seems to reduce historiography to propaganda: propaganda and tendentious reports suggest much but prove little. It is not my intention to refute this criticism. To put it provocatively, I believe that the most objective narratio is the narratio that comes closest to propaganda (however, without ever becoming propaganda). The following considerations may clarify this unprepossessing proposition.

According to narrative realism the narratio is a reflection, a narrative reproduction of the past as it actually was. The past has neither heart nor kernel (in the narrativist sense): the past itself is not a narratio. Therefore, according to narrative realism, each theory and each thesis on the past will bear the traces of the hands of the historian who wrote the account of the past containing such theories or theses, so that such an account is bound to be subjective. According to narrative realism, those narratios must be most objective that have neither heart nor kernel (like the past itself), and that meander along in the same unpredictable and disorganized way as the past itself. For narrative idealism, on the other hand, moving away from historical reality itself, seeing it from as large a distance as possible, is a prerequisite for attaining objectivity. The narrativist realist’s route to subjectivity is the narrative idealist’s route to objectivity and vice versa. Narrative idealism separates the level of statements on the past and the level of narrative interpretations of the past; thus it creates the logical space that is needed for views on or interpretations of the past to be formulated and recognized as such. Narrative realism has coalesced these two levels, as a result of which an objective interpretation of the past can be no more than a so-called “reproduction” of the past, a reproduction that is necessarily as unclear
and incomprehensible as the actual past that it should help to elucidate.

Creating, in conformity with narrative idealism, a maximal distance between the narratio and historical reality (which is a metaphorical way of saying that the scope of the narratio in respect of its descriptive content must be maximalized) does not in the least imply the elimination of every check on the relative adequacy of the narratio thus constituted. On the contrary it is precisely the narrative idealist’s strategy that makes narratios vulnerable. The narratio that is apt to please the narrative realist can hardly be confirmed or falsified (I may for once be permitted to borrow these terms from so remote a field as the philosophy of science)\(^6\). Hosts and hosts of statements will be needed to confirm or falsify the extremely weak core of such a narratio. Obviously, when there is hardly any narrative core there is hardly anything to be confirmed or falsified. It is much easier, however, to test the adequacy of narratios written in the narrative idealist vein: taking into account only a few historical facts may sometimes be sufficient to discredit a narrative idealist historical thesis. For instance, Venturi’s interesting thesis that much of 18th century political thought should be seen as a defence of republican ideas rather than of democratic ideas loses much of its plausibility when it is pointed out that 18th century political theorists were very much aware of the intrinsic weaknesses of the Venetian, Genevan, Genoese and Dutch republics\(^7\).

However, the claim made in the previous paragraph, that statements should sometimes confirm or falsify narratios, needs some qualification. The relative fruitfulness of the Nss proposed by the narrative idealist historian cannot be vindicated or denied merely by recourse to statements (whether or not belonging to these Nss). This can only be done by recourse to other Nss. We can only determine the (relative) merits of a narratio by comparing it with other narratios. Looking for the most objective narratio is to some extent similar to selecting the best hi-fi installation: we don’t compare these installations with what we actually hear in the concert-hall, but with other installations. Likewise, the light of objectivity in the narratio shines, as it were, from within, it is not a correspondence with actual historical reality that makes it shine. This does not mean that actual historical reality should not enter into it when we are looking for the most objective narratio or Ns: when we compare two Nss, “N\(_1\)” and “N\(_2\)”, we may well prefer N\(_2\) because other and/or more facts are mentioned in it than in N\(_1\). However, it is not due to these facts themselves that we prefer N\(_2\), but because the statements on these facts in N\(_2\) provide us with a wider “scope” in respect of historical reality.

---

6. It should be noted that I argued in Chapter IV for the falsity of narrative realism as a theory of historical writing. Moreover, the reductionist attempt to restrict historiography to historical research undoubtedly draws its inspiration from narrative realism. We may conclude that a historian taking seriously his narrative realism will tend to produce subjective narratios whose narrative meaning is obscured by an exaggerated emphasis on historical research.

Hence, we can say that facts may “(dis)confirm” a certain Ns but such a “(dis)confirmation” always runs via another Ns in which this fact is mentioned. Nevertheless, although we do compare Nss when we try to find the most objective narratio, statements make Nss into what they are. Therefore, the most successful historian is the historian who knows what parts of reality — when he describes them by means of statements on the past — will enable him to construct a narratio with a scope that is wider than the scopes of competing narratios.

