

Narratives, Events & Monotremes: The Philosophy of History in Practice

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Abstract

Significant work in the philosophy of history has focused on the writing of historiographical narratives, isolated from the rest of what historians do. Taking my cue from the philosophy of science in practice, I suggest that understanding historical narratives as embedded within historical practice more generally is fruitful. I illustrate this by bringing a particular instance of historical practice, Natalie Lawrence's explanation of the sad fate of Winston the Platypus, into dialogue with some of Louis Mink's arguments in favour of anti-realism about historical events. Attending to how historians seek out and utilize archival resources puts serious pressure on these arguments, motivates realist positions, and re-focuses the philosophy of history towards making sense of historiography as a part of the diversity of historians' interests.

1. Introduction

Platypus husbandry is onerous: these unusual, oviparous and shy (not to mention venomous!) mammals are a zoo-keeper's nightmare. This, in addition to their iconic status,

explains why their successful captive breeding in 1943 was sufficiently significant for global reporting. One who took note of the achievement was Winston Churchill who, given his from-childhood penchant for exotic animals, let it be known that he would be interested in adding a platypus to his menagerie. The Australian zoo-keeping community leapt into action. In 1944 a platypus, of course named ‘Winston’, was dispatched to the UK. Tragically, Winston did not survive the journey: wartime delays meant the trip took longer than expected, necessitating rationing of his food, and in his weakened state he was unable to withstand the stress of nearby depth charges.

I’ve just provided a *chronology*: a bunch of temporally-ordered historical facts. Churchill loved exotic animals. A platypus was bred in 1943 and Churchill heard of this. In 1944 Winston the platypus was sent to Britain. Winston did not survive the journey. But of course I haven’t simply provided a chronology, but also a *history*: the events are linked together by a narrative structure. Churchill’s love of animals and the captive breeding of a platypus together explain why Winston the platypus was sent to Britain. The earlier events take on significance in light of the later events; the later events occurred because of the earlier¹. In this paper I’ll make two claims about chronologies and histories as an illustrative example of how examining more of what historians do—historical *practice*—can transform arguments in the philosophy of history. First, both temporally-ordered facts and narrative structures can be true or false, or at least can more or less accurately reflect the way things actually were. Second, in historical practice, chronologies and histories develop together, in a way which partially explains how it is that histories and narratives are answerable to the real past. In short, I’ll sketch how a philosopher of ‘history in practice’ might defend a realist view of historical narrative and events.

Since the 1970s, insofar as the philosophy of history has been dominated by a particular perspective, it has been the *linguistic turn*: we begin our analysis of history from the nature of

¹ The classic discussions of the distinction are in Danto (1962, 1966).

historiographical representations, their semantic and syntactic structures². And often we don't just begin there, but stay there: narratives are understood abstracted from other aspects of what historians do. I'm going to contrast this approach with a recent turn in the philosophy of science—a turn to practice. Such philosophers make their arguments in light of often rich, almost sociological, descriptions of the processes of scientific work. I suspect this approach might be fruitfully repurposed for the philosophy of history. Here, I'll illustrate the basic idea using Louis Mink's classic arguments for anti-realism as my stalking-horse.

I'll focus on two of Mink's arguments, both targeting the conclusion that narratives cannot reflect the world's structure. The first argues from the non-aggregability of narratives, the second from the relationship between 'narratives' and 'chronologies'. Regarding the former, I'll argue that (1) Mink's argument fails to distinguish between anti-realism and sufficiently sophisticated versions of realism, and (2) considerations of practice should lead us to favour realism. Regarding the latter, I'll agree with Mink that narratives and chronologies are not independent, but will suggest that he mischaracterizes that lack of independence. Where for Mink historical events arise *from* narratives, I'll suggest that the two more-or-less collapse in light of historical practice—and collapse in a way demonstrating that narratives are in fact answerable to the structure of the world in a sufficiently rich way to motivate realism.

I'll try to be clear from the onset concerning what I mean by 'realism'. Specifically, I am interested in realism as (1) being about *narrative explanations*, that is, claims about the importance and significance of historical events as they relate to other historical events (as opposed to chronologies) and (2) a commitment to narrative claims being true or false due to how the past in fact went. A realist about narrative explanations thinks that at least sometimes

² Plausibly the linguistic turn follows from Danto's discussion of 'narrative sentences' (1962, see also Uebel 2019), other classic discussions include Mink 1966, 1970 & 1978, Ricoeur 1988, White 1973, 1987. Although forms of anti-realism play an important role in the turn, more important are the treatments of historical explanation and understanding themselves: See Vann 1987, Roth 2017 for more general treatments.

disagreements between historians about narratives are *substantive* in the sense that they turn not on matters of chronology (what happened when), nor on super-empirical virtues or taste, but on old-fashioned matters of empirical evidence just like mom used to make (Currie 2019a). It in no-way follows from this that narrative disagreement is always substantive in this sense (nor that substantive disputes are always the most important), nor does it follow that narrative disagreement isn't a complex, subtle matter.

