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The Exemplification Theory of History: Narrativist Philosophy and the Autonomy of History

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Abstract

The “exemplification theory of history” is proposed to account for the relationship between the past and historical narratives. The theory states that what belongs to the past according to some narrative does so in order to exemplify the historical thesis of that narrative. As such the theory explains how the past receives its meaning. This implies that the past has no intrinsic historical meaning itself. Moreover, it follows that historical narratives possess an autonomy of their own with regard to the past. It is argued that the exemplification theory of history goes to the heart of narrativist philosophy of history. This claim is supported by the key arguments of three narrativist philosophers: Arthur Danto, Louis Mink and Frank Ankersmit. The distinction between the history of social individuals (“states”, “poverty”, “Thirty Years War”) and the identification of such individuals turns out to be fundamental in this respect. The article concludes by distinguishing between a Platonic and an Aristotelian view on narrative and by explaining why we ought to prefer the former to the latter.

Keywords

exemplification theory, autonomy, narrative, Danto, Mink, Ankersmit

In her excellent study *The Triumph of Pleasure. Louis XIV & the Politics of Spectacle*, Georgia J. Cowart sets herself the task “to reveal the forces that effectively transformed the celebration of the monarch into the utopian celebration of public entertainment as a new societal model”.¹ This new,

¹ G. Cowart, *The Triumph of Pleasure. Louis XIV & the Politics of Spectacle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2008), xv.

libertine societal model, emerging in the late seventeenth century, was based on the ideals of love, social harmony, equality, and freedom. If it would come into being, pleasure would triumph. On the painter Antoine Watteau she writes:

his *Pilgrimage to Cythera*, based directly on the imagery and ideology of two ballets produced at the Opéra and related works at the *théâtre de la foire*, may be seen as the most complete expression of an operatic, proto-Enlightenment vision of an alternative, utopian society.²

This meaning of Watteau's painting, painted in 1717–1718, goes beyond Watteau's intentions for obvious reasons. Watteau, as any other mortal, could not have foreseen the future, even if the Enlightenment was about to unfold right in front of him. He may have intended to express a vision of an alternative society; he may even have intended to *anticipate* what was about to come: that would make him in retrospect a visionary; but he could not have intended to anticipate what was *later* to be known as the Enlightenment. For only *after* the events we have learned to associate with the Enlightenment took place did it make sense to speak of a *proto*-Enlightenment. Similarly, philosophers living before Socrates could not have called themselves "Pre-Socratic philosophers". Those of us who are familiar with Arthur Danto's *Analytical Philosophy of History* will have other examples ready at hand.

Maybe we should ask Cowart to change her *language* and ask her to discuss the past in its own terms only (it self-evidently would make no sense in this context to ask her to re-consider her *research*). For should the historian not confine herself to making statements that contemporaries of the events could have made? All historians need to do – and this is a task difficult enough already – is to help establish a complete inventory of the past: a record of all that has happened in the past.

The idea of a complete inventory of the past is discussed by Danto. He calls it the Ideal Chronicle.³ It is a list of all events in the past in their chronological order, stating absolutely everything about it, including the experiences and observations of contemporaries. Such complete inventory would

² Cowart, *The Triumph of Pleasure*, xviii.

³ A.C. Danto, *Narration and Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 146–149. This book includes the integral text of *Analytical Philosophy of History*.

thus fulfil the dreams of Leopold von Ranke and the like and show the past in itself, *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. The Ideal Chronicle has, however, as Danto points out, one important and decisive shortcoming: it does not contain any information on the *later* events that some events can be connected with. After all, the Ideal Chronicle only contains descriptions of events that could have been made at the time of their occurrence. It follows that, first, the description of the state of affairs at $t-1$ as it is in itself – assuming there is such a thing – will always be incomplete since that state of affairs can always be re-described in terms of states of affairs later in time. Second, the re-description of the state of affairs at $t-1$ in terms of the state of affairs at $t-2$ requires *both* states of affairs to have occurred. Finally, such re-descriptions, Danto calls them *narrative sentences*, cannot be part of the inventory of the past made by the Ideal Chronicler. For the state of affairs at $t-1$ described by the Ideal Chronicler at $t-1$ cannot be described in terms of some state of affairs at $t-2$ since at $t-1$ the state of affairs at $t-2$ had not yet occurred. So Adrian Haddock misunderstood Danto when writing that descriptions of actions are narrative sentences that the Ideal Chronicler cannot make use of.⁴ “Jones was planting a rose” is *not* a narrative sentence: its truth only requires the first event (the planting) and *not* the second and later event (the seedling having grown into a rose) to have taken place. The sentence “Jones was planting a prize-winning rose”, on the other hand, *is* a narrative sentence, since both the second (winning the prize) and the first event (planting the rose) must have occurred for the sentence to be true.⁵

The inventory of the past contains all descriptions of a state of affairs that could be made at the time of its occurrence. Such descriptions, however, will not be *historical* descriptions. For to know the historical meaning or significance of an event, Danto argues, “It will be necessary to know *which* future events are relevant, and this requires predicting the *interests* of future historians.”⁶ Of course, past events had a meaning for those living through those events. But the historical meaning of past events is only for historians to see. The past has no intrinsic historical meaning.

So we should not ask Cowart to change her language: we should reflect on it. According to Frank Ankersmit, all that is relevant in the philosophy of history is to be found in the distinction between descriptions of the past as

⁴ A. Haddock, “Danto’s Dialectic”, *Philosophia* (2008), 483–493, there 489.

⁵ Danto, *Narration*, 164–165.

