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Descriptive accuracy in history: the case of narrative explanations

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Abstract: This article discusses the issue of the conceptual accuracy of descriptions of social life, which, although fundamental for the social sciences, has in fact been neglected. I approach this task via an examination of Paul Roth's recent work, which recapitulates reflection in analytic philosophy of history and sets out a view of the past as indeterminate until retrospectively constructed in historical narratives. I argue that Roth's position embraces an overly restricted notion of historical significance and underestimates how anachronistic descriptions vitiate central historiographical tasks. I contend that the importance of conceptually accurate descriptions for history and the social sciences cannot be overstated.

Keywords: description; concepts; accuracy; history; narrative sentences; narrative explanation

In historical inquiry, too, questions, of what it was like to be another, can be avoided, but more evidently than in any other discipline the avoidance would be counterproductive of knowledge, understanding, and truth.

J. H. Hexter (1971: 288)

1. Introduction

To what extent are descriptions offered by social scientists and historians bound by their object of study? Must scholars respect the conceptual categories of the society or historical period they set out to investigate or are they free to rely on forms of description that derive from their own theory of choice, the particular story they wish to tell and the benefit of hindsight? Conventional social scientific wisdom typically sneers at ordinary concepts and is quick to grant the practitioner redescriptive liberties that are meant to bolster her epistemic credentials. Practicing historians are perhaps less susceptible to this. Yet, philosophical reflection complicates matters by suggesting that 'the past' is in some sense unformed, thus requiring the historian's redescriptive powers to create it in narrative. The resulting error is subtle but pervasive: it consists in the failure to appreciate the logically fundamental role of endogenous conceptual categories. In this article, I insist that it is an error indeed. and argue for a reconfiguration of the relationship between kinds of descriptions.

The article discusses at length Paul Roth's recent efforts (2017a, 2017b, 2018a, 2018b, 2020) to revive, after a long hiatus,¹ the philosophy of history in the analytic

¹ The fact that analytical philosophy of history flamed out at some point (Danto, 1995) partly explains Roth's reliance on thinkers such as Hayden White, Thomas Kuhn and, especially, Arthur Danto and Louis Mink.

tradition. Roth evinces the will to take the distinctive features of the social sciences seriously and to move beyond the blanket constraints of natural-science-orientated explanatory models, arguing for narrative as historiography's explanatory prerogative. I propose, in turn, to treat the examination of Roth's work as an opportunity to move beyond the issue of explanatory form, towards the question of the accuracy of descriptions of *what* historians and social scientists aim to study.² As indicated, the issue is not new but it is notoriously difficult and, I submit, perennially misunderstood. One reason for this is that methodological reflection on the study of social life, whether of the past or the present, has been preoccupied to the point of obsession with how different kinds of inquiry, from history to sociology, ought to explain the phenomena they take an interest in. In the few cases where the logically prior issue of description has been explicitly considered, the arising problems have been presumed to be those of the inexhaustible detail and, hence, incomplete coverage of reality; not of accuracy. In fact, thinking of inevitably selective description as the introduction of form, by the investigator, to an otherwise chaotic reality, has had exactly the effect of downplaying the issue of accuracy by removing the idea that there is something to be accurate to.³ In contrast, my aim in what follows is to demonstrate just how integral the issue of accurate description, especially of conceptual accuracy, is to history and the social sciences.

Roth's work is typical in that it reinforces exactly this picture of a chaotic social reality by portraying the past as unformulated and indeterminate until constructed in historical narrative and, even further, as in some sense constantly expandable through the addition of fresh retrospective truths. Roth focuses not on formalistic features of narratives (White, 1975) but on their epistemic ones, i.e., on narratives as justifications offered 'under a description' (Anscombe, 1979; White, 1979; Roth, 2002; Sharrock and Leudar, 2003). His account of narratives as a distinctive species of explanation, portrays them as possessing three interconnected features: firstly, conclusions reached are thought to be non-detachable from the overall structure they are embedded in, which, in turn, cannot aggregate with other narratives since, finally, there is no fixed or standardized form of description, each narrative, rather, introducing its own. According to Roth, who is reworking Danto's (1962; 1965) and Mink's (1968; 1978) ideas, this takes place by historians formulating their accounts via 'narrative sentences', that is, descriptions which reveal the position of events within a particular sequence and could only be offered in retrospect because they depend on knowledge of how things turned out. The fact, then, that historians have access to truths which could not have been known contemporaneously by the actors themselves, furnishes the former with the role of constituting an ever-changeable past by providing redescriptions as part of novel narratives and explanations.

Although they wrote some time ago, developing their arguments can help Roth establish continuity by allowing him to pick up matters from the point they last were at. The price to pay for this is a rather dense structure of commentary upon commentary: Roth discusses both Danto and Mink as well as the latter's comments on the former. This does not assist in the clear attribution or clarity of the ideas themselves.

² I will not be concerned with whether Roth has put together a programme which is close enough to contemporary philosophical sensibility, or is otherwise compelling enough, to achieve his stated goal of reviving the philosophy of history. Time will tell whether his trumpet sounding will remain lone, joined by other instruments or precipitate an avalanche.

³ I owe this point to Wes Sharrock and his 1970 PhD thesis, *Concepts in Action*, submitted to the University of Manchester.

I will argue as follows: First, I will contend that Roth's conception of 'narrative explanation' depends on a restricted sense of historical significance, which is unsuited to central tasks of historiography by being insensitive to the action and experience of historical actors. I will then proceed to show that the idea of the past as indeterminate and changing depends on a logically dubious understanding of truth, whose alleged retrospective expansion has the effect of granting the historian redescriptive liberty. But, the argument will continue, the fact that historians may redescribe in different ways and, to that extent, cannot agree on professionally 'standardised' descriptions, implies neither that the past is a formless *terra nullius* nor, therefore, the absence of descriptive standards. The conceptual forms that constitute the self-understanding of a society, whether past or present, demand to be rendered accurately.

In the next section I discuss 'narrative sentences' and how they are part of a particular conception of historical significance before turning in *Section 3* to address the metaphysical picture of truth that Roth is operating under and which bears methodological implications that will be the main focus of the final sections of the article: *Section 4* deals with the idea of 'non-standardisation' of descriptions and its corollary of the historian as creator. *Section 5*, after working through a list of different kinds of descriptions, focuses in on the issue of conceptual accuracy.⁴

2. Historical significance and narrative

'Narrative sentences' are retrospective descriptions that assign events to parts within a narrative by designating them, for instance, as beginnings, early or delayed starts, roads not taken until later, middle bits, turning points, as the end of an era or a final stand. Among the examples Roth lists are "The waning of the middle ages"⁵ and 'the beginning of the Holocaust'. According to his scheme such sentences demand to be explained, essentially and exclusively so, through, what he terms, 'narrative explanations', which are geared to answering "why the subject is as it is at the end of the sequence" (Roth, 2017b: 45). This is less of a contingently perfect fit than a result of definition whereby a

⁴ Before I proceed to scrutinise Roth's claims it is worth stating that I concur with much he has to say in opposition to standing predilections. I welcome his quarrel with the venerated assumption, originating in the D-N model, that explanatory form ought to be exclusively rendered as argumentative form and evaluated in terms of afforded inference licences (2017b). I also find particularly welcome what is, in effect, a lifting of the stipulative restriction on the word 'explanation' that informs the basis of philosophical discussion and a challenge mounted towards an item of faith in social scientific methodological discussion, namely, that description is somehow one thing and explanation is another so that a description cannot possibly be explanatory in response to a posed question. This is but a simple logical reminder as to the grammar of words like 'description' and 'explanation' (Tsilipakos, 2016: Ch.2). At the same time, Roth claims to be offering a clarification for philosophers of a 'logically obscure explanatory form', not to be telling participants what they already know (2020: 139). One cannot help but wonder whether Roth's search for formal explanatory features of narrative has really escaped Hempelian thought. That is, whether his naturalism, although 'empirical through and through' (2020: 121), is indeed designed to stay close to the varieties of historical practice, especially when he seems to push to the side some of the non-narrative aims of historiography in the name of justifying to philosophers the use of the word 'explanation' in history.