A few caveats. First, I don't here assume nor argue that appeals to practice must underwrite realist positions (both Kyle Stanford, 2006, and Derek Turner, 2007, have made arguments for scientific anti-realism from broadly practice-based conceptions). Rather, my aim is to demonstrate that appeals to practice might enliven a set of positions in the philosophy of history whose apparent unpopularity is surprising (to me, at least). Second, my purpose in targeting Mink is illustrative: it provides a contrast with in-practice approaches (and as such could have used a different philosopher, but I like Mink's work and it suits my purposes here). Of necessity I will skip lightly over much of the rich work in the philosophy of history that has followed from Mink, and indeed will not aim to give a complete picture of his arguments. I hope that philosophers who start incorporating more features of historical practice into their philosophizing about history will make richer use of and incorporate the insights philosophers of history have bequeathed to us. My aims here are to explain and illustrate how expanding the remit of philosophy of history to include more features of practice can be productive.

A further caveat: I don't mean to imply that broader features of historical practice have played no role in the philosophy of history. Raymond Martin (1989) as well as others (Lorenz 1994, Bunzl 1997) have argued in a similar vein to myself. C. Behan McCullagh's arguments that historians attempt to produce narratives which 'fairly represent' their central subjects is both realist in my sense and appeals to various features of historical practice (1987, 2002). As Harman Paul has recently put it, these authors argue "... that philosophers of history have the task of

elucidating historians' practice by analysing [what] this practice actually looks like. If historians turn out to spend much energy debating the relative plausibility of their historical accounts, philosophers of history have to make sure they can account for such debates" (170). indeed, Paul's recent call for a *History and Philosophy of History* has significant overlap with my suggestions here:

For although the so-called narrativist turn in philosophy of history, half a century ago, has produced important insights into the aesthetic, moral and political aspects of historical *writing*, the question as to how this writing emerges out of historical *studies* – historians' habits of reading, note-taking, thinking, corresponding, collaborating, teaching, supervising and reviewing (not to mention writing grant applications) – has hardly been addressed so far. (172)

Although I'll focus on archival evidence, I take Paul and my aims to overlap significantly.

It is also worth being clear on the scope of this paper: I'm here interested in cases where historians provide narratives for the purposes of explanation, that is, accounting for a past or present event by identifying previous events (or processes etc...) that gave rise to them. In those circumstances, the narratives historians produce can capture the way the past was more or less accurately. I don't by this suggest that this is all historical narratives are for, or that all history involves narratives (indeed they do not: Bunzl 1997). Nor by that do I suggest that the only point or ultimate purpose of history is the provision of approximately true histories.

The most critical caveat, perhaps, concerns differences in how notions of 'explanation' are treated in philosophy and historiography respectively, a difference which is likely to lead to historians to misunderstand the position I sketch below. I've often found that historians set an extraordinarily high bar for what it takes to *explain* an historical event, or for what it takes for that explanation to be *true*. They tend to think that explaining an historical event involves

providing a complete, and incontrovertible account. If you want, to give *the* explanation. Instead, many historians consider what they do to be hermeneutic interpretation: aiming for some kind of understanding or illumination, but not truth nor providing The Explanation. But both ‘truth’ and ‘explanation’ here are meant in extraordinarily high-falutin’ terms. Philosophers have long recognised the context-sensitivity and perspectival nature of explanation, as they have long accepted notions of partial, approximate, incomplete or non-correspondence notions of truth. I won’t speculate as to why this difference in usage exists (I suspect the hand of Hempel is in there somewhere), but regardless, if you insist on a high-falutin conception of truth and explanation, perhaps take my view to be a kind of realist view about interpretation, that is, at least sometimes interpretation tracks not just the chronologies but histories of an actual past. In that sense they deserve a realist treatment.

I’ll start with a sketch of the philosophy of science in practice from a methodological perspective. I’ll then turn to Mink’s arguments. Following this, I’ll draw on Natalie Lawrence’s work to expand our narrative about Winston the platypus. With Winston on the table, I’ll then discuss how appeals to practice might underwrite certain forms of realism about narrative.

2. Practice

We should be cautious of programmatic claims about any epistemic pursuit, philosophy as any other, but in a paper like this they are inevitable (some readers I’m sure will already have concerns about how I’ve described the linguistic turn). So, when I say philosophers of science care about practice, and imply that philosophers of history *don’t*, what do I mean?

One reading to immediately head off is the idea that philosophers of history (or non-practice-based philosophers of science) don’t *know about* practice. This is silly: obviously they do. Instead, I mean something about the methodological and argumentative role practice plays. Philosophy is ‘practice-based’ when interpretations of practice play a central role in the development and

acceptance of philosophical views³. I'll suggest that being practice-based involves, first, the analysis of scientific *processes* rather than *products*; and second, involves the role that descriptions of practice play in argumentation. The view, then, is explicitly programmatic, and the arguments herein can therefore be denied by denying the program. As this is what it says on the box (Swaim & Currie 2022), I'm not overly worried about that kind of response here. And so, onto the philosophy of science in practice.