⁶ Danto, *Narration*, 169.

they can be found in the Ideal Chronicle and the retrospective understanding of the historian.⁷ The exemplification theory of history proposed here is a theory about that distinction.

According to the exemplification theory of history, the past has no intrinsic historical meaning. The past receives its meaning by *exemplifying* a general thesis about the past. Historical theses are sometimes described as offering “perspectives on the past” or as the “conclusions” reached by historians. The emergent proto-Enlightenment in the late seventeenth century, emphasizing, among other things, social harmony, equality, and the wish to participate in the pleasures and manners of what was then known as noble gallantry, is such historical thesis. The past states of affairs mentioned in Cowart’s narrative, Watteau’s painting for instance, can be said to *exemplify* this thesis. The past has no intrinsic historical meaning: it “only” has a meaning in terms of the historical thesis that it exemplifies. It follows that the historical narrative expressing such thesis is *autonomous* with regard to the past.

The exemplification theory and that of the autonomy of historical narrative will bring us to the heart of narrativist philosophy of history. Support for both (obviously closely related) theories will be found in the work of Danto, Mink, and Ankersmit. These three narrativist philosophers of history all emphasize the autonomy of historical narratives. Moreover, all the three of them use notions coming close to what I have called “exemplification”.⁸ Furthermore, the distinction between the *history* of parts of social reality (as expressed in a narrative) and the *identification* of those parts of social reality

⁷ F.R. Ankersmit, “Danto, History, And the Tragedy of Human Existence”, *History and Theory* 42, (2003), 291–304, there 298.

⁸ The concept “exemplification” is well known from Nelson Goodman’s philosophy of symbols. A tailor’s swatch functions as a sample and as such it exemplifies certain properties (Goodman, *Languages of Art. An Approach to A Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1976), 53). A swatch only exemplifies some of the properties it has. It will for example not exemplify a certain shape. This notion of exemplification is different from what I have in mind in the following respect. I will argue that aspects of the past exemplify certain properties *after* being *historically* understood. Watteau does not exemplify the proto-Enlightenment because he is a proto-Enlightenment painter (and thus can be attributed the property of being such a person). Only after being historically understood (i.e. in terms of later events he is connected with) does Watteau exemplify the proto-Enlightenment. Watteau thus only *in retrospect acquires* the property of being a proto-Enlightenment painter.

is basic to their philosophies of history. Finally, as Ankersmit argues, and this is supported by the analysis of Danto and Mink, the identification of some part of social reality is made possible by having the history of that part. Historicity precedes identification.

Narrativist philosophy of history as advocated by Danto, Mink, and Ankersmit, can be characterized as “Platonic”; its rival, the narrativist philosophy of authors such as Carr and Ricoeur, as “Aristotelian”. The Aristotelians deny the autonomy of historical understanding. This article concludes with giving some strong reasons why we should prefer the Platonic view on narrative to its Aristotelian competitor.

1. Danto: Social Change and the Making of History

When Danto discusses sentences stating a fact about the past, he distinguishes at some point between sentences referring to human beings, on the one hand, and, on the other, sentences referring to what he calls “social individuals” such as social classes, groups, large-scale events such as the Thirty Years War, and large-scale social movements such as the Reformation.⁹ No one in his right mind would deny that both statements referring to individual human beings and statements referring to social individuals are indispensable ingredients of historical narratives. However, the distinction does give rise to some important problems. One such problem is whether there really are such things as social individuals. If one denies that social individuals exist, one can still admit historical sentences on social individuals to be valuable or even indispensable for historical writing. For it might be argued that such statements simply state something about the individual human beings of which the social individual consists that cannot be stated by referring to those individual human beings individually. Apart from this problem, there is a second, more pressing one we should attend to. It is best addressed by taking into consideration Danto’s treatment of Wedgwood’s narrative of the Thirty Years War. Discussing this second problem will also provide us with an answer to the former.

The central issue discussed by Wedgwood that Danto draws our attention to is the change of the Thirty Years War from a primarily religious conflict into a political one. Danto first asks himself the question how in a

⁹ Danto, *Narration*, 258.

description of this change reference is made to individuals (we shall leave the question whether the Thirty Years War was changing itself or whether the change happened in or during the Thirty Years War unanswered for the moment). His answer to this question is important in the context of our present discussion. Danto first points out that when Wedgwood refers to individuals, she does so mainly to “*illustrate this change*” or “to provide evidence that a change has in fact taken place”. (There is of course a difference between illustrating and providing evidence, a difference I will attend to below. For now let us merely follow Danto’s own analysis.) After this initial observation, Danto goes on to argue that the mentioned individual human beings are selected for a special reason. They are not selected because of their intrinsic interest, but because of the *historical* significance that can be attributed to them. For they “make clear to us that a great change in attitude and behaviour of individuals in roughly the same social positions has taken place”.¹⁰ Here we begin to understand that the past has an *historical* meaning only in terms of the narrative that is written about it. The past states of affairs mentioned in some narrative are not mentioned because of their intrinsic interest; they are mentioned because of their illustrative use.

Danto’s analysis does not stop here. He furthermore points out that the change of the conflict from a primarily religious conflict to a political conflict was not something that was intended. No one knows in advance the significance of what one is doing or living through – though speculations can of course always be made. Moreover, the change “may not have been reproduced within the biography of any *single* individual who lived through the change”, for “the change took place, not in individuals, but in *society*”. Social changes are according to Danto not observable as such. Not because the past is by definition unobservable since it is no longer present (unless we would have a time machine), but because only the behaviour and attitude of individuals can be the proper object of observation.¹¹ Furthermore, and this is central to Danto’s philosophy of history as a whole, individuals cannot view their action from the perspective of the historian. Only when the present has become past is it possible for actions to acquire historical significance. It is up to the historian to find out what later events some action or other event is connected with:

¹⁰⁾ Danto, *Narration*, 262–263.