Statements should be true, i.e. they should correspond with actual historical reality. Thus, when taking together the two components mentioned at the beginning of this section, we can claim the most objective narratio of a set of competing narratios to be the narratio whose statements 1) individuate the Ns in which the scope of the narrative beyond the descriptive meaning is relatively largest, and 2) all correspond to actual historical reality. The narratio that fulfils both these requirements is the most “daring” and “courageous” narratio. In such a narratio the epigraph of Popper’s _Logic of scientific discovery_: “hypotheses are nets: only he who casts will catch” has been followed most assiduously.

The narrative idealist narratio being at a maximal distance from the kind of narratio favoured by narrative realists, it may rather easily be discarded and replaced by a new and more objective narratio. Indeed, since they suggest as much as possible while stating as little as possible such narrative idealist narratios might, in some respects, be likened to propaganda. The essential difference between the narrative idealist’s “daring” narratio and propaganda is, however, that propaganda is supported only by the facts mentioned in its statements, while the narrative idealist historian has constructed his narratio in such a way that it is relatively hard to find the facts that “disconfirm” his narratio. An honest historian will propose his “daring” and “courageous” Ns while being convinced at the same time that it will not be swept away on account of a few aspects of the past he hasn’t mentioned in his narratio. A propagandist does not have such scruples. He only wants to convince while it is the historian’s aim to convince and to be nearest to the truth as well. Because the historian wants his Ns to “light up” with his Ns as large a part of the past as possible, there is every reason to label his historiography as more “objective” - or, as historians would prefer to say: nearer to the “truth” - than that of his colleague who shies off due to narrative realist misconceptions or than that which the propagandist wants to make us believe. Moreover, being aware of the vulnerability of the thesis on the past he defends, he will write down his narratio only after having struggled through Nss that mention facts he ultimately decides to leave out of his narratio. Indeed, the historian may be compared to a kind of Odysseus who has to steer between the Scylla of daring and the Charybdis of caution. When the historian’s work is looked upon in that light, I think my claim that historiography should come as close as possible to propaganda will lose much of its provocativeness.
Once again I should perhaps warn against confusing the task of the philosopher with that of the historian. The philosopher is only permitted to say that the historian should maximize the scope of his narratio beyond its descriptive content. But he cannot indicate how this should be achieved in actual historical practice. Nor is it his task to establish in individual cases which Nss have the largest relative scope. For this is and remains the domain of the historian and of historical discussion. And even for the historian it will be hard enough to answer such questions. The historian will be impeded above all by the fact that establishing the scope of a Ns cannot be done without considering other Nss on the same or related topics. For the scope of a Ns cannot be delimited in the absence of other Nss. Here the historian is in a much more awkward position than the scientist (although the gap between historian and scientist may be smaller if Lakatos’s well-known views on the growth of scientific knowledge are true). In the sciences the relative merits of competing theories can in many, if not all cases be decided on by purely experimental means. In historiography things are different. The scope with which one credits some Ns is largely determined by what one has already read in the field of history. Anyone who is not versed in history will be quite helpless when he has to compare, for example, Voltaire’s and Gouberts historiographies on Louis XIV. The fact that he understands each sentence of these narratios does not alter his predicament. This implies that disagreements between historians will remain with regard to the scope they credit individual Nss with. And these disagreements can largely be explained by the historiographical traditions to which individual historians belong, by what they have read, and so on. This is another argument in favour of the claim that the criteria of narrative objectivity will only enable us to decide on the relative merits of Ns. And even that is hard enough.

It is certainly disappointing that we can never know how to write objective historiography; we can only ascertain - and with difficulty at that — that one narratio is more objective than another. Nevertheless, our scope-maximization criterion may at least show us which compass helps us to decide in this matter. And hitherto even this compass was unknown to the philosopher of history; although, of course, historians have always been guided by it in their appraisal of completed narratios. However, attempts to turn it into an instrument that will show us how to cross the seas of historical writing are doomed to failure. It often happens that we do have the criteria enabling us to find out whether a certain goal has been achieved or not, while we do not have the criteria or the rules indicating how to reach such a goal: these two kinds of criteria are often entirely different. We do have fairly reliable criteria to establish whether somebody is happy. But there are no such rules indicating how to become happy: finishing your book may do the trick in some cases — as it does in mine — but in others it may not.
CONCLUSION