⁵ Despite employing this 'narrative sentence' as the title of one of his most well-known works, Huizinga's own views do not quite align with Roth's, as can be seen from the following excerpt on the retrospective treatment of Petrarch: "we are always inclined to exaggerate the modern element in his mind and work, because we are accustomed to see him exclusively as the first of renovators. It is easy to imagine him emancipated from the ideas of his century. Nothing is further from the truth." (1972: 309) In fact, Huizinga is critical towards the notion of a *precursor* which is logically equivalent to 'narrative sentences': "By marking someone as a precursor one lifts him out of the framework of his own time, within which he should be understood, and in doing so one distorts history." (1960: 260-1)

part of ‘narrative explanations’ is actually the *explanandum* itself stated as a ‘narrative sentence’, for instance, ‘how did such and such events serve as the beginning of the Holocaust?’. Roth describes this *explanandum* and the justification offered as non-detachable from the narrative and, conversely, he parses an explanatory narrative sequence into its *explanandum*-stating and justification-providing parts. In this he is again following Mink who treats narratives as sharing some features with scientific theories, holistically conceived (cf. Danto, 1965: 137; Roth, 2020: 159), that is, as expressing their own ‘conceptual presuppositions’, which render them not amenable to aggregation: they cannot be placed on a grid of a purportedly Universal History⁶ with either a single plot or subject or standard descriptions of events (Mink 1978; Turner, 2011; 2017; Roth, 2018b; see Roth, 2020: 93, 101 for the ascription of this idea to Kuhn). Thus, to the *non-detachability* of the ‘narrative sentence’ Roth adds the *non-aggregativity* of narratives and the *non-standardisation* of descriptions which, taken together, make up the essential features of the form of narrative explanations. Such explanations are considered to be the hallmark of historiography in the sense that their form is distinctive enough to diverge from philosophical accounts of explanation in the natural sciences. Whether this is enough to demonstrate its suitability to historiography and its tasks is, naturally, a different question.

In fact, Roth draws, via Mink, on Danto’s understanding of ‘narrative sentences’, which involves restrictive assumptions as to the tasks of historiography. When Danto introduced (1962) the notion of ‘narrative sentences’, he saw them as capturing the business of historians by bringing out a key sense in which an event might be historically significant, that is, when seen in light of later developments. Despite the fact that Danto discussed numerous senses of ‘significance’, ‘intelligibility’ or ‘meaning’⁷ he opted for an understanding of *historical* significance in the narrow sense of being consequential with regard to later events (1962: 169; 1965: 263; cf. Mink, 1978: 148), in other words, closer to the idea of *historic* significance, attaching to what is epoch-making or bears repercussions that are felt in the present.

One may wonder, then, whether this conception, whose extreme form is succinctly summarised by Isaiah Berlin in relation to Voltaire’s views of history, that “only that is worthy of mention which is worthy of posterity” (Berlin, 1974: 336), is not, even as a moderate doctrine, an actual impoverishment of the notion of historical significance. After all, there are past events worth knowing, for the record, as it were, and not for their impact on later events. As a clear expression of that sensibility, one might consider Max Weber talking of a sense of ‘merely’ historical interest in past affairs, as a matter separable from their having anything direct to teach us about the present:⁸

⁶ Mink (1978) in fact thinks that although the idea of universal historiography has been discarded, this is not the case for the implicitly held idea of the past as ‘an untold story’, and therefore of the past as determinate.

⁷ A brief survey of Danto’s (1965) notion of significance involves being part in a temporal structure (8), fitting in a story (11), being influential (13) being significant in a pragmatic, theoretical, consequential or revelatory sense (132-4) and being representative of later historic change (263) (Cf. Mink, 1978: 140, 148).

⁸ For another example one might consider prominent classicist Mary Beard and her 2019 Gifford lectures delivered at the University of Edinburgh (available online at <https://www.giffordlectures.org>) where she describes the classics as “unimaginably different” from us and insists, against attempts to “weaponize” the past in the service of various political projects, that “nobody owns the classics”.

There is little or nothing which ancient history can teach us about our own social problems. A proletarian of today and a slave of Antiquity would have as little in common as do a European and a Chinese. Our problems and those of Antiquity are entirely different. Therefore, the story I tell has only historical interest. (1976: 391)

The fact that Danto, and with him Roth too, ties 'narrative sentences' to the notion of being historically significant, understood as being retrospectively consequential, precludes such disinterested sensibility and, thus, limits the notion's suitability for historiography and the social sciences. It is worth noting that both Danto and Roth (2020: 41) acknowledge Anscombe's insights on action being intentional under a description available to the agent and cannot, therefore, but be aware of the fact that the notion of 'narrative sentences' is not designed to capture actors' intentional actions; at its extreme, to be discussed in *Section 5*, it even encompasses descriptions couched in forms which are conceptually unavailable to those actors. By definition, then, 'narrative sentences' constitute descriptions which are unsuitable as ascriptions to historical actors of, not only what they intended, but even how they could have witnessed any historical circumstance (Danto, 1962: 154, 158, 169). The epigraph from Tolstoy's *War and Peace* Danto uses in his book is particularly telling, as is his cognate contention that history is about unintended consequences whose significance cannot be grasped by those ignorant of future events (1965: 183). This led an early commentator to remark that:

the use of [narrative] sentences is not necessary for the construction of narrative. Doubtless a narrative will be *more* intelligible or significant if it employs such devices; but a narrative which abjures them, possibly attempting to represent the past entirely from the standpoint of the participants, is so far from being inconceivable that it in fact represents the ideal of all those conceptions of historiography which regard it as a re-enactment of past experience. (Dray 1971: 159)

It seems, then, that Roth, by following Danto and construing historical significance in the way described, has chosen to discount an entire tradition which, goes back to the 18th Century and Vico's *fantasia* or Herder's *Einführung* (Berlin, 1974). Coupled with this orientation, the typical stance of descriptive multiplicity Roth exemplifies cannot account for, not just a central historiographical preoccupation but, as I will argue, the logically distinctive features of the humanities and social sciences, which are forms of inquiry dealing with conceptually pre-constituted phenomena which, thus, the historian aims not to freely redescribe but, rather, to accurately reconstruct by taking precisely those conceptual forms into account.

But I anticipate. Before these matters can be taken up one needs to examine the conception which forms the background metaphysical picture, namely, that of '*narrative sentences*' *retrospectively adding truths*. This will lead to the discussion of the three features of narrative form in greater detail since they follow from the idea of 'narrative sentences' as expressing a truth non-knowable at the time the event described took place.