¹¹⁾ Danto, *Narration*, 263–264.

To ask for the significance of an event, in the *historical* sense of the term, is to ask a question which can be answered only in the context of a *story*. The identical event will have a different significance in accordance with the story in which it is located or, in other words, in accordance with what different sets of *later* events it may be connected.¹²

Finding out the historical significance of events is “the work of historians: history is made by them”.¹³ The historical meaning of an event depends on the narrative it is part of. This is the first step in understanding the proposition that events in narratives function as examples of the historical thesis expressed in that narrative. We may now also understand what narrativist philosophers of history have in mind with the autonomy of historical narratives: history is made by historians and not something that can be found in the past. It is the product of their retrospective understanding.

We may now come to the following somewhat surprising conclusion when combining Danto’s analysis of social change with his emphasis on the retrospective view of the historian: past states of affairs receive a historical meaning by illustrating a social change that as such cannot be found in the past itself. Thus Cowart uses individuals and their libertine behaviour and beliefs to illustrate what she calls the proto-Enlightenment vision of a utopian society. This proto-Enlightenment cannot be found in the past itself. Social changes do not take place in individuals but in society, as Danto contended. Now, we may still hold that societies are to be found in the past itself, but *their histories are not*. Only in retrospect does a past state of affair acquire historical significance. The historian’s hindsight is a *conditio sine qua non* of the writing of history. For only afterwards, when a period is over, is it possible to become aware of what defines that period *as* a period. This is the Hegelian gist of Danto’s narrativist philosophy of history.¹⁴

¹²) Danto, *Narration*, 11.

¹³) Danto, *Narration*, 284.

¹⁴) On this Hegelian gist in Danto, see also Ankersmit, “Danto, History”, 300–303. David Carr complains that Danto’s emphasis on the retrospective view of the historian downplays the role of the views of eyewitnesses and historical agents. D. Carr “Place and Time: On the Interplay of Historical Points of View”, *History and Theory* 40 (2001), 153–167, there 166. I do not think it does. The viewpoint of the agent and that of the historian differ radically, contrary to what Carr thinks. The agent views the reality that surrounds him. The historian aims to understand the history of past reality. The *history* of past reality is however not *part* of

The nineteenth century historicist may have argued that these social changes are inherent in the individuals who lived in the past themselves and that they should somehow be abstracted from all that we can say about them, as Wilhelm von Humboldt maintains.¹⁵ A feature of narrativist philosophy of history is to situate such abstractions on the level of the narrative instead of on that of past reality, as Ankersmit argues. Historical ideas or forms are part of the historian's language.¹⁶ The historicists were right that the nature of a thing lies in its history, as long as we do not identify history with the past but with its retrospective understanding as expressed in a narrative.

The double character of the notion of individuality¹⁷ in historicism – the notion applies to individual human beings and to individual states and nations – can still be attained. Of *both* it is true that their identity *is* their history, that is, to know the nature of some individuality, one has to understand that individuality historically. I emphasize this because Danto's claim that social change is a change in society as illustrated by the behaviour of individuals, suggests that individuals belong to the realm of reality while societies belong to the realm of narrative. But that is not what I (or Danto) have been arguing for. We must make a difference between aspects of social reality and the historical understanding of such aspects. The point is that we can only know what a certain aspect of social reality is (an individual human being, a state or nation, or a social condition such as poverty) if we understand it historically, and this historical understanding is typically expressed in a narrative.

At the start of our discussion I said that the question whether social individuals exist or not would be answered by Danto's analysis of social change in historical narratives. That discussion warrants the conclusion that social individuals exist as historical entities (e.g. the Thirty Years War, France, libertines), that is, as products of historical understanding. Of course, we

past reality. Therefore it could never have been part of the viewpoint of the historical agent. See also section 4 below.

¹⁵ W. von Humboldt, "On the Historian's Task", *History and Theory* 6 (1967), 55–71, there 65.

¹⁶ Ankersmit, "The Necessity of Historicism", *Journal of the Philosophy of History* (2010) 226–240, there 237. See also his *Narrative Logic. A semantic Analysis of the Historian's Language* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1983), 114.

¹⁷ J. Bos, "Individuality and interpretation in nineteenth-century German historicism", U. Feest ed., *Historical Perspectives on Erklären and Verstehen*, (Dordrecht: Springer Science + Business Media B.V., 2010), 207–220, there 209.

may still, apart from this, refer to social entities in the sense given to it above: as statements about individual human beings of which the social individual consists that cannot be stated by referring to those individual human beings individually. So individual human beings *and* social entities may be said to have existed in the past. Their history however does not.

Social change, the primary concern of most historians, is illustrated by individual human beings. The difference between referring to individuals, their behaviour and attitudes, to “illustrate” social change, and referring to individuals in order to “provide evidence” for social change, can now be made clear. If reference to individuals is made to illustrate social change, the history of an aspect of social reality is at stake, while if reference to individuals is made to provide evidence of social change, the identification of an aspect of social reality is at stake.