Much in the philosophy of science has targeted scientific *products*. Scientific products are the outcomes of scientific *processes*. Examples of the latter might be the generation, management and analysis of data, be it in the field, the lab, *in vivo* or *silica*. This might include the institutional, social and political context in which such work is embedded. Examples of the former might be scientific theories, evidence, models, hypotheses. This distinction is not clean, as of course theorizing, evidencing, modelling and generating hypotheses are themselves scientific processes. The difference, I take it, turns on what philosophers take to be isolatable in their arguments. Hypothetico-deductivism, for instance, takes scientific evidence and explanation to be best understood in terms of formal argumentation. Epistemic analyses are undertaken via various 'argument schema', that abstract from procedural context (Norton 2021). Philosophers of science in practice depart from this in various ways, arguing that science's history, or its social arrangement, or various procedures of knowledge generation, are a necessary part of a proper philosophical understanding of scientific knowledge.

The long-toothed distinction between the contexts of 'justification' and 'discovery' might be helpful here. In brief, the latter involves the generation of data and hypotheses, the former involves bringing these together, that is, asking whether the generated data supports said hypotheses⁴. An appeal to this distinction can be used to isolate various scientific properties for

³ My treatment here is perhaps idiosyncratic, see also Ankeny et al 2011.

⁴ This is a purposefully simple articulation of the idea: see Popper 1959, although the original is owed to Reichenbach in a more complex form (1922, see Glymour & Eberhardt 2022 for a nice summary).

the purpose of abstract philosophical arguments, largely by restricting what is of philosophical interest to the context of justification. Philosophers of science in practice will insist that features usually lumped into discovery are epistemic *properly speaking*: you cannot analyse the nature of scientific knowledge without considering the processes that generate its products.

The second defining feature of the philosophy of science in practice, I take it, is the role practice takes in philosophical argumentation. Here's the wrong way to distinguish between traditional philosophy of science and philosophy of science in practice: the former starts from the armchair, deriving normative principles, and then applies these to science; while the latter starts from descriptions of science and attempts to derive normative principles from these. Understanding science in practice does not (or at least need not) turn philosophers into clumsy science journalists. Rather, the philosopher brings their normative conceptions of scientific work into dialogue with scientific practice. How practice is described and engaged with is influenced by philosophical ideas about knowledge production, but those ideas are themselves shaped by the details of practice. I find analogy with the role of the material record in archaeology to be a useful comparison.

Archaeological theory is perennially concerned with how interpretation can reflect the structure of human pasts given the complexity, incompleteness, and messiness of the archaeological record, and the idiosyncratic humanness of those pasts (Hawkes 1954, Gero 2007). One part of an answer I find plausible emphasizes the importance of the materiality of the record itself. Although many archaeological hypotheses are underdetermined, the archaeological record has nonetheless, as Chapman & Wylie put it, "... a striking capacity to function as a 'network of resistances to theoretical appropriation' that routinely destabilizes settled assumptions, redirects inquiry and expands interpretive horizons in directions no one had anticipated" (Chapman & Wylie 2016, 6, see also Currie 2022, Currie & Meneganzin forthcoming). Archaeological theorists cannot push an often-intransigent record anywhichway they want. Rampant underdetermination

doesn't lead to archaeological theorizing being hopelessly theory-laden (although it might generate other worries!), and it doesn't do this, because of the role the material record plays in archaeology.

Similarly, philosophers of science in practice ground their analyses and normative claims in descriptions and interpretations of the process of science. In doing so, there is an iterative relationship between philosophical views and interpretations of practice. No doubt, my conception of good epistemic work will influence which episodes I examine and how I interpret those episodes, but—as with the material record—the episodes will not bend to just any old interpretation. They act as a network of resistances. Episodes of practice, then, provide a crucial constraint on, and are a source of, philosophical explanations of scientific knowledge. There is a relationship of *epistemic iterativity* between philosophical views and scientific practice (Chang 2004, Crasnow 2020).

So, a philosopher of science engages with practice when (1) they include the processes and procedures of knowledge generation as a crucial part of epistemic analysis, and (2) instances of practice act as points of resistance to philosophical argumentation. It is not my place here to systematically claim that either of these do not play roles in the philosophy of history—they surely do—but I will at least claim that the linguistic turn leads to their underemphasis. Louis Mink is quite explicit about his focus:

Professional historians might object, too, to the emphasis on narrative historiography. Professional history, a historian might say... does not exclude the construction of narrative accounts, but that is a literary skill quite independent of professional skill in actual research (130).

While happily admitting that historians do more than construct narratives, Mink makes a methodological gambit by considering such narratives in isolation from other things historians

do. I'll argue below that at least to some extent his arguments depend on this move, and become significantly less plausible once this abstraction is removed.

3. Two Arguments

We've seen that practice-based philosophy of science involves expanding our conception of what is relevant for philosophical understanding to include scientific processes as well as products, and in doing so ground philosophical arguments in interpretations of episodes of practice. What, then, would a philosophy of history-in-practice look like? My way into answering this question is via consideration of two of Louis Mink's arguments, I'll appeal to historical practice in the response and thus illustrate the difference.

In his influential 1978 article, Mink provides a series of arguments that underwrite anti-realism about narratives and historical events. To be clear, here realism is not about the past generally, nor about the facts captured in chronologies. Rather, it is about whether narratives—representations that assign significance to earlier facts in light of their influence on later facts—reflect the structure of the world, that is, whether their truth turns on the way the past was. As Mink puts it:

'common sense'—without us realizing it—says that reality has a 'narrative form' which historians correctly *describe* in their stories. But that can't be right (for various reasons). So, we should recognise that narratives are 'cognitive devices': they are projected onto the world by historians, not true or false (131).

