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Review of Paul A. Roth's *The Philosophical Structure of Historical Explanation*

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Paul A. Roth, *The Philosophical Structure of Historical Explanation*.

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Roth's book is rich and intense. In a relatively short space, it seeks to locate historical explanations within our general metaphysical and epistemic predicaments. Understanding the argumentative nuances of the book requires knowledge of analytic philosophy of history, analytic philosophy in general, philosophy and history of science, and narrative theory. As Roth's book provides an excellent overview of the potential richness and importance of philosophy of history, critically engaging with its contents and strategy enables us to see possible ways to cross-fertilize current philosophy of history and trends in other areas of philosophical research. In this review, I focus on those issues that might interest philosophers of science the most.

Roth's book centers on the notion of *essentially narrative explanation*. “[A] narrative involves an “unfolding,” sequencing of a series of events that accounts for a development” (66). Narrative explanations explain narrative sentences (see below). “A narrative explanation will be a presentation of a temporal series that answers why the explanandum turns out to be as it is. [--] [It provides] a sequencing of events that has the later event emerge as a consequence of the earlier” (6).] Narrative explanations necessarily require a *retrospective stance*: We can identify a historical event and thus its beginning only retrospectively. A narrative also “simultaneously constitutes and constructs both explanans and explanandum” (71). The sequencing of events that a narrative explanation provides also constitutes the event in question.

Essentially narrative explanations have three characteristic features: nonstandardization, nonaggregativity, and nondetachability (SAD).

Nonstandardization concerns the fact that “historical events do not begin as constructs of some articulated theory of which they are a part [--] histories, and so those who author them, constitute the events they explain under nonstandardized descriptions” (9-11). *Nondetachability* means that “events explained by histories exist qua events only as constructions of those histories” (14). The explanandum cannot be detached from the explanatory narrative. *Nonaggregativity* means that there cannot be a “single account that links all possible events under one explanatory rubric” (67). These are strong characteristics as they are associated with deep metaphysical assumptions and methodological consequences.

By constructing a narrative explanation, we “make up” a past and “impose an order on what we take to have happened” (43). This claim is meant to be taken quite literally. In Chapters 2 and 3, Roth argues against historical (metaphysical) realism and defends *irrealism* according to which there must be multiple pasts that we make up by imposing an order on what we take to have happened. Despite the strong consequences of SAD and their partnership with irrealism, Roth argues that history is a science and, moreover, history enables us to identify what counts as science in the first place (see below).

The argumentative strategy of Roth is unique and interesting, but it also has some weaknesses, both in practice and in principle. It is not quite obvious whether we should accept the strong conclusions or rethink the foundations of philosophy of history that generate those conclusions.

The first problem is that Roth’s argumentative strategy depends heavily on Danto’s thought experiment about an Ideal Chronicler. Roth argues that

“This thought experiment establishes that statements true of a particular time t cannot be comprehensively known at t , not even by someone capable of recording all that happens when it happens (the Ideal Chronicler). Danto’s now canonical example is this: “The Thirty Years War began in 1618.” This statement is true of what happens in 1618 but is not knowable in 1618, not even by an Ideal Chronicler. Danto calls these “narrative sentences,” and they demonstrate that there will be truths about any time t not knowable at t ; truths about time t continue to accumulate after t .” (8).

It seems that the thought experiment would require more analysis. Prima facie, that truths about time t do not accumulate after t but only truths about cross-temporal relations between t

and later times. The Chronicle does not have an access to cross-temporal relations and, therefore, it is unclear what we can infer from the epistemology of the Chronicle.

Roth continues the argument for the metaphysical plurality of the pasts by arguing that it is a mistake to think that “there exists only a single past calling for explanation” (24). Roth states: “What needs to be rejected is the picture of a past that is simply there waiting for a historian to come along.” (26.) Roth’s argument is two-fold.

First, it is argued that “if the fixity of the past is a coherent notion, as it seems to be, then this implies that there could be an Ideal Chronicle” (28). However, there could not be an Ideal Chronicle because there are no ideal events to be recorded: “Without some description or other, there are no specific events; with an identifying description, we still do not know if the event is of the requisite ideal sort— that is, not primarily of our making” (29). Secondly, Roth relies on Goodmanian consideration of Ian Hacking who argues that nature does not dictate one organizing scheme and strengthens these considerations with Danto’s argument that truths about some time *t* are not fixed to derive his irrealism.

There are two interrelated problems in this argumentative strategy. First, it is not clear why metaphysical realism implies that an Ideal Chronicle is possible. The Chronicer is, despite the first impression, a rather limited cognitive agent. For example, it does not have access to cross-temporal relations between events. Given that metaphysical realism is committed to the idea that what is true goes beyond what can be known, why would metaphysical realism be committed to the idea that a seriously limited cognitive agent could know everything?