More needs to be said on this difference. It will be a central theme in the rest of this essay. For now the following distinctions suffice. If a state of affairs x illustrates a social change, then x is *understood historically* (in terms of the social change it illustrates). The state of affairs x is in this sense a *historical entity*: a product of historical understanding. If a state of affairs x is evidence for a social change, then x *justifies* the claim that the social change in fact took place. The state of affairs x is then an *identified aspect* of social reality. In terms of philosophical semantics we may say the following. A state of affairs x is a historical entity if it illustrates or exemplifies that change, whereas a state of affairs x is an aspect of social reality if it can be referred to by a statement that can be empirically justified. So the painting of Watteau is a proto-Enlightenment-painting because it illustrates the proto-Enlightenment. We may wonder whether the painting can also be used as evidence for the existence of the proto-Enlightenment. Does the painting justify that there was a proto-Enlightenment? The answer is that it does not. Danto maintained that changes in society cannot be observed in individuals and their behaviour at the time of their emergence. Their behaviour and attitudes may only illustrate social change. No one could observe that Watteau’s libertinism was anticipating the eighteenth century’s Enlightenment. Watteau’s painting may be evidence of his libertine outlook, but it is not evidence of the *history* of his libertine outlook and the events it is connected with. That history is only illustrated by such things as his painting. Because the painting illustrates the proto-Enlightenment, we are able to make the true statement that Watteau’s painting is a proto-Enlightenment

painting. The painting acquired this property as the result of Cowart's retrospective understanding; it is not a property of the painting to be found by the historian in the past itself.

The question whether the change from a religious conflict to a political one was a change *of* the Thirty Years War or a change *in* the Thirty Years can now be answered. In a sense the Thirty Years War changed itself: it changed from a religious conflict into a political conflict. In another sense, however, the change happened in the Thirty Years War: individual human beings living during that time interval illustrate the change. In both these senses, the Thirty Years War is a social individual that is known in terms of the history that can be told about it.

To sum up: individuals illustrate social changes. These social changes are not part of the past; they are the result of the retrospective view of the historian. This led to the question how this can be so since societies are no doubt part of past reality. The answer was that individuals, individual human beings *and* individuals such as societies, are part of the past but their histories are not. History is, as Danto puts it, made by historians: it is autonomous with regard to the past itself.

2. Mink: Ingredient Conclusions and the Autonomy of History

In his "The Autonomy of Historical Understanding", Mink argues, among other things, that the conclusions (theses) of historical narratives are inseparable from the events mentioned in those narratives. This is what the writing of history demarcates from the other sciences, where conclusions *are* detachable from the represented empirical content. We already encountered this non-detachable quality of historical conclusions before. The distinction between a state of affairs *x* illustrating social change and referring to a state of affairs *x* to provide evidence for social change is another way of formulating Mink's distinction between the writing of history and the other sciences. Cowart uses Watteau's painting to illustrate the proto-Enlightenment, not to provide evidence for the proto-Enlightenment, since, as we have argued, what Watteau's painting illustrates could not have been observed as such. Obviously, as a proto-Enlightenment-painting (i.e. an historical entity, a product of historical understanding), Watteau's painting cannot be separated from the proto-Enlightenment it illustrates. Similarly, the change from

a religious to a primarily political conflict during the Thirty Years War cannot be separated from the individuals illustrating that change. As illustrating (exemplifying) entities they are historical entities and as such they are non-detachable from the thesis they exemplify. Mink writes:

The significant conclusions, one might say, are ingredient in the argument itself, not merely in the sense that they are scattered through the text but in the sense that they are *represented by the narrative order itself*. As ingredient conclusions they are *exhibited* rather than *demonstrated*. Articulated as separate statements in a grand finale, they are not conclusions but reminders to the reader (and to the historian himself) of the topography of events to which the entire narrative has given order. In this one respect at least, history is akin to poetry in its reliance on ingredient rather than detachable conclusions.¹⁸

In this quotation from Mink we find the meaning of “illustration” that we had been looking for all along. Historians exhibit rather than demonstrate their conclusions. States of affairs in the past do not constitute the empirical content of the narrative used to demonstrate historical conclusions. The states of affairs mentioned in the narrative exemplify (illustrate or exhibit) the historical conclusions of that narrative. The historian is looking for a *comprehensive synthesis*.¹⁹ Therefore the conclusion cannot be separated from the events mentioned in the narrative. The conclusion that the Thirty Years War changed from a primarily religious to a primarily political conflict cannot be separated from the individuals who – without perhaps even intending or knowing about that change – illustrate that change. Similarly, the conclusion that in late seventeenth century France a libertine outlook anticipated the eighteenth century Enlightenment cannot be separated from the events exemplifying that outlook. What exemplifies cannot be separated from what is exemplified in the way that empirical content can be separated from the conclusion it supports. If Watteau’s painting stops exemplifying the proto-Enlightenment, then the painting will no longer be a proto-Enlightenment painting. Whereas if the painting demonstrates the conclusion that a recurring theme of Watteau’s paintings is the depiction of people coming from different social classes, the painting and the conclu-

¹⁸) L.O. Mink, “The Autonomy of Historical Understanding”, *History and Theory*, 5 (1966), 24–47, there 39.

¹⁹) Mink, “The Autonomy”, 40.

sion *are* detachable. The painting does not stop depicting people from different social backgrounds if the conclusion turns out to be *false*. The conclusion that the late seventeenth century was a period of proto-Enlightenment, in contrast, is not true or false: it is exhibited in a narrative or not.

With the distinction between exhibiting and demonstrating we enter the heart of narrativist philosophy of history. The historian may start with studying an aspect of social reality such as poverty, social classes, inequality, states, revolutions, and so on, but she will end up with an autonomous historical narrative in which past states of affairs exhibit a thesis on for example poverty. Ending up with an autonomous historical narrative is precisely what makes a historian a historian rather than a social scientist. The narrativist philosophy of Mink thus leads to the same conclusion as that of Danto. History is made by historians; it is autonomous with regard to the past.