An anti-realist like Mink will accept that Winston the Platypus didn't make it to Britain, that the first platypus was bred in captivity in 1943, and so forth. But they will insist that the claim that, say, Churchill's love of animals matters because it led to his desiring a platypus, is not the kind of thing that can be true or false. It is a way of making sense of the past, of organizing things

such that they generate some form of understanding in minds like ours. They are projections onto the world and (at least insofar as they get the chronology right) should be judged as constructions, not discoveries. Why commit to such a view? Philosophers of history have developed several arguments in favour of, and against, anti-realism⁵. Here I'll sketch two of Mink's.

Let's call Mink's first argument *non-aggregation*. We start from the idea that, if realism is true, we should expect narratives to aggregate, that is, to be combinable. After all, if narratives *describe* a single past, then combining them should simply lead to more complete, longer, or more detailed descriptions. But this doesn't seem to happen, because of the nature of narrative structures. To put it very coarsely, narratives have beginnings, middles, and ends. A platypus is bred in captivity, a platypus is put on a boat to Britain, a platypus meets a tragic fate. If we were to combine our story of Winston the Platypus with, say, a narrative about Churchill's pets, say the life of Nelson the cat, we would find ourselves with a different beginning, a different middle, and a different end. Combining narratives does not lead to a conjunction of two stories, the claim is, but rather a new narrative emerges. According to realism, narratives ought to aggregate, but they do not, and so realism is false.

A narrative must have a unity of its own; this is what is acknowledged in saying that it must have a beginning, middle, and an end. And the reason why two narratives cannot be merely additively combined—in the simplest case, by making them temporally continuous...—is that in the earlier narrative of such an aggregate the end is no longer an end, and therefore the beginning is no longer *that* beginning, nor the middle *that* middle.

⁵ For some recent realist arguments see Wallach (forthcoming), Currie & Swaim (2021). Paul Roth has recently defended an anti-realist (irrealist) position that draws and expands on Mink's arguments (Roth 2019).

[there is] a new unity, which replaces the independent coherence of each of its parts rather than uniting them (138).

It will suit my purposes downstream to present the argument semi-formally, so here is the argument from non-aggregation:

- (1) If the past is a single determinate realm of unchanging reality which historical narratives describe, then different historical narratives ought to aggregate.
- (2) If two historical narratives are combined, they become a new narrative because a new narrative structure forms (that is, they do not aggregate).
- (3) Therefore, the past is not a single determinate realm of unchanging reality which historical narratives describe.

The second argument I'll consider concerns the nature of narrative events, let's call it *the argument from historical events*. To get the point here, it is useful distinguish between temporally-ordered *past facts* which we encounter in a chronology, and the *events* that play a role in narratives. The 'fact' describes a state-of-affairs, say, the first captive breeding of a platypus in 1943. This becomes an 'event' when that state of affairs is taken to be significant in virtue of being part of a narrative, that is, a trajectory leading to our conclusion. Here's Mink on the nature of historical events:

... the concept of event is primarily linked to the conceptual structure of science... but in that conceptual structure it is purged of all narrative connections, and refers to something that can be identified without any necessary reference to its location in some process of development—a process which only narrative form can represent (141).

The thought here seems to be that in science 'events' are delineated via some conceptually defined procedure, specific measurements and the like, which are abstracted from narrative

structures. I'm not sure what to make of this claim (I don't think that all scientific events are understood without reference to processes of development) but let's go along with it for the sake of the argument. Whatever events in science might be, events in historical narratives do not have this feature. What makes the breeding of a captive platypus significant for Winston the platypus' fate is, the thought goes, precisely that we are interested in making sense of that later event. Historical events are the events they are in virtue of the narrative they are embedded in. If historical narratives describe the world, as the realist insists, then the event-hood of events—their significance—should be in some sense independent of narratives. But they are not, as Mink puts it: “Events’... are not the raw material out of which narratives are constructed; rather an event is an abstraction from a narrative” (135). Here is the argument from historical events:

- (1) If the past is a single determinate realm of unchanging reality which historical narratives describe, then ‘historical events’ should be determinate independent of narratives.
- (2) Historical events are only determinate in light of narratives.
- (3) Therefore, the past is not a single determinate realm of unchanging reality.

I've sketched two of Mink's arguments against realism. At this point, you might worry that I have misconstrued the arguments, or loaded the die in my favour in some sense. I think most pressing, I worry that Mink's various arguments are not intended to be taken in isolation as I will tackle them, and indeed they have subtleties lost in the abstract treatment I've provided. In my defence, recall my purpose in responding to these arguments: I'm interested in them insofar as they provide a good contrast with what I take to be an in-practice approach. And indeed, as we'll see I think responding to my objections likely involve digging deeper into the details of historical practice.

4. Winston the Platypus

I've thus-far sketched a methodology in the philosophy of science—philosophy of science in practice—and provided two arguments for anti-realism about historical narratives from Mink. If we're going to respond to those arguments with an in-practice approach, then we need an instance of historical practice to act as a place of resistance.

