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Is narrativism empirically plausible? What we can learn from the case study approach for the philosophy of historiography

Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen

Narrativist philosophy of historiography or narrativism in short has been a dominant tradition in the theory and philosophy of historiography for some decades. Dominance can be understood as popularity as an approach and as philosophical sophistication with regard to rival doctrines. Hayden White once lamented that “historians [...] have transformed narrativity from a manner of speaking into a *paradigm* of the form which reality itself displays”.¹ What is more, the concept of “narrative” has also travelled fluidly to neighbouring disciplines and is now taken as a given in many discussions in the humanities.²

It has become customary to associate narrativism primarily with two authors and their main works: Hayden White’s *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* and Frank Ankersmit’s *Narrative Logic. A Semantic Analysis of the Historian’s Language*.³ The contributions of narrativism are undeniable. First, it correctly shifted attention from atomistic statements of the past or fragments of a text to entire texts of historiography and the features of texts. Second, it suggested that such texts provide a general and synthesised view of the past. Narrativists have called this synthesising entity variously, for example, “narrative”, “narrative substance”, and “representation”. Third, narrativists remarked that texts contain properties (coherence, fullness, meanings, etc.) that have no counterparts in the past and that should be understood as “subject-sided” creations and postulations on the past by the historian. On a general level I agree with all three points and specifically with the idea that the central cognitive contribution of his-

1 Hayden White, The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality, in: *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980), p. 27, emphasis Kuukkanen.

2 Matti Hyvärinen, Towards a Conceptual History of Narrative, in: Matti Hyvärinen, Anu Korhonen, Juri Mykkänen, *The Travelling Concept of Narrative*, Helsinki 2006 (*Studies across Disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences* 1), p. 20–41.

3 Hayden White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe*, Baltimore 1973; Frank R. Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic. A Semantic Analysis of the Historian’s Language*, Boston, London 1983. There are other notable narrativists, such as Paul Ricœur and David Carr. Their approach has sometimes been called “phenomenological” narrativism to indicate that their focus differs from that of linguistically oriented White and Ankersmit. The former understand narrativity as a kind of transcendental condition of human experiencing rather than as a disciplinary feature of historiographical presentation.

toriography is some kind of content-integrating entity. But my approach also differs on the level of details and ultimately goes beyond narrativism altogether.⁴

A few papers have been published on narratives and case studies and even specifically on the relation of evidence and narrativity in historiography.⁵ However, no one has treated narrativism itself as a philosophical doctrine to be tested despite the fact that narrativity is commonly understood as a feature that characterises historiography. That is, it is often assumed that history books are narratively organised. Furthermore, many scholars think that any text of history is a narrative, which entails that historiography is essentially narrativist:⁶ if no narrativity, then no text of historiography!⁷

My purpose is to subject narrativism to an empirical test much in the spirit of Larry Laudan who tested the viability of convergent realism as a philosophical doctrine against the history of science.⁸ And because this paper is a part of a theme issue on case studies, I focus on two questions related to the theme: (1) Are narrativism and the case study approach compatible? (2) Does narrativism as a philosophical doctrine provide a plausible description of historiography? The first question considers whether narrativism allows that its main theoretical postulation, “narrative”, can be tested empirically. It turns out that the answer is negative. Narratives are empirically immune and therefore narrativism and the case study approach are incompatible. Given that narrativism and the assumption that history books are narratively organised is nevertheless an empirical claim about historiography, the second question tests this assumption by a case study. The “case” is a book of history, Christopher Clark’s *The Sleepwalkers. How Europe Went to War in 1914*.⁹

I argue that despite its apparent narrative mode of arrangement it is not, in fact, narratively constructed if “narrative” is understood as entailing holism and chronological ordering. Therefore I conclude that narrativism as a philosophical doctrine does not receive support from this case study. Furthermore, as detailed in the relevant section below, it is my view that Clark’s book is a representative sample of

4 Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*, Basingstoke 2015.

5 Katherina Kinzel, Narrative and Evidence. How Can Case Studies from the History of Science Support Claims in the Philosophy of Science, in: *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 49 (2015), p. 48–57; Jutta Schickore, More Thoughts on HPS: Another 20 Years Later, in: *Perspectives on Science* 19 (2011), p. 453–481.

6 Nancy Partner, Foundations: Theoretical Framework for Knowledge of the Past, in: Nancy Partner, Sarah R. I. Foot, *The SAGE Handbook of Historical Theory*, Los Angeles 2013, p. 2. White, Value, p. 6–8.

7 Ankersmit uses a weaker expression and says that books of history “typically” adopt a narrative mode, cf. Frank R. Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, Stanford 2005, p. XIIV.

8 Larry Laudan, A Confutation of Convergent Realism, *Philosophy of Science* 4 (1981), p. 19–49, here 48.

9 Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers. How Europe Went to War in 1914*, London 2012.