3. Retrospectively adding truths?

In claiming that “there will be truths about any time t not knowable at t ” and, further, that “truths about time t continue to accumulate after t ” (2018a: 14), Roth is invoking Danto’s *reductio* argument as to the impossibility of an Ideal Chronicle (IC), that is, a complete list of truths about a certain time which is available at that time. This is an impossibility because some truths, precisely those that are expressed by ‘narrative sentences’, are only retrospectively available. Danto’s use of the IC is rather subtle: for one, it forms part of his critique of, what he calls, ‘substantive philosophy of history’, such as that of Marx, which is argued to be contradictory to the extent that it attempts to describe the retrospective significance of future events. Danto also offers a complex discussion around the difference between an historian and an Ideal Chronicler who would not be allowed to make use of expressions such as ‘anticipated’, ‘begat’ or ‘correctly predicted’ (1962: 159), reflecting, finally, on the limited use an IC would be to historians, supposing they could be supplied with one.

Roth treats Danto’s argument as useful in helping him dispense with ‘the correspondence theory of historical truth’, the conception of ‘history as mapmaking’ and, what he considers as an unpalatable metaphysical assumption, namely, “that there exists only a single past calling for explanation” (2020: 24-6). Yet, in putting his own metaphysical views⁹ in place, Roth misses, in my view, a number of logical subtleties which require care. They cluster around the concept of truth and its connections to notions of *(in)completeness*, *accumulation*, *countability*, and *temporality*. Their mishandling by Roth leads to the methodological oversights to be discussed in the next section.

Before proceeding to the examination of the concept of truth, it is worth stating clearly that the objections pressed against Roth’s account depend on paying attention to how relevant expressions are ordinarily used and not on any personal or theoretical view. I do not see philosophy as being able defensibly to engage in the business of offering theories of truth; all it can hope to offer is an elucidation of the concept as it figures in the lives of human beings. This is why I take issue with Roth’s distortion of the concept and, naturally, objections of the kind I raise hold equally against any type of philosophical ‘analysis’ of truth that departs from ordinary use.¹⁰ Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, this approach of deflating metaphysical speculation by referring to the non-philosophical use of words is not only consistent with the overarching argument as to the importance of conceptual accuracy but, more generally, entirely appropriate for dealing with the language of history which, as Hexter points out, “is and has to be for the most part common language.” (1971: 67)

Starting with the notion of completeness, the motivating thought is, as noted above, that an IC of a certain time, written at that time, would be impossible. For instance, the fact that the Battle of Stalingrad was the beginning of the end for Germany in WWII, depends on knowledge of later events and, thus, is thought to constitute a

⁹ For the record, Roth adopts, what he calls, an *irrealist* position (2020: Ch.3). It is beyond the scope of the present article to take up the metaphysics of the past or to argue against Roth’s constructionism for either a realist or a moderate constructionist stance. For what it is worth, I do not regard such crystallised ‘isms’ as particularly helpful in illuminating the issues at stake.

¹⁰ For an elaboration and further defence of this way of proceeding, in other words, the position of Ordinary Language Philosophy, see Hacker (2007), Baz (2012) and Tsilipakos (2016).

retrospective addition to any purportedly complete list of truths at the time of the battle, which is thereby shown to be incomplete. However, it is dubious whether it makes sense to talk about, not only completeness, but also incompleteness or, for that matter, about any list of truths at a point in time, which itself is an incoherent notion for reasons other than the, equally misconceived, retrospective addition process.

Firstly, it is important to distinguish between knowledge and truth in relation to the question of accumulation. It is patent that we speak of the growth of knowledge and of knowing more things than we knew in the past and, naturally, we proceed to compare our earlier to our later knowledge (though not in terms of quantifiable numbers of things we know). This way of speaking, however, does not transfer without incident to the notion of truth. If we reflect on how we ordinarily speak then we will find it very difficult to use expressions such as ‘the growth of truth’ or ‘accumulation of truths’, in a sense that does not simply refer to the growth of knowledge.

Secondly, what is presupposed by the idea of a list of truths is countability. Apart from the largely irrelevant cases of religious doctrine or revealed knowledge (or, in a different context, the fundamental laws in thermodynamics which can be counted indeed), the notion applies neither to knowledge nor to truth. The fact that we do not attach any sense to individuating truths and counting or comparing their number can be easily shown by noticing how we fail to see a point in settling questions as to whether the fact that I am writing these lines on a Saturday, during the weekend, not on a Monday are one, two or three truths. Moreover, the number of true statements that can be made at any point in time is indefinite so, in that sense, any list of truths would be open-ended and indefinitely extendable, even without any reference to the future. To that extent, it would not be either *complete* or *incomplete*.¹¹ Roth’s idea, following Danto, seems to be that if a truth is unknowable until later then surely any future list of truths is an expansion of an earlier list to which at least this retrospective truth has been added, thus manifesting its incompleteness. But all this way of speaking manages to achieve, apart from further confusing truth and knowledge, is to mislead us in thinking that we have a clear sense of ‘list of truths’, ‘accumulation’, ‘addition’, ‘subtraction’, or ‘equal number’. But we do not.

Thirdly, and most crucially, a list of truths is thought to be part and parcel of the time it describes, in other words, not only knowledge but, paradoxically, truth is conceived as belonging to a certain time: “a narrative sentence adds a truth to an earlier time” (Roth, 2017b: 44, 2020: 106). It is, of course, true that what we later find out to be the case adds to our knowledge of that earlier time but, as per Roth’s argument, the fact that the Thirty Years’ War began in 1618 was not part of knowledge at the time nor, of course, could one retrospectively add this piece of knowledge to the knowledge available at that earlier time. Is there, then, something intelligible Roth can have in mind with the idea of adding a truth to an earlier time besides the idea of adding to what we know about that time?¹² Reflected in our ordinary use of language is a difference

¹¹ The issue here is analogous to that around the concept of the infinite in mathematics, namely, the contradiction between the notion of ‘consummated infinite’ and that of indefinite iteration of addition in forming successor numbers (see Lazerowitz, 1985).

¹² The difficulties here are exactly those in connection with ‘future truths’ discussed by Ryle with regard to the issue of fatalism (1958: Ch.II) and by White (1970: 41-56), who in relation to time distinguishes between the sound idea of not being true *unless* certain events take place, and the erroneous one of not being true *until* those events take place, neatly capturing the logical subtleties around truth. White’s book

between the atemporal character of truth and the temporality of knowledge, which suggests that the answer is negative. Indeed, there are important nuances in the concept of truth in relation to time, which are, for instance, linked to the applicability of different prepositions, such as 'in', 'at', 'of': what is (not) true *of* a certain time cannot be said to be (not) true *in* or *at* that time, although it may be (not) known *at* that time. Roth offers the example that "[t]he 40th President of the United States starred in *Bedtime for Bonzo*. Put another way, in 1981 something happens that adds to the list of statements *true in 1951*." (2017b: 44) (my emphasis) One can appreciate how Roth's way of phrasing the matter is an artefact of the IC argument and the involved notion of a list of truths. But its unfortunate consequence is to strain understanding. One reason for this is that it is not intended to refer to any record of actual statements but to a virtual list of true statements, of truths about 1951 which are somehow thought to belong to 1951.