The narrative which began this paper emphasized Winston Churchill's eccentricities: at base, the sequence of events occurred because of his love of exotic animals. Natalie Lawrence (2012) argues that this narrative is incomplete, instead pointing to various features of nationalist and global politics. "Churchill's platypus... provides a unique case, where the effects of zoological collecting had implications for international relations, British zoos and zoology, Churchill's public persona and national morale" (290). Her picture emphasizes two features: first, breeding a platypus can be seen as having a 'moon-shot' role, playing into the dynamics of patriotism and empire; second, the events can be understood in terms of diplomatic gift-giving.

There is a long-standing connection between science and Europe's colonial empires, perhaps attested most obviously by the grand natural history museums across the continent (Harris 2005). Further, the running of zoos themselves was often a symbol of life defiantly continuing despite the war as well as nationalistic symbols (Koenigsberger 2007). The sheer difficulty of transporting a platypus to Britain, and its acclimatizing, speaks not only to the ingenuity of Britain and Australia, but also to their ability to progress despite the ongoing war: "In addition to being emblems of colonial domination, zoos symbolised competition for preeminence between Western rivals. A Europe-wide species debut would be a considerable triumph" (294).

Lawrence further argues that the platypus was intended to play a diplomatic role by acting as a kind of gift, promoting cooperation between Britain and Australia. After Japan entered the war there had been increasing tension due to many of Australia's resources and soldiers being sent to Europe, and the perception that Britain had not done enough in light of the war opening in the

Pacific, more-or-less abandoning her colonies. Diplomatic gift-giving often functions to generate networks of obligation between nations, encouraging aid.

Historically, gifts have been displayed to achieve their value in complex diplomatic relationships. The display of the platypus in London Zoo would have ‘activated and publicised’ the meaning of the gift, just as Churchill was advised to achieve the ‘public object’ with a demonstration of military assistance to Australia. Australia could conspicuously oblige Churchill’s whims, and he could fulfill the role of colonial benefactor (296)

Further, the symbolism of an endemic and iconic Australian animal acclimatizing to Britain is important here too.

Acquiring a platypus, an animal so symbolic and highly protected in Australia, could be a token way of symbolically re-staking British claim over Australia, after Curtin [Australia’s Prime Minister] had publicly ended Australian reliance on Britain. ‘Winston’ was to become accustomed to ‘our climate’ and ‘British worms’, becoming a British platypus. (296)

So, Lawrence compares our original narrative, emphasizing Churchill’s eccentricity, with a richer narrative that emphasizes the geopolitical and the propagandistic alongside that eccentricity. Let’s draw attention to a feature of Lawrence’s practice: her use of archival evidence. Lawrence provides at least three kinds of evidence to support her argument. First, background information about the connection between empire and science. Second, she presents telegrams from the Churchill archives discussing the platypus. Third, quotes from Australian newspapers. Let’s consider a few examples, starting with a telegram:

I have just received a letter from W. S. Robinson. He says that the Australian Government have suspended their must-cherished law about preventing a platypus from leaving the

country. One is now on its way to you accompanied by 50,000 especially chosen worms! The Australian Government believes that these ample rations will keep the platypus happy and well until it becomes attuned to our climate and to British worms. (fig 2 of Lawrence, 293)

In this telegram we see evidence for the difficulty and importance of sending the platypus (the Australian government having to officially suspend a law in wartime, for instance), which as we'll see matters for Lawrence's arguments against the idiosyncrasy narrative. We also see the emphasis on the platypus becoming acclimatized. The newspaper articles, quoting folks involved in the breeding program, quite convincingly suggest that the Australians at least were thinking of things in terms of gift-giving. Michael Fleay is quoted as saying: "Might not the little animals be urgers for more planes and guns? Even *Ornithorhynchus* was entering the war effort" (quoted in Lawrence, 206). Lawrence's story does seem to track the explicit justification given by the Australians.

Note a few things about the case so far. First off, compared to more developed historical cases it is quite simple. There has not been a flourishing research program examining Winston the platypus (more's the pity)⁶, and thus the basic ideas and arguments are easily explained. I hope this is a feature not a bug: the primary aim of this paper is to illustrate how the philosophy of history in practice might go, and how it might be a productive avenue, and so a simple case serves me well. Further, at this point I've only appealed to a particular aspect of practice—the use of archival materials as evidence. Later, I'll also (speculatively) discuss archival practice itself. I'm absolutely open to the charge that I've only dipped ever-so-lightly into historical practice

⁶ An anonymous referee points me towards a recent guardian article by Alistair Paton (2022) that recounts the episode emphasizing Churchill's idiosyncrasy. The line "Historians have tried to place this episode in a broader context of empire and international geopolitics, but it seems Churchill just really wanted a platypus" can only be a reference to Lawrence, so perhaps there is space for a debate here still...

here: archival discovery and the use of archival resources as evidence are only two aspects of historical practice, and no doubt I am giving them shallow treatments here. You should do better.