We may easily confuse terms with their history. The term “poverty” may refer to social reality in general and the phrase “poverty in nineteenth century London” may refer to the social reality of nineteenth century London in particular. The “*history* of poverty”, however, refers to the historical understanding of poverty as provided by an historian. The same term (e.g. “poverty”) may thus be *used* differently. From this it follows that one cannot *prove* that the term “poverty” refers to a certain state of affairs in reality. One can only use the term “poverty” in that way. Therefore one cannot refute the narrativist philosopher of history’s claim of the autonomy of the history of poverty with regard to past reality with an appeal to the argument that the meaning of the term “poverty” is defined or fixed by social reality itself. One would only be proving that a term can be used in a certain way.

With Mink we have taken a second step in arguing for the exemplification theory of history. The conclusions (theses) of a historical narrative cannot be separated from the past as represented in that narrative: they are exhibited rather than demonstrated. In addition we made a distinction between the history of *x* and the identification of *x* and argued that the history of *x* is to be found in historical narratives.

3. Ankersmit: History and Identification

The distinction between the history of *x* and the identification of *x* may be said to be what narrativist philosophy of history is all about. This is especially

true of the narrativist philosophy of Ankersmit. First I will relate some central aspects of his philosophy to what has already been said on the philosophies of Danto and Mink. Then I will focus on the distinction between the history of *x* and the identification of *x* and argue that the identification of *x* is made possible by having the history of *x*. This will, finally, lead to a proper understanding of the exemplification theory of history as proposed in this essay.

Ankersmit follows Mink in emphasizing the autonomy of historical understanding;²⁰

The narratio is not the projection of a historical landscape or of some historical machinery; the past is only *constituted* in the narratio. The structure of the narratio is a structure *lent* to or *pressed* on the past and not the reflection of a kindred structure objectively present in the past itself. We should reject “the idea that there is a determinate historical actuality, the complex referent of all our narratives of “what actually happened”, the untold story to which narrative histories approximate (Mink).²¹

To be sure, the proposition that the structure of historical narratives is something lent to or pressed onto the past does not imply that the historian can *invent* events, human beings, their behaviour, and so on. If that would be the case, history would be no different from fiction. Ankersmit does not deny that past events were once present, nor does he deny that historians should do their utmost best to accurately represent the past.²² However, as Danto already pointed out, the *historical* meaning or *significance* of past states of affairs depends on the narrative of the historian. Or, as Ankersmit puts it, narratives embody historical interpretations.²³ History is made by historians: it is the product of their retrospective understanding.

²⁰) Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic*, 7.

²¹) Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic*, 81. The reference to Mink is to his “Narrative form as a cognitive instrument” in: R.H. Canary and H. Kozicki eds., *The writing of history. Literary form and historical understanding*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 148.

²²) “Accuracy” here does not mean “corresponding to state of affairs” in the sense of the correspondence theory of truth. “Accuracy” must be understood as being in line with the values and codes of the historical profession. See on this distinction and its importance: R. Rorty, *Truth and Progress. Philosophical Papers Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 73–74, and my *Beweren en Tonen. Waarheid, Taal en het Verleden* (Nijmegen: PhD thesis Radboud University, 2009), 103–112.

²³) Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic*, 16.

Ankersmit too argues that the past states of affairs mentioned by the historian in her narrative have an *illustrative use*.²⁴ Ankersmit uses the term “narrative substances” for what we have called “historical theses”. He agrees with Mink that historical theses (or conclusions) cannot be separated from the events and their order as represented in the narrative, although he misses the opportunity to identify Mink’s “ingredient conclusion” with his “narrative substance”.²⁵ If we identify Mink’s “ingredient conclusion” with Ankersmit’s “narrative substances”, we may understand why narrative substances can only be identified by a complete enumeration of all the statements it contains.²⁶ To fully understand the historical thesis (conclusion) of a narrative, one has to read the entire book. With narrative substances, historians “try to convey a maximally clear and consistent representation of the past”.²⁷ This again emphasizes the autonomy of historical narratives, for the past itself is not clear or unclear, nor consistent or inconsistent, only narratives have such qualities.

Ankersmit provides several examples of narrative substances: “intellectual movement”, “Renaissance”, “social group”, “Industrial Revolution”, “states”, “revolution”.²⁸ These examples easily lead to misunderstandings. So John Zammito, among others, argues:

for most historians, the notion that the ‘historical idea’ [narrative substance] is entirely fictive, ontologically restricted to the representation and without any claim to actuality in the past, goes too far. *Poland*, however unstable its borders, however interrupted by partition, is not just our metaphor: it actually existed and we *know* that. *Bourgeoisie* may be harder, and *Renaissance* harder still, but the practicing historian’s intuition needs to be taken extremely seriously.²⁹

“Poland” is indeed a proper name we can use to identify a certain state with. But the use of the term “Poland” to refer to a certain country must be distinguished from the historical understanding of Poland as expressed in a

²⁴ Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic*, 128.

²⁵ Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic*, 46. Ankersmit rightly disagrees with Mink’s conception of the narrative as a network of overlapping descriptions (Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic*, 48–49). This conception of the narrative is absent in the article of Mink I discuss above.

²⁶ Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic*, 107–110.

²⁷ Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic*, 104.

²⁸ Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic*, 82, 101.