If we pause for a moment in order to remind ourselves of how we ordinarily speak, we will notice how jarring this is. We might indeed say, for example, that *a principle* is true for a particular period or under certain conditions, this being a way of discussing its scope and application, the kind of things it might encompass. We might also say that *a description* offered became true as what it described became the case. Consider the following story: Jovan's grandfather used to fondly say of him, even as a little boy, that he is 6 feet tall. Whilst that was false for much of Jovan's childhood it became true when he turned 16. Equally, we might say of *statements* that they become true or false, for example, 'I am drinking coffee' is true when I utter it at 9:30 but false when I utter it at 11:30 since I have long switched to tea or am not drinking anything at all. On the other hand, it makes no sense to speak of a truth becoming true or false at some point in time, joining or departing from the list of truths in a particular year without contradictorily implying that it was not a truth before or is one no longer. The same can be said about statements that include temporal references: 'Jovan is drinking coffee at 9:30' is not itself true *at* 9:30 or 11:00, *in* the morning or *during* the day before. It is simply true without any temporal qualification. The fact that a truth relates to a particular time does not imply that it becomes true *at* that time or that it forms part of the list of truths *in* that time or *later*; it is simply a truth about that time.

By thinking about the fact that it could not have been known in 1951 that Ronald Reagan would become the 40th president of the U.S., Roth slips into the notion of a list of true statements in 1951 not in the sense of statements actually made but rather in the sense of truths which are true in 1951, where the temporal characterisation 'in 1951' characterises not, say, available knowledge, something one could sensibly claim, but rather some kind of independent list of statements or truths. But there is no such thing as a list of statements or truths that belong to 1951 nor retrospectively adding to any such list. Our concept of truth entails that we do not see sense in asking whether, for instance, the fact that a man later responsible for unspeakable monstrosities came to power in 1933 forms part of the list of truths in 1933, 1934, the present or 100 BCE.

may be consulted for an overview of various theories of truth and their relation to how we ordinarily use relevant expressions. Danto (1965: Ch.IX) also considers "the logical determinist's timeless notion of truth" but rather than paying attention to those subtleties succumbs to thinking in terms of "incompatible descriptions, so to speak, hovering over a given past event, unable to establish definite semantical relations with it *until* something happens in the future." (1965: 195) (my emphasis)

Roth wants to insist that “a list of truths about each moment in time does not close as that moment ceases to be present. Past times do not exist as frozen tableaux. Rather, some events can be said to be true of earlier times at those times because what happens later makes them true.” (2017b: 44) Returning, once again, to the difference between truth and knowledge, let us substitute the phrase ‘what we know to be true’ in the above for which we simply get ‘what we know to be true about each moment in time does not close as that moment ceases to be present’. But if we perform that substitution then we will not be inclined to count the list of truths about a time as something which is part of that time and is thus retrospectively expanded. Or at least, once we reach a paradoxical sounding thesis about the past somehow changing we may find ourselves much less bedazzled, treating with circumspection statements such as that “[r]etrospection reveals truth about past times that can be known only retrospectively even though true at an earlier time.” (ibid.: 44) (original emphasis) We may find that there is not much to be animated about in considering that there are things we could know only later once it is understood that we can simply erase the clause ‘even though they were true at an earlier time’ (see also Roth, 2020: 67), which introduces precisely a temporal modification that adds nothing to truth. Things we can know only later even though they are true? Well, of course, things we later found out!

But, it will be said, enough with the logical scrutiny of metaphysical theses as to truth. What impact do these logical misdemeanours, granted that they are such, really have on description in historiography?

4. ‘Non-standardisation’ and the creator historian

The picture of retrospective truth advocated by Roth grants power to historians to “creat[e] an event under a certain description, one knowable only after the fact” (2018a: 18) (my emphasis) by lending plausibility to a conception whereby there are many possible descriptions and accompanying narratives in which they are embedded as *explananda* and coupled with justificatory sequences.¹³ I will now turn to the issue of how the idea that these narratives are constructed by the historian works together with the idea of non-standardised description to create a blind spot regarding any limits to the process of redescription.¹⁴ It is thought that if the historian produces truths which could not have been known at a specific point in time then there is little for which to be answerable to the knowledge and conceptual architecture forming part of that point in time. This, I submit, contradicts a central logical requirement.

As already noted, Roth defines the essential features of narrative explanations as involving the following: First, the *non-detachability* of ‘narrative sentence’ and justification from the narrative account, second, the *non-aggregativity* of different narratives into a unitary account, and, third, what he calls, the *non-standardization* of descriptions and narratives. ‘Non-standardisation’ is explicated as the idea that “[n]othing answers to normal history, because there exists no theory that normalizes

¹³ This derives from Danto whose “argument depends on bringing out with maximum forcefulness the point that there are many descriptions of an event, and no standard or complete description.” (Mink, 1968: 690)

¹⁴ Once again, this derives from Danto and his ideas that “no *a priori* limit may be set to the number of different narrative sentences, each of which truly describes *E*” (1962:167), that there is “no end to the number of temporal structures in which the historians of the future might see *E* as located” (idem.: 177) and that “as time passes, we find it more and more necessary to add fresh descriptions.” (ibid.: 178)

historical events” (2018a: 15) and as there being no “settled theoretical ‘recipe’ in historiography regarding how facts should or could be put together to make an event and which events they make.” (2017b: 44). ‘Non-standardisation’ is basic among the above three features: a lack of theoretical standards of description (in contrast, let it be noted, to what is thought to be the case for the natural sciences) implies a variety of explananda which are introduced by, and can be taken as non-detachable parts of, a varied range of narratives. In turn, both ‘non-standardisation’ and ‘non-detachability’ are thought to imply the ‘non-aggregativity’ of those narratives.

‘Non-aggregativity’ may be briefly illustrated by considering how an account of WWII as a prelude to the Cold War would be different to an account of WWII as the final instalment in a series of Great Wars. By occupying a particular position within the sequence of events the different justifications provided would presumably resist subsumption under a single narrative. The simplest way to think of this is as WWII discussed under different explanatory purposes.¹⁵ Perhaps, though, this way of putting it is too simple: if that were all that is intended there would not be much to take issue with or, for that matter, to distance this view from that of someone like Collingwood, for instance, whose logic of question and answer would happily accept the relativity of explanatory purpose under the posing of different questions. There are, however, much stronger reasons offered for ‘non-aggregativity’, evinced in the fact that, conversely speaking, aggregating narratives is only thought to work given *per impossibile* the detachability of descriptions from narratives or, alternatively, theoretical standardisation, in which case there is still ‘non-detachability’ (as per a version of the Duhem-Quine thesis) but its disorderly effects are ruled out by singularity.

Once again, then, we stumble on the notion of ‘non-standardisation’. Let us examine it together with the implication embedded within it as to the divergence between science and history. The ideas here originate with Mink who argued against ‘standardization’ in the following way:

[A] scientific account of an event *determines* a standard description of the event, by counting, say, statements of the mass and velocity of a moving body as relevant descriptions, and statements about its color or the states of mind of people watching as irrelevant. History, on the other hand, reports how descriptions change over time [...] Thus there can be [...] no science of history, that is, a complete description of events which includes or subsumes all possible descriptions. (Mink, 1968: 690-1)

The thesis re-appears in Roth in the following way, which we can now appreciate as recapitulating the three characteristics of narrative explanations:

Because there exists no standardized way of demarcating either event types—e.g. revolutions—or specific historical events—e.g. the American Civil War—these become non-detachable from histories that discuss them. No prior theories function to “standardize” such events, and neither do they constitute natural kinds. Thus, historical events “exist” only as part of some narrative or other. (2017a: 401)

¹⁵ See also Turner (2018) in relation to Weber’s distinction between meaning and causal adequacy and further assessment of the possibility of detachment and aggregation of descriptions vs. causes.