Second, note that our two competing narratives—the *idiosyncratic* and the *geopolitical*—do not seem to disagree on the chronologies. The latter includes a bunch of events that the former doesn't, but in terms of what things happened in what order, there doesn't appear to be disagreement. The disagreement, then, is between the *narratives*. While both agree that Churchill's personality played some role in the subsequent events, the idiosyncrasy narrative lays a lot more significance upon it. The nature of the disagreement becomes clear in this quote from Lawrence:

Firstly, the demanding husbandry of the animal, forestalling all previous attempts to export them, was to be attempted at a time when resources were stretched extremely thinly. Secondly, Churchill's request stemmed from personal interest yet had wide public and political ramifications. Lastly, the form of a 'gift' was central to these ramifications, simultaneously implying submission and creating an obligation. If Churchill had simply desired an exotic animal, he would surely have done better requesting one likely to survive in Britain, or arrive at all (294).

Lawrence does not simply argue that the geopolitical narrative is a good one, but also argues that the competitor is unsuccessful: Winston's idiosyncrasy is not sufficient to explain the herculean task of trying to get a live platypus to England. So, there is a *prima facie* real disagreement, and it is a disagreement about narrative events, not chronological facts.

Third, as we've seen, Lawrence appeals to historical, archival evidence in attempting to undermine one narrative and support another. Just as an historian might dig up a set of old texts and translate them in order to establish a sequence of events, or the latest possible date something could have occurred, or whatever, here we see an historian using the interpretation

and contextualization of telegraphs and newspaper articles to provide some kind of *prima facie* evidential support in favour of one narrative over another.

Let me pause here to be explicit about what I am and what I am not saying about Lawrence's argument from a realist perspective. You might worry that Lawrence cannot be read as denying the eccentricity narrative because she includes Churchill's eccentricity in her story. This isn't a case of falsifying one narrative in favour of another, but synthesizing various factors into what I've elsewhere called a 'complex' narrative (Currie 2014, 2019). That is in part correct, but note that Lawrence does think that one crucial part of the eccentricity narrative is false, and explicitly argues this in the quote above. She argues that Churchill's eccentricity is sufficient for the episode to have occurred. In this sense Lawrence does say that the narrative is false: it over-inflates the significance of Churchill's personality. And as I'll cash out in the next section, realists about narratives think that at least sometimes arguments about historical significance are arguments about how the past in fact was, that can turn on historical evidence.

These latter points should be puzzling to the anti-realist: if narratives are not true or false, in cases where there are competing narratives (but not chronologies) why would empirical evidence bear upon that competition? In the next two sections I'll draw on this case to provide responses to Mink's two arguments, and sketch how a focus on historical practice might motivate realist positions.

5. Practice & Metaphysics

The argument from aggregation takes us from a set of realist expectations (if historians describe the world, then like other descriptions we should expect these to aggregate) and a claim about narrative form (narratives do not aggregate) to an argument against realism. In this section, I'll briefly follow an argument due to Daniel Swaim and myself (Currie & Swaim 2021) to

suggest that the argument is not sound insofar as realists need not expect their descriptions to aggregate, before sketching how a realist metaphysics might be drawn from practice.

To say that a realist should expect explanations to aggregate is a strange one. Even on accounts that emphasize the ontic side of explanations, explanations are highly context-sensitive, their being satisfied depending crucially on the interests of the parties involved. Further, a realist ontology that claims that significance is something which is discovered not projected need not be a *simple* ontology. In circumstances where we combine two narratives, thus a beginning becomes a middle, say, the realist can say that both beginnings *are in fact* beginnings—that they are significant in the way those explanations claim—but they are beginnings to different stories, and various events partake in many differing stories. And do so irrelevantly of whether we have found ourselves interested in telling that story. There's a lot of different ways in which we might cash out this promiscuity about narrative significance and events, but at base, instead of saying that there is *no* significance discovered in the world, the realist can instead say there is a *lot* of significance in the world, and which aspects of that significance we highlight depends upon our explanatory interests.

Note that I've been more-or-less using 'historical event' and 'significance' interchangeably. This is because, in the current context, a historical event is understood as constituted by a chronology and a claim about its significance: the event of Churchill loving animals is significant (for our story at least) because it led to Winston's untimely demise. I've also just cashed out 'significance' as being in the world, and this might strike you as odd. How could something as mind-dependent as 'significance' be an ontological feature? Here's one way to tackle this (thanks to Aidan Ryall for discussion). We might say that significance attributions (say, Winston the platypus mattered because he was a diplomatic gift) pick out a wide variety of different relations in the world: causal, constitutive, logical, political influences, rational actions, take your pick. A significance attribution gains purchase—is true—when the token relation picked out in fact

existed and in fact played the role it needs to in the relevant narrative. When Lawrence appeals to evidence from newspapers, say, she is evidencing that the relevant relation—the Australian conception that Winston would generate British obligations—held. On this view, ‘significance’ is not a mere projection, but a multiply realizable property which is truly realized when the token relation both holds and does the work specified in the explanation. The anti-realist, I suppose, is welcome to claim that there are merely many true things we might say about relations in the past, but insist that these are only transmogrified into ‘historical events’ or made significant once the historical categories or explanations at hand are generated by historians, but this strikes me as epiphenomenal to the discussion: significance attributions are made true by a combination of explanatory requirements, but also *the world*; they are true or false. As I said in the last section, even though Lawrence does not deny that Churchill’s eccentricity played a role in the story, she argues that it is not sufficient: it is not as significant as claimed in the original idiosyncrasy narrative. I’ve just explained how a realist about narratives could understand this.