²⁹ J. Zammito, “Ankersmit and Historical Representation”, *History and Theory*, 44 (2005), 155–181, there 164.

narrative. The same is of course true of the terms “bourgeoisie” and “Renaissance”. So the issue is not whether terms such as “Poland”, “bourgeoisie”, and “Renaissance”, refer to something in past reality: we *can* use those terms for doing that. The issue is, rather, to distinguish between what a term refers to and the historical understanding of what the term refers to. The historian may start by studying social reality. But, as a historian, she will end up writing a narrative expressing the historical understanding of social reality. The history of a thing belongs to our understanding of reality and should not be confused with reality itself.

Ankersmit’s narrativist philosophy of history may be said to be all about the distinction between the history of *x* and the identification of *x*. He holds that we can only identify such things as states, revolutions, and social classes, if we presuppose them to have a history, that is, a *possible* narrative substance embodying their historical interpretation (and that history need of course not be written or read beforehand). Studying the nineteenth century Prussian state, for example, only makes sense if that state has a history, that is, an existence in time that can be understood retrospectively. If the history of *x* is presupposed in the identification of *x*, then the history of *x* *precedes* its identification.³⁰ (This is, obviously, only true of the things we can write a history of. Usually, history is written on social individuals such as “states”, “revolutions”, “poverty”, and “the Enlightenment”).³¹ We can only identify social individuals on the condition that they have a history.

The difference I have in mind here is that between identifying narrative substances embodying the history of some aspect of social reality and identifying some aspect of social reality. We already noted that according to Ankersmit the history of *x* (i.e. its narrative substance) can only be known by a complete enumeration of all the statements defining what that history is. That way the history of *x* is *individuated*. The history of a thing is in other words its complete notion. The identification of *x*, on the other hand, depends on one or more identifying descriptions.³² Now, the identification of *x* can be said to stand in a part-whole relation to the history of *x*: we can

³⁰) Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic*, 143–155.

³¹) We can write a history of almost everything, perhaps only not of natural kinds such as “water” and “air”. It will only be a history in the proper sense if it concerns (social) individuals. Books with titles such as “The history of chess” are usually nothing but a chronicle of events related to “chess” rather than historical understandings of “chess”.

³²) Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic*, 110–111.

identify x because there is a complete notion of x (i.e. its history) that gives identifying descriptions their sense.

In terms of narrative logic Ankersmit argues as follows. A narrative consists of statements on states of affairs in the past. These statements are components of the narrative and as such properties of the narrative substance (the historical thesis or conclusion).³³ All statements (p , q , r etc.) contained in a narrative should according to Ankersmit be read as statements on the narrative substance proposed in that narrative (“ N is p ”, “ N is q ”, “ N is r ”).³⁴ These statements expressing the properties of narrative substances are analytical. This is according to Ankersmit the most fundamental theorem of narrative logic.³⁵ It is also a very precise formulation of what Mink calls “ingredient conclusions” and of individuals (as described by p etc.) illustrating social change (N is p etc.).

Since every statement contained in a narrative states something about the past and at the same time attributes a property to the historical thesis proposed in that narrative, they have according to Ankersmit a double function: asserting that p (making a statement on a state of affairs in the past) and asserting that N is p (attributing the property of including p to the narrative substance proposed in the narrative).³⁶

I will rephrase this double function of statements³⁷ in terms of the exemplification theory of history. I define that theory as follows: if p is a statement on x (a state of affairs in the past) contained by the historical narrative N , then x (as described by p) can be said to exemplify the thesis expressed by N . The following passage of Cowart’s *The Triumph of Pleasure* may illustrate all this:

[i] Perhaps because of their apparent frivolity, the ballets of Campra and his collaborators have never been examined as vehicles of social critique or political ideology. [ii] Yet a study of their libretti reveals a carefully encoded dialogue between the opéra-ballet as a modern *fête galante* embodying the ideals of love, equality, and freedom, and the court ballet of the 1660s as an archaic *fête monarchique* embodying the ideals of absolutism, patriarchy, and

³³) Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic*, 94.

³⁴) Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic*, 107.

³⁵) Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic*, 127.

³⁶) Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic*, 95.

³⁷) Cf. my *Beweren en Tonen*, 38–42.

sovereign praise. (..) [iii] The public ballet of the Paris Opéra, under the guise of a *libertinage de moeurs*, a social libertinism that is shared with the court ballet of Louis's early reign, also espoused a *libertinage d'esprit*, a political outlook serving as a bridge between seventeenth-century libertinism and eighteenth-century Enlightenment thought.³⁸

We should focus here on the sentences (ii) and (iii). In (ii) reference is made to the libretti of Campra and his collaborators. Their libretti exemplify the historical thesis that is expressed in (iii). They are proto-Enlightenment things. Danto would say that the libretti illustrate a change in society. Mink would say that the libretti are an ingredient and non-detachable part of the historical conclusion: they espouse a libertine spirit bridging seventeenth-century libertinism and eighteenth-century Enlightenment thought. Ankersmit would say that all statements attribute a property to the narrative substance that is known as the “proto-Enlightenment”. Here we have in a nutshell the exemplification theory of history and the way it is anticipated by narrativist philosophers of history.

4. Conclusion: Narrativist Philosophy and the Autonomy of History

We have emphasized Danto's argument that the historical significance of events is autonomous with regard to those events themselves. Even a perfect witness to an event, knowing all what happens and having access to the minds of all participants, could have no knowledge of the historical significance of that event. It is up to the historian to make history. Only she can determine what the historical significance of an event is. Or, as Mink would have it, it is the historian who write histories by “seeing things together” and by providing a “comprehensive synthesis”.³⁹ They do so by exhibiting their conclusions. Ankersmit, as we have seen, contends that the past has no narrative structure. The narrative is no mirror image of the past as it has been in itself, it is no inventory aiming at completeness, as Danto would have it. The narrative has a substance of its own, embodying the historian's interpretation of some part of the past.