In this radical constructionism of events, coupled with a profusion of narratives to which one may insert what is thought to be as of yet undescribed, "the flux of experience" as Roth tellingly refers to it (2020: 63), there is no sense of any limits in terms of the retrospective packaging under new descriptions of events calling for an explanation.¹⁶ Whilst it would, of course, be foolish to deny a role for the explanatory purposes, hindsight, or even creativity of the historian, for instance, at the level of descriptions of sets of events —e.g. designating or 'colligating' (Walsh, 1942) a large set of actions as 'the Holocaust'— it is imperative to acknowledge that this is in effect a repackaging of units that are already conceptually packaged as the actions, intentions, knowledge, understanding, experience, among others, of historical agents.

In fact, one can extract as much from Mink's observations on the change descriptions undergo and how historical accounts track such changes, which implies at least some measure of answerability of historical inquiry to the actual forms of description that characterise a particular period. This fact also follows from two ideas Roth assents to: firstly, Hacking's point that a change in the stock of available descriptions results in a change in the kinds of events possible and, secondly, Kuhn's arguments on capturing "the historical integrity of [a] science in its own time" (cited in Roth, 2020: 102, cf.64) which requires that "[t]hough a given sample of activity can be referred to under many descriptions, only those cast in this vocabulary of disciplinary characteristics permit its identification as, say, science" (cited in idem: 110).

Hence, Roth's conclusion in the quotation above as to the narrative-dependent existence of historical events does not follow as straightforwardly as one might imagine. While there is indeed no preformulated Universal History but, instead, many possible descriptions and attending narratives that historians may construct, historians are not quite dealing with 'the unconstituted' and thus do not have a free hand: neither their descriptions nor their narratives are all conceptually on a par. In other words, there is such a thing as inaccuracy, relative to standards, including in relation to forms of describing which are not created by historians and are essential to a sense of actions and events at a particular time. It is to the complex issue of the accuracy of descriptions that I now turn.

5. Conceptual accuracy, justice and 'narrative sentences'

To arrive at the question of conceptual accuracy, which forms the central focus of this article, it is instructive to pause along the way to appreciate the different kinds of descriptions and some of the potential dangers they harbour¹⁷ by considering Mink's

¹⁶ The idea of many descriptions of an event, of "historical events, on this view, exist[ing] only under a description" (2017b: 47) to use Roth's phrase alluding to Anscombe's way of putting it (1967), as Sharrock and Leudar (2003) noted in their exchange with Roth (2002), involves possible misuse of Anscombe's concerns which had to do with alternative correct identifications of actions. As such, she is silent on the issue of correctness not because she considers it unimportant but because she presupposes it. Further, it is worth noting that when Anscombe discusses a series of 'redescriptions' she has in mind a specific logical series where each next description encompasses the previous ones (cf. Turner, 2011: 232).

¹⁷ It is worth acknowledging that there are many kinds of inaccuracy, indeed as numerous as the various ways descriptions may fall short of accuracy. While it is beyond the scope of this article to catalogue such kinds the interested reader might wish to consult a classic account offered by Ibn Khaldun in the Introduction to the *Muqaddimah* (1958).

sensitive classification, comprising five categories (1968: 691). Mink begins with the idea of staying with what the times under investigation could afford and distinguishes between, **(1)** actual contemporary descriptions based on records and recovered accounts and **(2)** possible contemporary descriptions, that is, ways of reconstructing what took place by bearing in mind what could have been known or understood and the conceptual forms in which it could have been expressed. Both categories exhibit the type of accuracy in question. He then moves on to descriptive kinds which depart from what was available at the time, though in interestingly different ways. First, there is a type corresponding closely to ‘narrative sentences’, that is, **(3)** descriptions only retrospectively available due to later knowledge of how things turned out. Mink distinguishes ‘narrative sentences’ from **(4)** descriptions that depend on the progress of technology and scientific understanding, for example, of how nature or the human body work. One example Mink uses is that of drawing on the latter in order to establish that the cause of death of Richard II of England (1367-1400) was, in fact, coronary embolism. Naturally, this is an accurate description of a perfectly good thing to know, on the condition, however, that it does not purport to report on medical techniques or on the understanding of the body current at the time (cf. Hartnell, 2018); this is exactly what limits its usefulness as historical knowledge, roughly speaking, to the history of disease rather than, for instance, the history of medicine, to human beings as biological organisms rather than knowers.

Turning to ‘narrative sentences’ and having raised in a previous section the issue of their insensitivity to actors’ intentions together with their role in a truncated notion of historical significance as retrospective impact, we are in a position to further investigate how they may fall wide of the mark by leading to inaccurate and potentially unjust attributions.

Consider a fairly recent example in European politics: the election of a left-wing government in Greece in January 2015 and the events that led in July of the same year to an imposition of capital controls and a referendum on a plan of fiscal reforms dictated by the infamous ‘troika’ of EC, ECB and IMF. While it is arguably a task for historians of the future to construct a narrative of, for instance, the course of government actions *given what happened in July*, another equally defensible task, one that has the benefit of distancing historians from, e.g., political opponents who might wish to discredit the government’s ways of handling negotiations in light of what transpired (or, were the outcome different, from supporters who would wish to heap praise on it), is precisely to describe the developing understanding that formed part of each stage of negotiations, during which at least conceivably different outcomes were still possible. It would be in some measure unjust, in a sense historians ought to take into account,¹⁸ not to do so and,

¹⁸ Dray, for instance, notes that concepts of cause used in history “require also what might be called ‘respect’ for past human agents: a consideration of them in their full capacity as moral beings” and cites Hexter as raising the correlative issue of justice “as a general obligation laid upon the historian” (Dray, 1980: 134), with reference to a phrase by Mattingly: “to the living to do justice, however belatedly, should matter” (cited in Hexter, 1971: 287). Hexter himself ends his *The History Primer* with an exhortation tying history to the exercise of “the capacity [...] to judge men justly and rightly, and to understand men humanly and humanely. Not to cherish those gifts is to deny to other men their humanity and thereby to abase and destroy our own” (1971: 398). If the “decision on how to write history will represent a moral choice on the part of the historian” (Roth 2020: 142) then Hexter’s concern with justice is central indeed. Historical figures cannot return in order to demand justice —except in the form of theatrical characters, as in Tamsin Clarke’s play *Manuelita*, in which Manuelita Saenz (1795-1856) bids to be understood not only as Simón Bolívar’s lover

instead, to describe the actions of government officials, say, during February, as inexorably leading to what took place several months down the line.

Switching to one of Roth's examples, when historian of the Holocaust Raul Hilberg writes that "[w]hen in the early days of 1933 the first [German] civil servant wrote the first definition of 'non-Aryan' into a civil service ordinance, the fate of European Jewry was sealed" (cited in Roth 2017b: 46), this statement glosses over a considerable number of contingencies, for example, around the handling of German aggressiveness by allies, the outcome of various military events, which historians might wish to detail and take into account in describing and evaluating events in the early 1930s. In this case too it would be a matter of injustice if one were to describe the actions of that civil servant by ascribing to them some sense of, or even further, holding them accountable for what, at the time, was only a contingency. What that civil servant did, undoubtably forms part of, but is not accurately "reworded as the sentence that "The Holocaust began in 1933"" (Roth, 2020: 141). In other words, the latter narrative sentence, much like one applying to the previous example, that "January 2015 in Greece was the beginning of the road towards the imposition of capital controls" constitute potential misdescriptions of the actions during that particular period and the understanding that informed them.