So, the argument from non-aggregation cannot tell between a promiscuous realist ontology and an anti-realist one. But this in itself is not an argument for promiscuous realist ontologies. I think an appeal to practice does provide at least a motivation in this direction.

Mink’s argument works by drawing metaphysical conclusions by comparing narrative structure to realist expectations. One way of drawing metaphysical conclusions from practice is to argue from features of a practice, to the world needing to be a certain way to explain those features. What kinds of features might we have in mind? We might appeal to the success of a practice, or to its coherency, or to its motivations, and so on⁷. Epistemic practices have internal logics, and differing internal logics are more effective for understanding different kinds of

⁷ For examples of this strategy, see Chang 2022, Waters 2016 and (perhaps controversially) Hacking 1983’s ‘experimental realism’.

systems. So, when a logic works, we might appeal to features of those systems to explain that success (Currie & Walsh 2018).

In the last section, we saw how Lawrence examined Australian newspaper records and the Churchill archive, generating interpretive evidence in favour of a richer narrative about Winston the Platypus. We might disagree about whether Lawrence's arguments are successful, but hopefully we'll agree that they are *motivated*. There is good reason for historians to use archival evidence in this way. But, if we are anti-realists, I'm not sure what that motivation might be. A Mink-style anti-realist appeals to the role of the historian's imagination to project narratives onto the past:

... the significance of the past is determinate only by virtue of our own disciplined imagination. Insofar as the significance of past occurrences is understandable only as they are locatable in the ensemble of interrelationships that can be grasped only in the construction of narrative form, it is we who make the past determinate in this respect (130).

If narratives are cognitive devices *only*, then I'm not sure what role such evidence should play: it doesn't seem to buy us anything. To be clear, what I don't mean by this is that anti-realists have no story about narrative disagreement—far from it—they can claim that one narrative is more illuminating than another, say, or that it generates richer understanding (Roth 2019 is particularly clear on this). But these features of (mere) cognitive devices don't make sense of the historian's practice of testing and examining narrative and historical events by doing archival work and then presenting analysis drawn from that work as evidence for or against the truth of significance claims made within narratives.

Consider a relational account of data, wherein data is understood as potential evidence which, when suitably 'enriched' with relevant information about the circumstances of its

production, how it has been managed and travelled, might be employed to evidence some claim⁸. For the anti-realist, archival data can only evidence chronologies; for the realist, they can evidence narratives as well. That Lawrence appears to use archival data to evidence her narrative over a competitor (especially where there is not disagreement concerning chronology) should at the very least *prima facie* motivate realism.

At least some prevalent historical practices, then, appear to be predicated on realism about narratives, that is, on the idea that at least sometimes narratives structures are reflect in the world and historians discover these. Although I find this kind of argument convincing, I happily admit that it isn't anything close to a knock-down argument against the anti-realist. But I think the ways in which they might respond are interesting and productive. The anti-realist might double-down, saying, *so much the worse for historical practice*. This is a bold move. More interestingly, they might try to show how the kinds of practices I've pointed to, archival work for instance, is made sense of in anti-realist terms. Perhaps certain kinds of archival practices are particularly good ways of generating the resources for building effective cognitive instruments. Or on another tack, they might shift from a metaphysical anti-realism—the question of whether the world has narrative structures—to an epistemic anti-realism. Perhaps there are features of historical epistemology that should lead us to think that only rarely do historians succeed in generating true narratives. I consider these to be fruitful avenues of investigation, largely because they bring philosophical consideration of history closer to what historians do: we must examine archival (and other) practices to make such arguments.

A further question that arises concerns how exactly the proposed realist should make sense of historical practice: how historians bring evidence to bare on narratives is predicated on narratives sometimes capturing the structure of the world, but how do they manage to in fact

⁸ See Leonelli 2016, Boyd 2018, Currie 2021

capture those structures in the right circumstances? To get a very initial grip on this, let's turn to Mink's second argument.

6. Events & Practice

Mink argues that historical events are the events they are in virtue of being situated in a narrative structure. As the realist takes their cue from events as they (apparently) are in science, they assume an inverse structure. Where the realist wants chronologies to provide events, the anti-realist takes narratives to provide events. Metaphysically speaking, the promiscuous forms of realism mentioned above show how a sufficiently complex realism can happily say that historical events are part of the world. If Lawrence is right, the idiosyncrasy narrative falsely claimed that Churchill's personality was extremely significant—in fact the major explanatory driver—for the fate of his monotreme namesake. Because the relation between Churchill's love of animals, and Winston's subsequent death, posited in the narrative didn't in fact hold, the narrative is rendered false. Further, if Lawrence is right, various geopolitical events (Australia and Britain's falling out after Japan entered the war) are much more significant than we thought. The realist claims these are discoveries, they reflect the structure of the world, but will also argue that historical facts take on many different significances for many different narratives. Mink's argument appears then to fail on the first premise: the realist need not think that historical events are determinable independent of narratives, precisely because they think that narratives correctly describe historical trajectories.