In this study three fundamental theses have been defended. The first was that there are no translation-rules enabling us to “project” the past onto the narrative level of its historiographical representation; the narratio is therefore not a “picture” or “image” of the past, this thesis implies a critique of speculative philosophies of history and of all attempts to transform history into a social science. The translation-rules embodied in socio-scientific theories or models upon which the narrative realist bases his case can only be useful to the historian as long as he is doing historical research, but obfuscate the historian once he has reached the phase of integrating the findings of his historical research into an objective narratio. Because the CLM focuses our attention exclusively upon the regularities we know from daily life or from the social sciences, we may conclude that the CLM can only be meaningfully applied to the domain of historical research only and not to that of the narrative writing of history. Modern socio-scientific research into the past is a very useful ancillary science for historiography but can never be substituted for historiography itself. The attempt to do so only results in very subjective narratios; that is, narratios with a very narrow scope.

The second fundamental thesis was that the whole of a historian’s narratio offers us a certain interpretation of the past and this interpretation is embodied in a Ns. In fact, this thesis amounts to an acceptance of the most essential tenets of historism: the “historische Ideen” or “historische Formen” that have interested historists so much may be identified with the Ns whose nature has been analyzed in this study. Historism has been criticized for different reasons. On the methodological level the historist’s demand that historical phenomena should always be placed in and understood from the context of a unique process of historical change has been said to eliminate the possibility of reliable historical knowledge. It is impossible to infer a unique historical phenomenon from a unique historical context and vice versa: to make reliable inferences requires general knowledge of what either these historical phenomena or the historical context in which they are embedded can possibly be related to. However, as soon as we realize that historical uniqueness should always be associated with narrative things and not with things in historical reality, this criticism loses its point. Not what is explained but what explains is “unique”. What is unique in a narratio is not the aspects of the subject-matter under discussion, but the way these aspects are integrated or “colligated” into one Ns. This argument also enables us to defend historism against its most pertinent criticism. Political conclusions have been drawn from historist investigations of the past. But historism should only be interpreted as a philosophical theory explaining how narrative

---

1. Historism has been much criticized for the political conclusions its seemed to support. See Iggers (1) and M.C. Brands, Historisme als ideologie, Assen 1965.
knowledge of the past is possible and what its nature is. How we should act in the future is quite a different problem from how to integrate narrative statements on the past into an objective narratio. Historists could only formulate their political exhortations because they interpreted the consistency of a narratio as if the past related in this narratio was *itself* pointing in a certain direction. But an objective and consistent narratio is the achievement of a historian and not an indication of the future path that will be followed by history itself. Therefore, when historism is cleansed of its metaphysical accretions, it will no longer give occasion to political conclusions. To summarize, this study can be seen as a plea for a historist philosophy of history, which is supported by the fact that nearly all the historiography written by modern and older historians is consonant with historist assumptions.

The third fundamental thesis demonstrated the similarity between metaphorical statements and narratios. Both metaphorical statements and narratios define a “point of view” from which we are invited to see reality. The “point of view” expresses a preference for a specific selection of the statements that can be made on (historical) reality. The totality of these statements constitutes the “scope” of the metaphorical statement or of the narratio. Because the truth or falsity of these statements is not asserted in the narratio itself, we have concluded that there is an essential difference between theories or general theoretical statements and the “theories” or interpretations of the past proposed by the historian. Since all action requires a “point of view” as meant in this study — meaningful action always presupposing a conception of how to continue our personal or group-history in the future — this distinction runs parallel to that between theoretical and practical knowledge. In fact, historical knowledge is not knowledge in the proper sense of the word; it is better characterized as an *arrangement* of knowledge. What makes historical knowledge philosophically such an interesting phenomenon lies in the fact that it is always concerned with the question of what we should or should not say on reality and not with how we should speak about reality (the domain of the sciences). This question is always closely connected with “practical” considerations or, as Foucault has shown, with the exercise of power: “once knowledge can be analysed in terms of region, domain, implantation, displacement, transposition, one is able to capture the process by which knowledge functions as a form of power and disseminates the effects of power. There is an administration of knowledge, a politics of knowledge, relations of power which pass via knowledge and which, if one tries to describe them, lead one to consider forms of domination designated by such notions as field, region and territory”2. What we decide to say on reality largely determines how we wish to act on it. Increasing the scope of the narratio as much as possible is a necessary condition for producing “objective” narratios. The formal structure of statements on Nss (the predicates of such statements can be analytically

---

derived from the complete notion of its subject) obliges us to accept explanations of the past that are couched in terms of Nss 3.