What these examples show is not, of course, that such sentences should be purged from the writing of history but rather that if we follow Roth in taking 'narrative sentences' as encapsulating the central tasks of historiography we end up with, what Skinner has dubbed as, "a mythology of prolepsis" (1969: 22-4) or, alternatively, to allude to Butterfield's essay, a certain type of 'Whig interpretation of history'.

It may be objected that the label is inappropriate because there is nothing necessarily presentist or congratulatory about 'narrative sentences': Roth's arguments have cast historians as interested not in the glorification of the present but in how later past events cast their shadow on previous ones and are, in turn, explained by them. In other words, 'narrative sentences' presuppose a centre of relevance at the end of a chosen sequence of events, regardless of when those took place or whether they are evaluated as desirable. That is where the *explanandum* lies, dictating a selection of events which are to be described in relation to it. The objection might continue by pointing out, in unison with the argument about truth in *Section 3*, that the relation is logical, not causal. Thus understood, Hilberg's claim as to the fate of Jews does not amount to the assertion that the Holocaust was already inevitable in 1933. Finally, and most importantly, the 'centre of relevance' idea makes plain what our explanatory goals are so that any complaint that we have been unjust to actors living in 1933 can be brushed off by insisting on those goals: the point is not to explain what was understood or intended in 1933 but rather what kinds of events ended up, no doubt through twists and turns —yes, 1933 turned out to be a landmark year but it could have been otherwise— playing a part in what came to be the Holocaust even in spite of what was understood or intended.

That this defence must fail to deflect the charge can be seen by noticing, for example, with Burrow (2009: xiii, 474), that just by picking a 'terminus' to be explained

but as a revolutionary in her own right. Barring such extraordinary circumstances, it is up to historians to administer justice.

by previous events there is something inherently Whiggish in narratives. It might not be a case of presentism but a dominance of the later event or of later consequences which can, of course, collapse into presentism. And this is exactly the truncated sense of historical significance that we have seen Roth borrow from Danto, which tends to drive out of historiography questions of justice done to historical actors and their understanding, and with the latter, that of the accuracy of descriptions.

I would like to press the issue further by moving to consider the stronger sense of descriptive inaccuracy forming the central preoccupation of this article, namely, that arising from the retrospective application of later conceptual forms. This is the point at which Mink's classification diverges from Roth's ideas. For Mink, 'narrative sentences' are thought of as departing from the knowledge available to actors but not from the available forms of description; unless, that is, a society in question is thought to lack any understanding of narrative, which therefore would preclude its use or comprehension of such sentences. Yet, when we arrive at Roth's discussion of 'narrative sentences' not all examples he has in mind respect this. For instance, with reference to Fernand Braudel's work, Roth identifies as a narrative sentence¹⁹ how there came to be a global Mediterranean in the 16th century, where 'the Mediterranean' is understood as an 'underlying reality' (Roth, 2017b: 46). As one of the chief representatives of the *Annales* School, Braudel is committed to producing a history that takes strongly after social science. This involves not only making use of its methods and alleged team-based research organisation, but also postulating temporal units and patterns such as *conjunctures* (mid-term) and *structures* (long-term)²⁰ which, as Hexter puts it, "escape the consciousness of those who live in and have to learn to live with them" (1972: 96). As a matter of programmatics, if not always practice, then, Braudel is dismissive of actions, events and people as persons, preferring to personify peninsulas, towns, the 16th century and the Mediterranean (Hexter, 1972: 116-7). A cursory glance at Braudel's later work (1977: 81) confirms that 'the Mediterranean' is understood as a 'world-economy' (*Weltwirtschaft*) or 'world unto itself' and thought to possess the following characteristics: a) Stable limits in geographical space, b) at most one dominant city for extended periods of time, and c) an organisation into successive zones (central, intermediate, peripheral). Through the postulation of the 'world-economy' as a long-term underlying reality on Braudel's part there is a departure, at least to a certain extent, from the conceptual forms involved in the specifics of social life of any particular period.

Thus, what Roth is proposing lies closer to Mink's fifth, and for our purposes most interesting, category of descriptions, namely **(5)** asymmetric descriptions which are possible only due to later conceptual forms. Mink offers as an example the sentence "the unpropertied citizens of Rome constituted the first urban proletariat" (1968: 691) and notes that this category of description evades Danto's attention. The same could be said about Roth, who in including it in his understanding of 'narrative sentences' approvingly alludes to this example as not only made possible by, but as reinforcing the 'non-standardization' thesis: it is thought to constitute "a further principled barrier to any hope of normalizing descriptions of historical events" (2020: 10) and, thus, to

¹⁹ Perhaps somewhat paradoxically given the *Annales* School programme that "narrative was [to be] superseded by the analysis of structures and mentalities." (Burrow, 2009: 483)

²⁰ See Burke (1990) for a Glossary on the *Annales* School.

reaffirm the distance between history and normal science while, once again, this brushes aside the issue of accuracy and the fact that the historian might need to exercise conceptual sensitivity.

Let us examine the example offered at some length. The phrase ‘urban proletariat’ is also used by Scullard in his classic textbook when he turns to describe the various classes in the late Roman Republic (2011 [1959]: 149-154). Very briefly, the *proletarii* (‘proles’ (= offspring) of citizens)²¹ of Ancient Rome, from which the later term ‘proletariat’ originates, were a property-less group who were catalogued in the census by nothing other than their own ‘heads’; they were *capite censi*. Furthermore, not being able to afford to equip themselves with any arms they did not form part of either the cavalry or infantry classes, at least until things changed when Marius made it part of the state’s business to furnish the property-less with weapons so they could fight —Weber notes the date as 104 BCE (1976: 321). Now, given the existence of the *proletarii* the choice of ‘urban proletariat’ as a conceptually asymmetric term is a potentially confusing one. Nevertheless, one may suppose that Mink’s point is not about the use of an ancient term but, given that it was repurposed, possibly as late as the 19th century, about the later concept, and its retrospective application.²²

It is worth saying outright that it is indeed possible to apply the concept retrospectively. We can, further, see what is being said by calling the unpropertied of Ancient Rome a proletariat, as Marx and Engels do in *The German Ideology* while treating Rome under the so-called ancient form of property. The issue is not whether it can be done or not but whether it is a particularly nuanced thing to do or something to be consistently engaged in given the aims of historiography.²³ In fact, I would like to argue, it is not a procedure that can stand on its own feet; unless it follows from and is checked by an accurate description of the class system in Ancient Rome, it ends up undermining it.²⁴

Let us delve into the matter a little deeper. It should hardly need pointing out that the notion of the proletariat in Marxism is part of a two-class scheme whose categories are interdefined in opposition of interest and distinguished based on the ownership or not of the means of production. To apply the full-fledged concept of the proletariat, then, given interdefinition, one would have to apply that of the bourgeoisie too. The key question is in what sense it makes sense to do this. Within Marxism the question might revolve around the role of the means of production in the context of an agrarian-military society compared to that of an industrial-technological society, in which they are constantly revolutionised. Now, it might be said that the differences

²¹ Weber (1976: 291) notes: “Those who owned no land are called *proletarii*, which of course does not mean ‘producers of children’ but rather people who belong to the offspring (*proles*) of a full citizen and only because of this lineage count as citizens.”

²² In connection with the difference between terms and concepts, it is worth noting that Roth (2020: 60-1) discusses what he considers as the justified retrospective ascription of the concept of inertial mass to Galileo (Prudovsky, 1997). But the point ends up being about the ascription of an anachronistic verbal form, not an ‘anachronistic concept’ (Roth, 2020: 60), given that the concept is constructed from Galileo’s reasoning!

