

Narrative and the Basis of Historical Truth

My aim is to defend the *pragmatic view of historical truth*: narratives are objects of truth-functional assessments and are true when and because they continuously pass assessment based on critical consensus-building standards of inquiry within the practice of history.

1) White's tropological view

"To emplot real events as a story of a specific kind (or as a mixture of stories of a specific kind) is to trope these events...Stories are told or written, not found...*All* stories are fictions which means, of course, that they can be 'true' in a metaphorical sense and in the sense in which any figure of speech can be true."¹

Objections to White's view:

1. Presenting information in a conventionally structured discursive form does not imply that the construction lacks representational content.² E.g., documentary footage.
2. White assumes an atomistic correspondence view of truth, where each sentence must correspond to some particular happening, such that the conjunction of all such sentences is true.³
3. White's account makes a standard form of critical exchange in history incoherent, namely, criticizing prior accounts on the basis of their incompatibility with evidence

Historical narratives have representational content and critically examining that content is a standard part of the practice of history.

2) Skepticism about Narratives

Another extreme position about narratives sees them as unscientific and subjective in a way that frustrates history's search for truth.⁴

Danto's Ideal Chronicler argument against narrative skepticism:

- "imagine a description which really is a full description, which tells everything and is perfectly isomorphic with an event" which will be written by the Ideal Chronicler, who "knows whatever happens the moment it happens, even in other minds," and "is also to have the gift of instantaneous transcription," writing down everything "as it happens, the *way* it happens."⁵
- The Ideal Chronicle will systematically exclude some of the most informative kinds of statements made in histories, what Danto calls "narrative sentences," which refer to later times to described earlier events, e.g., "The Thirty Years War began in 1618."
- A further problem: just how much of *everything* is being written down in the Chronicle?

Narratives selectively focus our attention so as to make change at a greater temporal scale intelligible to our experience.⁶

¹ "Figuring the Nature of Times Deceased," p. 27, emphasis original.

² Carroll, "Interpretation, History, and Narrative;" McCullagh, "The Truth of Historical Narrative;" Norman, "Telling it Like it Was."

³ Carroll; Passmore, "Narratives and Events;" Louch, "History as Narrative." C.f., Larmore, "History and Truth."

⁴ E.g., Hempel, "The Function of General Laws in History;" *Annales* school thinkers, discussed in White, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory;" Mandelbaum, "A Note on History as Narrative."

⁵ Danto, *Narration and Knowledge*, pp. 148-9, emphasis original.

⁶ C.f., Velleman, "Narrative and Explanation;" Louch.

3) Pragmatic Historical Truth

While defenders of narrative as a means to (non-literary) truth haven't given an account of truth, much of what they say in the course of their defense lends itself to pragmatism:

- Rejection of correspondence theories of truth
- A view of specialized knowledge as an extension of ordinary knowledge refined through the social epistemic process of communal inquiry.⁷
- The process of refining knowledge is a continuous, communal one.⁸
- The course of inquiry is question relative, such that different observers with the same evidence may perceive different relevant relationships without error.⁹

Two core ideas of the pragmatic account of historical truth:

- A) historical narratives are objects of truth-functional assessment based on critical consensus-building standards
 - a. Truth value of narratives is holistic, it depends on general views of human behavior and societies that organize the construction of the narrative
 - b. Critical standards call for justification to be satisfied
- B) narratives are deemed true when they continuously pass assessment on the basis of those standards.
 - a. a product of passing (or failing) assessment is the accumulation of reasons that weigh in favor of the truth of a given account
 - i. When all doubts and considerations have been covered, we reach the end of inquiry, where truth values are final.

4) Truth within the Practice of Historical Inquiry

Objection: Aren't there truths that we can't know about?

Reply:

- A) Pragmatism rejects bivalence of truth values; bivalence is only a regulative assumption of inquiry.¹⁰
- B) Truth should matter for interpersonal epistemic accountability in communities of inquiry
 - a. “[i]f there once happened an event concerning which no shred of evidence now survives, that event is not part of any historian’s universe; it is no historian’s business to discover it; it is no gap in any historian’s knowledge that he does not know it”¹¹
 - b. Persons cannot hold one another epistemically accountable to discover truths of which they have no evidence.

Is there something special about historical truth? I think so: historical inquiry constitutively has a dual interpretive structure.

⁷ McCullagh page 33; c.f. Norman p. 135.

⁸ Louch p. 58.

⁹ Carrol, p. 153.

¹⁰ Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality*, pp. 67-73; Misak, *Truth and the End of Inquiry*, ch. 4.

¹¹ Collingwood, “The Limits of Historical Knowledge,” p. 219