Although the metaphysical inference is unlicensed, Mink gets something right about events in terms of the representations that historians craft. It is true that historical explanation is all about situating events within historical trajectories, and so how events are represented and thought about are closely tied to the narrative at hand. If we take this point back to practice with a little speculation about archival work, I think we should to an extent reject Mink's holism in

favour an interdependence between historical facts and historical events. And, as I'll suggest, this interdependence offers support for the realist.

In Lawrence's work, should we think of the development of the chronology and narrative as separate processes? Taking the abstracting strategy that Mink does—focusing on historiographic narrative in isolation—it is tempting to see the chronology as being laid down first, and then a narrative be laid upon it. Many philosophers of history have rightly objected to this kind of picture (Roth 2019, for instance), but I think a concern for practice might give us a different perspective. How did Lawrence develop her view? Although I don't know for sure, here is a plausible sketch.

Having heard the strange tale of Winston the Platypus, Lawrence began hunting through the Churchill archives, looking for mention of Winston and related materials. How she searched—what counted as a significant find—turned crucially on that initial narrative. However, that narrative began to shift as she noted discrepancies, mention of the task's difficulty, hints concerning geopolitical importance. Lawrence may have recalled—or already had in mind—geopolitical framings of history, and a new narrative may have begun to form. This new narrative would have led her to further archival work. Perhaps now she began looking for mention of the platypus in Australian newspapers of the time, striking particularly upon the explicit appeals to Winston providing a motivation for further of Britain's wartime resources heading to Australia.

I don't know whether this is a correct description of Lawrence's process, but that doesn't matter for our purposes here. Regardless of the exact ordering of things, we neither see the chronology determining the events, nor the narrative⁹. Rather, narratives play a role in shaping what matters in archival work, but the events discovered within that work also push back and play a role in shaping the narratives. Perhaps we want to say they are co-constitutive, or

⁹ I also don't think it matters if the process was more post-hoc, Lawrence constructing the narrative after the archival work: it is the interdependence that matters, not the specific timing.

interdependent, or similar. But the point is, in terms of historical practice, we should neither be holists about events nor reductionists (that is, saying they are simply determined by the chronology). Rather, ‘events’ emerge via a dynamic interplay of standing narratives, which play a role in shaping significance, and the historical record, which pushes back. In other words, what I want to say about practice for philosophers-in-practice, I also want to say about the relationship between historians and archives, primary sources act as one source of resistance for historical theorizing and narrativizing.

Insofar as archival work ties history to the actuality of the past, then this interdependence makes historical narratives answerable to how the world was, that is, it gives succour to the realist. Albeit through complex routes, if a line can be drawn from the event’s occurrence, and how it is discussed and interpreted via the archive, then we have some reason to think that narratives can be true or false and empirically testable.

I mentioned above that the anti-realist might shift to an epistemic footing, and this appeal to archives raises a strategy for them. Whether we think historians succeed in providing true narratives now turns on the quality of their sources. And, the anti-realist might very plausibly argue, the primary sources of history—archives—are very distant from dry attempts to capture what happened. What texts are written, which survive, and which are deemed significant enough to be archived, is clearly an issue wrought with political and ideological aspects. That is, we might agree that archival sources are data, but think it highly suspect data. This is obvious to historians, but the isolating strategy philosophers adopt has at least sometimes obscured this.

7. Conclusion

My primary aim has been to sketch what I’ve called *The Philosophy of History in Practice*, and suggest that it is a productive approach to doing the philosophy of history. My strategy in doing this was to take two of Mink’s arguments, and try to show how a practice-based philosopher

might respond, suggesting a route to realism. Should you be convinced of these responses? Well, I'm not sure: they are not intended to be knock-down objections (indeed, these come rarely in practice-oriented work). But of course that isn't the primary point—the primary point is to show which productive avenues open up.

I've argued that realism makes better sense of the role of archival work in history. But does it? Are there forms of anti-realism which can also accommodate this feature? Part of that argument turned on the idea that there were *prima facie* empirical disputes regarding narratives but not chronologies. But if we go beyond *prima facie*, are there really disputes here? The promiscuous ontology of the form of realism I prefer makes historical disagreement almost as tricky as it is for anti-realists. In many cases historians may have different explanatory targets, and so highlight different factors in the past—here apparent disagreement might in fact be difference in interest or emphasis (Currie & Walsh 2019).

I've made my argument on the basis of a very simple case, rather casually described: am I right about how historical practice goes, did I smuggle in simplifications that really mattered for the arguments I made? Answering this would involve looking carefully at how historians do work well beyond narrative historiography. I've argued that the relationship between archival practice, chronologies and narratives should be viewed in terms of a complex interdependence, and that this interdependence makes narratives answerable to the world. But this might be a poisoned chalice to the realist: how well really do archival practices really do this? How important is their role in historical practice really? And further, history of course is no way near a monolith, but as diverse and complex as any epistemic pursuit. As such, our answers to these questions are unlikely to be general or homogenous.

Overall, then, even if I've not convinced you of realism—or even of the *prima-facie* motivation I've claimed for it—I do hope I've convinced you that a philosophy of history that takes the processes and procedures of historical work seriously, that attends to practice,

promises to be a productive and fascinating pursuit which both opens new questions and opportunities for philosophers to interact with the details of historical work and with historians themselves.

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