²³ It ought to be stressed, then, in relation to how the previous discussion of truth relates to the argument put forth in this section, that the latter neither presupposes nor requires any notion of absolute truth or absolutely accurate descriptions.

²⁴ It might also be interesting to add, in relation to Marxism, that its categories may be involved in feedback mechanisms (e.g. as Hacking’s ‘looping kinds’) after they became part of the culture. Concerning the pre-Marxist past, however, such feedback mechanisms cannot, by definition, play a part.

should not prove particularly troublesome, that with a little bit of persuasion we can accept that ownership of the means of production is bound to be important even without precipitous technological development and that we can understand as the bourgeoisie the propertied classes or, perhaps, the more specifically business-orientated classes in Rome, such as the knights of the equestrian order. Yet depending on what period we have in mind there are a multitude of divisions, even within the order of the knights (Scullard, 2011 [1959]: 367-8), besides the many other census ranks of the Centuriate Assembly (*comitia centuriata*) that voted on legislative and judicial matters. Moreover, even if we collapse the census ranks into a two-class system there are persisting questions as to the impact of numerous other divisions, institutions and relations in the structure of Ancient Roman Society: that between patricians and plebeians based on ancestry, the particularly extensive role of slavery, the patron-client relationship within the institution of clientship (*clientela*), the distribution of occupations²⁵ and, finally, the distinction between private property and property as a share in what is owned by the community (Weber, 1976: 275).²⁶ It is such considerations that led Weber, who specifically considered the problem of retrospective application of medieval or modern economic categories²⁷ to Antiquity in his essay 'Economic Theory and Ancient Society', to argue that, especially on account of the existence of slavery, "[t]he modern proletariat as a class did not exist in Antiquity" (1976: 43).²⁸ More generally, Weber pointed out that comparisons across ages are untrustworthy and that going after similarities by using common forms of description can be highly misleading.²⁹ Otherwise put, the *proletarii* of Ancient Rome and the proletariat of modern industrial societies could hardly unite under a single cause any more than Byron, Confucius and Sophocles could join one another at a poetry event, as per Voltaire's wish (Berlin, 1988 : 8)

²⁵ "[A]side from politics and the law, the Army or farming, there were few approved professions for Roman gentlemen. If a senator, for example, wanted to make money in a business venture, he had to employ an agent to take care of all the details and management. Major commercial ventures, including finance and insurance, were in the hands of the equestrian, or knightly, order. Shopkeeping and the crafts were left to the lower classes." (Hadas et al., 1965: 83)

²⁶ Weber also notes the difference between the distinction of *adsidui* and *proletarii* and that of *tribules* and *aerarii*: "The tribules were the tribe members who were subject to conscription, while aerarii were those who had wealth but not land, and did not render military service but did pay taxes. These two pairs are not equivalents. A proletarius was a citizen who for the moment did not have wealth, in particular landed wealth, equal to the hoplite census, but might acquire it at any time. An aerarius was a citizen who, regardless of how much wealth he might have, was not accorded hoplite status;" (1976: 291)

²⁷As such may be designated both categories formulated during those periods as well as categories designed to apply to those periods, regardless of when they were put together. The aspiration to construct timeless economic categories is conceivable only in the latter sense. The distinction might help explain Weber's seeming inconsistency regarding the category of 'capitalist economy' (see below). It is also useful to compare von Mises on the difference between ideal-typical and praxeological versions of 'the entrepreneur' (1966: 30, 59-64, 251-255).

²⁸ As Weber explains: "The latter was a consumer proletariat, a mass of impoverished petty bourgeois, rather than, as today, a working class engaged in production." (1976: 42)

²⁹ But it is interesting to note that Weber is unwilling to "to limit needlessly the concept of capitalist economy to a single form of valorization of capital – the exploitation of other people's labour on a contractual basis – and thus to introduce social factors. Instead we should take into account only economic factors. Where we find that property is an object of trade and is utilized by individuals for profit-making enterprise in a market economy, there we have capitalism. If this be accepted, then it becomes perfectly clear that capitalism shaped whole periods of Antiquity, and indeed precisely those periods we call 'golden ages.'" (1976: 51)

The point I wish to stress is that the concept of slavery and those expressed by the above-mentioned lines of division are not dispensable or merely secondary features of the society; they are the concepts that enter into social life of the period and give it its distinctive identity. If these concepts are not preserved by the historian or social scientist in their descriptions then we might as well describe the entire history of the world as the history of one type of society. I do not mean to say that consideration of the identity of a historical period absolutely precludes the description of a class as an urban proletariat but, rather, that the specific character of the society as expressed in institutions and concepts is presupposed and, crucially, serves as a check on the applicability of any such description even at the level of a loose analogy —which, let it be noted, might be perfectly appropriate for some purposes, which may work themselves in various ways into the many different kinds of historical inquiry.

Yet, one could object that all we are dealing with is the simple question of the conditions for the application of the concept of the proletariat, which are arguably not fulfilled in this case, and not with any question of being faithful to any specific concepts.³⁰ Either there is a proletariat or there is not one and the rest is unimportant, the objection runs. I think that this tack cannot but fail. Firstly, the question is not empirical at all: it is not a matter of asking whether Rome built circuses or not, but rather closer to asking whether it built ziggurats. But, why use ‘ziggurats’ as a form of description even if just to mean ‘temple’ especially when a distinctive term might signal the different concept.³¹ Which brings me to the second point, namely that the underlying assumption in this objection and, more generally, in Roth’s reasoning is of the past as a conceptual *terra nullius*, when in fact the social life of any period is populated by those who lived through it and the conceptual forms through which their conduct took shape.

At this juncture it is instructive to return to Mink, who acknowledges part of this argument:

[...] there are the concepts which inform our understanding of past events, and there are the concepts which at least in part were constitutive of past actions, in the sense that they were necessarily involved in the agents’ understanding of what they were doing. We could not understand Greek civilization without the concept of *moira*, which is not part of our conceptual systems, nor without a concept of culture, which was not part of theirs. (1968: 693)

Interestingly and, to an extent, wisely enough, Mink offers a capacious conception. He refuses to adjudicate in an *a priori* manner between what he thinks as “the advantages either of redescribing past events in terms not conceptually available to contemporaries of those events, or of reconstructing past events in terms which would not be conceptually available to us save through historical inquiry itself.” (1968: 694) The practical realities of historical inquiry seem to him to suggest, and require, a more

³⁰ This point was raised by various participants at ENPOSS 2019.

³¹ Danto considers the issue of what is involved in reasoning based on what can be unpacked from a description of, e.g. a past figure as an artist, leading the life of an artist, etc. and considers this as a kind conceptual evidence (1965: 122) perceiving correctly that “were our only evidence of this sort, all written history would indeed be ‘present history’” (ibid.: 126) exactly because “the application of a narrative based upon conceptual evidence presupposes [...] constancy of institutions and practices” (idem: 125), in other words, of what an artist does and what it means to be an artist.”

measured stance. Thus, Mink argues that while there are monogamous approaches to history aligning with the exclusive advantages of either side, namely, a history which is resolutely social-scientific as, for instance, per the aspirations of the *Annales* School, and, on the other, a humanistic history associated, for example, with Collingwood's thought, in actual fact most historians are, what he calls, 'polygamists' (1968: 693; cf. Berlin, 1974: 356).³² The benefit of the idea of historians as 'polygamists' is that it allows for a multiplicity of aims and forms, e.g., those Burrow (2009) records, and it also makes allowances for both horns of the related 'rank-or-file dilemma', i.e., that of treating events either next to each other or after each other (*nacheinander* or *nebeneinander* as Spengler puts it) (Hexter 1961: 2), signalling the perhaps inevitable existence of 'history-minded' and 'present-minded' historians (idem: 1961: 1), of synchronic and diachronic description (cf. Foucault, 1972).