³⁸⁾ Cowart, *The Triumph of Pleasure*, 167–168.

³⁹⁾ Mink, “The Autonomy”, 42–44.

Narrativist philosophy of history is all about the distinction between the history of *x* and the identification of *x*. Danto, Mink, and Ankersmit, address this issue in similar ways that mutually support each other. We can always make a distinction between concepts that refer to aspects of social reality and the history of what those concepts refer to. We should, however, not confuse the one with the other. Moreover, if we really want to understand what such concepts refer to, we should not start with investigating the past, but with reading what historians have written about them. Historical narratives are better guides to the past than the past itself will ever be.

Throughout this article it is maintained that history is autonomous with regard to the past. The history of *x* refers to the historical understanding of *x* as expressed in a narrative. The existence of individuals in time and what they have been through, the *res gestae*, is only understood as *history* in retrospect, as *historia rerum gestarum* the moment it exemplifies a historical thesis. The exemplification theory of history thus explains both the transition from *res gestae* to *historia rerum gestarum* and the autonomy of the latter with regard to the former. History is not part of the past; it is an autonomous mode of understanding the past. This is what is meant by the autonomy of history.

Past events illustrating a particular historical thesis are of course not stumbled upon. The historian studying the past should try to understand past events retrospectively. By studying individual human beings, their behaviour, attitudes and beliefs, in light of possible social changes that go beyond their intentions, she will eventually move away from past reality into the direction of a historical thesis. The better she retrospectively understands past reality, the better it is clear to her which past states of affairs exemplify the historical thesis. When Cowart studied Watteau's painting, she did not *discover* that his painting was a proto-Enlightenment painting. Only as the result of her retrospective understanding did the painting acquire the property of being a proto-Enlightenment painting. Moreover, the possibility of such historical understanding was her guide when studying late seventeenth century France. Historicity, as Ankersmit argued, precedes identification.

We may now understand why the narrativist philosophy of history of Danto, Mink, and Ankersmit, may be called *Platonic*. Historical narratives do not reflect reality; it is precisely the other way around: *reality reflects the narrative*. To grasp past reality, one has to study it historically rather than

empirically. After all, the history of *x* cannot be found in the past itself; it is an autonomous idea or form, providing the past with its historical meaning. Without such historical ideas, past states of affairs could never acquire historical significance. Therefore we should give priority to those ideas above reality itself when discussing the relationship between historical narratives and the past. To know what past social reality is like, one, paradoxically, has to move away from it.

On the other hand, the narrativist philosophy of history of authors like Paul Ricoeur and David Carr may be characterized as *Aristotelian*.⁴⁰ They deny the autonomy of historical narratives. Instead they focus on the understanding of action of historical agents which provides them with their model of narrative. As they insist, to understand human action is, basically, to recognize its temporal structure. Actions have a pre-narrative structure, a temporal structure “that call for narration”, according to Ricoeur.⁴¹ Carr sees a similarity between the motives-means-end structure of action and the beginning-middle-end structure of narratives.⁴² Narrative is thus modelled on action. The historian’s own practical knowledge, assembled through years of experience, enables him to move from the historical agent’s action to its explanation as presented by the narrative. The historian’s life experience then functions as a translation-rule, tying the historical agent’s action to the narrative told about it. Danto, Mink, and Ankersmit, reject such translation-rules, since they are at odds with the autonomy they claim for narrative.

Ankersmit argues that in hermeneutic theory the life-experience of the historian “constitutes the translation rules that enable him to understand and describe the past”.⁴³ Indeed, according to the Aristotelian view, narratives are a *mimesis* of action. Danto emphasizes the limitations on the scope of *Verstehen* entailed by the fact that the historical significance of an event can never be seen or witnessed by those living through that event.⁴⁴ Finally, Mink observes that understanding events is not “reliving them in a serial

⁴⁰ Carr relates his narrativist philosophy explicitly to Aristotle in his “Narrative and the Real World”, 126. Ricoeur places Aristotle’s theory of the *mythos* as the *mimesis* of action as developed in his *Poetics* at the center of his narrativist philosophy in his *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 31 ff.

⁴¹ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, especially 59, 64, and 74.

⁴² Carr, “Narrative and the Real World”, 122.

⁴³ Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic*, 79.

⁴⁴ Danto, *Narration*, 169.

order”; it is to hold them together in one thought, in an “act of judgment” which “no one could experience together”. It is therefore of no use to try to relive those events in their serial order.⁴⁵

Carr holds that according to the autonomy thesis – or “discontinuity thesis” as he calls it –, narratives distort reality.⁴⁶ The autonomy thesis, however, does not imply this. For if the history of aspects of social reality are not part of reality, then how could a retrospective understanding of reality distort that reality? Narratives do not distort reality: they help us understand it. Carr also believes that, according to the autonomy thesis, reality is a meaningless sequence.⁴⁷ But the autonomy thesis as defended here does not imply this conception of reality (although I readily admit that such a conception can be found in some unwarranted passages of the proponents of the autonomy thesis). Past events will no doubt have had a meaning for the people living through those events. But that could not have been an *historical* meaning. (It is sometimes said of a current event that it is “historical”. Such statement only makes sense if it is understood as a prediction about future retrospective views). The autonomy thesis does not so much contradict phenomenological hermeneutics, as Carr believes it does, it argues for the fundamental *limits* of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics with its focus on the agent’s point of view cannot account for the *history* of the events that the agent has lived through. The autonomy thesis does not contradict, as Carr puts it, that “events are charged with the significance they derive from our retentions and pretensions”. Nor does it imply, as Carr believes it does, that life is a “mere sequence”.⁴⁸ We may agree with Carr on both these matters without contradicting anything we have said on the autonomy thesis, for the autonomy thesis is about the retrospective understanding of the events that agents may have lived through; it is not a thesis about their experience of life. Therefore we cannot agree with the following. Carr argues that “It is not only novelists and historians who view events in terms of their relation to later events, to use Danto’s formulation of the narrative point of view; we all do it all the time, in everyday life”.⁴⁹ So much is certainly true, but this is irrelevant in the present context, for the point of my argument is not only (to take up that example again) that Watteau in

⁴⁵ Mink, “The Autonomy”, 43–44.