Secondly, even though Roth claims “to give this metaphysical assumption of the objective past the most plausible form that I can, and then show that the assumption is untenable” (27), there is little discussion about characterizations and defenses for metaphysical realism that the proponents of the position have given. This does not only harm the credibility of the argumentative steps in the book but also the possible cross-fertilization of philosophy of history and philosophy of science. For example, it would have been interesting to know how recent developments in perspectival realism relate to the conceptual space of irrealism.

When it comes to the account of narrative explanation itself, there is a central unanswered issue. Usually, a mere sequencing of events does not explain anything. Roth is aware of this: “what makes narratives explanatory[?] [--] narratives typically seem to be descriptive” (70) but goes on to argue that the distinction between description and justification does not arise in

the case of narratives. This seems to miss the point. Usually, a sequence of events is considered explanatory if it is causal. Roth seems to be aware of this but argues that “*The causal sequence, in turn, can consist only in this case of seeing facts as ordered and so related in a particular way*” (73, emphasis original). Later it is added that “no functional distinction exists between describing that sequence and justifying causal links” (75). The problem is that if there is no stronger notion of *causality* in use than one that makes causality follow automatically from a description of a sequence of events, then causality does not add any explanatory import to the sequence. One cannot make causality carry the explanatory load without a notion of *causality* that distinguishes between causal and non-causal sequences.

In Chapter 5, Roth makes the important observation that, while history informs our understanding of science, we do not understand historical explanation well enough to tell how history does this. Roth argues (in Chapter 6) that Kuhn provided an essentially narrative explanation of what counts as normal science. Roth adds that such an explanation is necessary since, if we wish to understand science naturalistically, we cannot rely on some a priori notion of science when defining what counts as science.

However, there are two interrelated worries that this argumentation raises. First, while it is true that history of science can be highly useful in order to understand science, it does not follow that we do not know what counts as science independently of historical explanations. Most people who do science or study it do not have a historical narrative to back their conception of science.

Secondly, even if a historical explanation is required to identify science, it does not follow that essentially narrative explanations are the only – or the best – candidates to perform this function. Historians and philosophers of science have used all sorts of explanatory formats to understand science. Can they all be, in principle, unsuited for the task? Equally unsure is the necessity of the Kuhnian account of science.

In Chapter 7, Roth provides a defense of methodological naturalism and history’s place among empirical sciences. This chapter raises two general worries in light of Roth’s argumentative strategy. First, given that essentially narrative historical explanations are required, according to Roth, to tell what counts as science and given that each explanation constructs its own past (irrealism), different histories of science construct different

conceptions of science. When we attempt to understand science naturalistically, whose conception shall we rely on? Moreover, given that historical narratives do not cumulate due to SAD, it seems that we cannot improve our understanding of science in a piecemeal manner by collecting historical insights concerning science. This would be a problem for historically oriented philosophy of science.

Secondly, the need for detailed studies of the epistemic limitations and workings of history does not stop even if we grant history a place among sciences. Even if naturalism “situates the study of humans, in all their aspects, as of a piece with those methods and theories used to investigate other objects in nature” (116) there might be important differences between sciences below this general level. This becomes obvious when we notice that not all research within a single field of science is equally good. However, Roth would probably argue that there is nothing philosophically interesting about these differences. For example, Roth argues that “it is hard to comprehend [--] which *evaluative* standards of historians supposedly cry out for a *philosophical* solution” (141) and the same probably goes for other questions concerning the details of how science works.

However, this outright hostility towards philosophy of science does not seem quite justified and is connected to the fact that Roth’s book does not discuss theories of explanation in detail. Roth writes that “by virtue of implicitly or explicitly placing a demand on historical practice that emanates from *philosophical preconceptions* regarding the logical form of scientific explanation, I have termed the putative problem of historical explanation as one of our (i.e., philosophers’) own making” (7). It seems quite unfair to dismiss the developments in the philosophy of scientific explanation with such sweeping claims. Currently, most philosophers working on scientific explanation work in a close connection with scientific practice. This philosophy, as James Woodward put it, “recognizes that causal and explanatory claims sometimes are confused, unclear, and ambiguous and suggests how these limitations might be addressed”. Those who apply the conceptual tools developed by philosophers of science to history attempt to analyze the prospects and limits of the tools with respect to understanding history. This is far from imposing philosophical preconceptions – whatever that even means – on historical practice. It is hard to understand how one could deny, a priori, that such philosophical analysis might be an important part of science, naturalistically understood.

While this review has been critical in tone, I still found the book valuable. If I had more space, I would have focused more on the challenges that it raises from the standpoint of philosophy of history to that of philosophy of science. I recommend the book especially to those who are interested in facing the challenge from the philosophy of history.