Yet, as the example of Ancient Rome illustrates, the idea of polygamy papers over an important logical point which includes but goes beyond the idea of doing justice to intentional action or the self-understanding of any agent. In fact, it is important to note that describing the issue as that of agential self-understanding can be misleading if taken as pitting the historian against a particular mind, for example, Cicero and his grasp of his own actions or his overall knowledge of Rome. Moreover, by following this way of thinking the historian can easily conjure up a duty to distance themselves from the historical agent on account of her partiality or idiosyncrasies. However, the issue is really not about any individual but about the self-understanding of a society as expressed in its concepts, from which there is no duty whatsoever to take any distance. Indeed, unless a society is understood through the concepts informing its institutions, divisions and overall practices, one cannot even claim to understand that particular society. This does not mean that there is absolutely no room for redescription, but that any such redescription is logically secondary (cf. Mink, 1978: 140) and that in many, though by no means all, cases of historical inquiry, the mere fact of raising as a topic a particular society or period, means that historians are *ipso facto* wedded to those constitutive concepts.³³

Thus, rather than portray the situation as one of two marriages with two spouses, a logically more appropriate analogy is that of a marriage and an extra-marital affair, in which case unless one is married they cannot really have any extra-marital affairs. Similarly, unless those constitutive, identity-conferring features are in place, no redescription that is in any sense relevant is conceivable, nor are there any criteria in place to gauge the accuracy of that redescription. The validity of this point is not damaged in the slightest by the fact that for various reasons it may not be observed in practice, given a number of impulses that push history and (especially) the social sciences in the direction of adultery and lead some to entertain the illusion that they might pursue such affairs not only out of but even without first entering into wedlock.

In sum, conceptual accuracy contrasts with the conceptual anachronism exhibited in asymmetric descriptions of the past, including those that constitute

³² Given Weber's 'inconsistencies' in not wishing to limit the concept of capitalism (see footnote above) the idea of using of a multitude of forms seems to apply to sociologists too. For a very different sense of historians as using a plurality of *causal models* see Dray (1980: Ch. IV).

³³ I am not, thus, ruling out the innocuous idea that more can be truthfully said than anyone is aware of but, rather, the idea that redescriptions can be self-standing and at the same time pass as history (of the requisite kind).

'narrative sentences', and depends on the recognition of the logically fundamental role of conceptual categories that are endogenous to the society under investigation. Accordingly, it exhibits itself in the various forms of responsiveness and sensitivity to such categories.³⁴ It is best thought of as a form of accuracy because it relates descriptions and assesses their faithfulness to the understanding that is embodied in the social practices under investigation and expressed in attending linguistic forms.

6. Conclusion

It is not novel to emphasise the importance of sensitivity to concepts and ideas. So-called idealist³⁵ or humanist versions of history and interpretative or interactionist conceptions of sociology have certainly done so in the past. Even further, their recommendations have found expression in sub-fields such as the history of ideas, the history of science or cultural history, and, in the case of sociology, in interactionism or ethnomethodology. 'What of it', one might protest, 'is it not the case that for each one of these approaches there is another which follows rather different methodological directives?' If what I have argued in this article is correct, then this picture of capacious polygamy is the result of a deep misunderstanding. Peter Winch (1958)³⁶ put his finger on it in demonstrating that concepts and social practices are two aspects of the same thing, i.e., that conceptual forms and modes of life are interdefined and, therefore, that there is no discounting concepts without at the same time discounting the social life under investigation. This renders the point logical and general, that is, beyond any disciplinary sub-field, embedding it, instead, in the very idea of sociology or history: take away the constitutive conceptual forms and there is nothing that survives. The historical expanse is rendered docile but also barren.

It follows then that whilst there might be no scientific theory that standardises descriptions, the conceptualised is not, *pace* the widely prevalent conception Roth exemplifies, only what has been retrospectively theorised or narrativized. There are, instead, endogenous conceptual modes which rather than be considered as absolutely elusive, for instance, through an argument against 'meaning realism' (Roth, 1987),

³⁴ For example, conceptual accuracy might involve investigating the sense of expressions, such as 'proletarians' and '*proletarii*', which, although superficially similar, are used in conceptually different ways and are embedded within different sets of social practices, taking note of the discontinuities. Furthermore, to be conceptually accurate, one might adopt characteristic expressions that wear their historical context on their sleeve, such as *ziggurat*, *moira* or *clientela*. But this is not the only way to go. One might as well opt for elaborate recounting, for example, of various ways of acting and reacting, by making use of terms which apply equally to our conduct and to that of the people under discussion. Such would be a form of conceptual accuracy no less.

³⁵ Dray's observations are instructive: "The importance in history of explanations given from the agent's standpoint gives some point to well-known idealist dicta like 'All history is contemporary history', and 'All history is the history of thought'. Such slogans are exaggerated and paradoxical, but they do register an awareness that the problems of historical agents have to be faced by the reader and the investigator if they are to understand what was done." (1959: 140)

³⁶ Although I have not discussed the social sciences at any length it does not take much to see their proximity to history. The inclusion of Weber in the above is strategic. Turner, for one, attributes to him the thought that "the object of history is the same as the object of sociology [...] actions and their connections" (2011: 236), perhaps unsurprisingly given the range of 19th century German thinkers who took history as an exemplar of the *Geisteswissenschaften*. The relationship becomes closer via Turner's helpful connecting of Weber to Collingwood whose central ideas, in turn, received a Wittgensteinian elaboration by Winch. Winch's ideas of concepts and social relations as two aspects of the same thing are also taken up by Taylor (1971).

actually can and need to be accurately identified. Precisely because some of these forms will inevitably be alien to us, there is a sense in which historiography ceases to be historiography when it does not seek to understand them. Yet, there is no reason to conceive of these forms under the 'cult of systematicity' as forming water-tight or utterly alien conceptual schemes (Toulmin, 1972), or cultural wholes whose every element is expressive of a central idea (Gombrich, 1989). To conceive of ancient proletarians as having coal-blackened faces or wearing blaxploitation outfits is a self-standing mistake, as is, conversely, not to resort to such forms in relation to the Industrial revolution and 1970s U.S. culture, irrespectively of issues as to how representative of the period they may be taken to be.

To use Hacking's language, which Roth also adopts, while conceptual forms may not have "the robustness possessed by some indifferent kinds" (Roth, 2020: 44), if indeed it is 'interactive and intentional kinds' that characterise 'the past', this is exactly what renders them inextricably involved in historiography's subject matter. Such kinds encompass much more than the alternative individuations of events or colligatory groupings; much more than the issue of "what *counts* as an event" (Mink, 1966: 47) or even what counts as an action with a 'thought-side' (Dray, 1959: 9). They have to do with every aspect of "the activities of men and women" (Dray, 1980: 44) within societies past and present. Precisely because they are not natural kinds, to proceed to alter them is not to talk about a past which has now changed but to talk about something else while using the past as an excuse to do so. The price for history and the social sciences to pay for such instrumental use that relinquishes descriptive accuracy is no less than that of injustice and irrelevance.

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