In pleading the necessity of postulating the concept “narrative substance” I have introduced various philosophical topics. It might be argued that these topics should have been analyzed separately. However, the concept “narrative substance” owes much of its plausibility to the fact that it has proved to be quite useful to us in our investigation of so many different topics. In a sense the concept “narrative substance” is like an auxiliary line in geometry: we conceive of it because it enables us to solve so many otherwise intractable problems. The introduction of a diversity of philosophical problems is therefore not to be regarded as a flaw in the present investigation, but as an essential part of it. Only in this way could the central idea of this book, i.e. the concept “narrative substance”, be satisfactorily explained and argued for.

In the course of our inquiry only one substantial assumption has been made, viz. that historians describe the past with the help of singular constative statements. Because no restrictions have been made as to the content of these statements, the results of my analysis may also have some bearing upon fields of investigation other than historiography. For instance, if it is true that during periods of scientific revolution not just different descriptions of the same phenomena but different “paradigms” are contrasted with one another, science comes close to history in such a phase of its development. Perhaps it is not unreasonable to say that the relative breadth of their scope is the decisive criterion for the

3. For each of these three fundamental theses support can be found in Huizinga's theoretical writings. The first thesis may be compared with Huizinga's assertion that there is no "es" corresponding with the "es" in Ranke's dictum that the historian should represent the past "wie es eigentlich gewesen" (Huizinga, p. 44). His inaugural lecture Het aesthetisch bestanddeel van geschiedkundige voorstellingen amply testifies to his awareness of the gap between the past and narrative accounts of the past thanks to the historian's aesthetical grasp of the past (Huizinga; pp. 3-39). Our second thesis finds its counterpart in what Huizinga wrote on the "historical forms" or "historical ideas" (Huizinga, pp. 69—85, 134—150). Thirdly, the metaphorical character of the narratio has been expressed by Huizinga in the following poetic way: "historical knowing is hardly ever tantamount to indicating a strict causality. It is always the understanding of an 'interrelatedness' ('samenhang'). This interrelatedness is always, as we argued, an open one; that is to say, it should never be thought of as the links forming a chain but rather as a bundle loosely tied together, to which new twigs may be added as long as the string reaches. Even more appropriate would be the image of a bunch of wild flowers. Because of their variety and their different values each new notion added to the conception of a historical interrelatedness has an effect similar to that of a new flower added to the bouquet, each changing the aspect of the whole bunch" (Huizinga (2); p. 56). To put the same point in our own terminology: each new statement added to a narratio modifies the point of view from which the past (as described by the other statements of the narratio) should be seen. Like the flowers of the bouquet, the statements of a narratio determine one another's narrative meaning.

In my personal opinion, Huizinga's theoretical writings contain the best analysis of the nature of historical knowledge available as yet.
fruitfulness of individual scientific “paradigms”. But normal science and history have little in common: normal science deals with predicates and historiography deals with statements.

On the other side of the spectrum of human experience narrative philosophy may have its value as well. The way the mind synthesizes sensory perceptions could very well have more in common with the historical than with the (“normal”) scientific approach to reality. The fact that the concept of our selfidentity (i.e. the Ns $I_{int}$), into which all our sensory perceptions are integrated, is a narrative concept, speaks strongly in favour of this conjecture. The essential difference between robots or computers and human beings lies, in my opinion, in the capacity of human beings to constitute the Ns “ $I_{int}$”- The possibility of artificial intelligence probably depends to a considerable degree upon the question as to whether one can make computers use the word “ $I_{int}$”. The trouble is that one cannot teach computers how to use this word, for here regularities, guides or instructions cannot be called upon. Whoever uses the word $I_{int}$” has not learned to identify a specific individual thing in reality: he has acquired the philosophical insight that solipsism can be lived but cannot consistently be thought. This is not merely an academic matter: the all-pervasive anti-narrativism of the 20th century mental climate strongly stimulates solipsism. And solipsism is an ailment that may take a long time to be discovered: it never comes into conflict with reality.

---