⁴⁶ Carr, “Narrative and the Real World”, 117. See also Carr, “Time and Place”, 165.

⁴⁷ Carr, “Narrative and the Real World”, 121.

⁴⁸ Carr, “Narrative and the Real World”, 122.

⁴⁹ Carr, “Narrative and the Real World”, 125.

1718 did not know what the Enlightenment was going to be like, but that historians writing about such large-scale events as the Enlightenment express a historical thesis that is exemplified by individual human beings. If Carr would have his way, historians would be chroniclers making inventories of the past only (albeit with special attention given to the agent's point of view).

I will now come to some final observations. We may wonder whether the exemplification theory of history resembles what is known as the “exemplar theory of history”. This pre-historicist theory of history, the dominant theory of history from antiquity until the eighteenth century, was didactic in purpose, an instrument of political education⁵⁰ and a “storehouse of vicarious experience from which to derive examples of behaviours both to imitate and to avoid”.⁵¹ As against this view, nineteenth century historicists such as Humboldt argued that it was not up to history to have examples told what to do and what to avoid. History's usefulness was to be found in “its power to enliven and refine our sense of acting on reality, and this occurs more through the form attached to events than through events themselves”.⁵² The pre-historicists exempla as directions for future actions were abandoned for events embodying historical forms or ideas. Twentieth century narrative philosophy of history restated historicism, at least Ankersmit explicitly did so: historical forms or ideas belong to the autonomous level of the historical narrative. From that perspective there is, indeed, no resemblance between the exemplar theory and the exemplification theory. Nevertheless, there is one striking and obvious resemblance. For in both theories past state of affairs are examples: in the exemplar theory examples are given of what to do and what to avoid, in the exemplification theory past states of affairs are examples of the historical thesis they exemplify. So whereas historicism was a search for the historical forms inherent in the events themselves, depriving them from their exemplary function, narrative philosophy revitalized those forms by relocating them on the level of historical understanding as expressed in the narrative,

⁵⁰ G.H. Nadel, “Philosophy of History before Historicism”, *History and Theory* 3 (1964), 291–315, there 294.

⁵¹ A. Blair “*Historia in Zwinger's Theatrum humanae vitae*”, *Empiricism and Erudition in Early Modern Europe*, ed. G. Pomata and N.G. Siraisi (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2005), 269–296, there 269.

⁵² Humboldt, “Historian's Task”, 60.

returning thus to events the exemplary function they were suppose to have lost, however, not as exempla for future actions, but as exempla of historical theses, the forms the historicist had been so much eager to find. These historical theses may indeed, as Humboldt stated, “enliven and refine our sense of acting on reality”.

One last observation. The exemplification theory of history does not lead to a false opposition between life and narrative. Narratives do not distort life. Nor should they be viewed as an extension or continuation of life, as Carr does, or as a fulfilment of the inchoative narrative quality of life, as is the case with Ricoeur. No narrativist philosopher of history would deny that history should serve life. The question is how it does. The Platonic view on narrative may be our best guide here. The world surrounding us presents itself to us as a social world, as a world we can identify, describe, explain, and quantify. This is how it appears to us. It is the historian’s task to lead us out of this world of appearances into the Real.⁵³

⁵³ This may also explain what Ankersmit calls “historical experience”. While discussing Francesco Guardi’s painting *Arcade with a Lantern*, Ankersmit at some point refers to Richard Sennet’s *The Fall of Public Man* in which it is argued that in the eighteenth century “acting” was not just restricted to the theatre; it was part of public life. The need to integrate these respective roles into one substratum was not felt. The fact that public life was a theatre led to a sentiment of boredom. Guardi’s painting, combining normal life and the theatre on his painting, expresses such boredom. The painting brings us according to Ankersmit “right into the heart of eighteenth-century public life” (Ankersmit *Sublime Historical Experience*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 274–275.) Now, in terms of the exemplification theory we should say that Guardi’s painting exemplifies or illustrates eighteenth century public life (it should be noted that Ankersmit does not seem to be aware of the fact that he is referring to a narrative substance, proposed by Sennet. In his *De historische ervaring*, (Groningen: Historische Uitgeverij, 1993), 23, Ankersmit is even more outspoken, and argues that Romanticism did integrate the roles played in public into one substratum, an authentic self that eventually destroyed the *ancien régime* – an even more exciting narrative substance in need of illustration). Eighteenth century life is a social individual whose history cannot be found in the past itself; it can only be illustrated with such things as paintings. Ankersmit may have experienced the boredom expressed by the painting, but he could only identify the boredom in Guardi’s painting as an eighteenth century sentiment resulting from public life being a theatre *after* retrospectively understanding the painting, as narrativist philosophy dictates. The exemplification theory furthermore explains what Ankersmit means when he describes an historical experience as a “direct and immediate encounter with reality” (*Sublime Historical Experience*, 285). This is the encounter we have the moment history leads us out of the world of appearances into the Real.