‘narrativist historiography’. Naturally, this does not put into question other, perhaps more moderate versions of narrativism, but their construction, if there are any, is a task for narrativists. My suggestion is that it is “argumentativity” that characterises historiography as a disciplinary approach on the past. It is worth noting that this view is compatible with the claim that historians use *also* narrative techniques to argue for their theses on the past. I will briefly explain this in the end of the paper.

It is necessary to pay attention to a few terminological issues. A central distinction in this paper is between history and historiography. Broadly speaking, “history” means the past itself and “historiography” the results of the investigations of the past that are normally presented in a textual form. Moreover, as the paragraph above indicates, I use “case study” as a general term to mean any “case” that can stand in an evidential relation to what is tested. It can be thus, say, “events” in the history of science as it is typically understood but also, for example, a sample text as an exemplification of practice and a product of historiography.

I begin this essay with a brief stipulative section, the aim of which is to spell out some main features of a successful employment of case studies. After that, I outline briefly some main features of narrativism and study how the relationship between narratives and historiography has been perceived by the narrativist philosophers of historiography. The third section explains why narratives are immune to empirical challenges by case studies. One will see that narratives do not fulfil all the conditions of case studies as stipulated in the first section. The final substantial part of this paper tests the postulation of the narrativity of historiography, i.e. the suggestion that all historiographical texts are organised narratively. I conclude my paper with a brief discussion on the value and the force of the case study approach itself.

Preliminaries on case studies

It is difficult to say with certainty for how long case studies have been used to judge the viability of philosophical ideas. Traditionally case studies have been used in the history and philosophy of science (HPS), but they are relatively recent additions even to the tool box of HPS. This is, of course, to be expected, because the history and philosophy of science itself emerged largely as an offspring of the historical philosophy of science. Its emergence went hand in hand with demands for historical accountability of the positivist models of science. In any case, HPS is the most natural starting point in a study of case studies.

It is notable that many historical philosophers, such as Thomas Kuhn in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*¹⁰ and also Stephen Toulmin in his *Foresight and Understanding*,¹¹ tried the “synthetical” approach, i.e. they formed a view of science through history by way of writing “theoretical history”.¹² By contrast, case studies seem to work the other way round. They test pre-conceived models and philosophical ideas by reference to the historical record. For example, Rachel and Larry Laudan and Arthur Donovan in their classic case-study book *Scrutinizing Science: Empirical Studies of Scientific Change*¹³ called for extensive and systematic testing of “post-positivist theories” “against the empirical record”.¹⁴ Broadly speaking, I will approach my “cases” with a similar assumption: there is a philosophical view of historiography, narrativism, and its tenability is to be evaluated empirically. In what follows, I will stipulate some conditions for such an approach in order to explicate what is implied by the idea of “case studies”. Often these implications are left implicit. After this, I outline more generally what the case study approach as understood in this essay entails and, just as important, what it does not entail.

In general, the case-study approach seems to be based on the following presuppositions:

(1) A certain philosophical theory, idea or model is assumed to characterise some phenomena.

A theory, idea or model, such as Kuhn’s idea that science is problem-solving activity, has thus to apply to more than one phenomenon and typically in general to a certain class of phenomena, such as science. If there were only one application, the phenomenon would be unique and particular in the historicist sense of historical research.

(2) A case to be studied is chosen so that it is representative of the phenomena.

If the chosen case were not representative, then it could obviously not lead to any conclusion on how well the theory, idea or model characterises the phenomenon. It would be a situation of a badly chosen case.

(3) It is necessary to empirically investigate whether the relevant features of the theory, idea or model can be detected in the case study.

For example, one could focus on whether Dalton’s chemistry in the beginning of 19th century can be regarded as an instance of Kuhnian problem-solving activity.

10 Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago 1970.

11 Stephen Toulmin, *Foresight and Understanding: An Enquiry into the Aims of Science*, London 1961.

12 Alexander Bird, Thomas Kuhn, Bucks 2000, p. VIII.

13 Arthur Donovan, Larry Laudan, Rachel Laudan (eds.), *Scrutinizing Science. Empirical Studies of Scientific Change*, Baltimore 1992.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

(4) If the features are detected, the philosophical theory, idea or model receives support. If they are not, then the theory, idea or model is not supported by the case study.

If chemists working on the atomic theory, say, in the middle of the 19th century, shared a number of fundamental assumptions and attempted to solve the remaining “puzzles” of the Daltonian atomic theory, then Kuhn’s idea could be said to receive support. By contrast, if they were driven primarily by personal interests or by a noble sense of truth, then this case would seem to challenge Kuhn’s idea.

This may resemble a fairly straightforward “falsificationist” idea of theory testing, but I believe it captures the essence of the case-study approach. Laudan and Donovan’s volume mentioned above is perhaps the best-known example. Equally good is Laudan’s celebrated article *A Confutation of Convergent Realism*.¹⁵

Now what needs to be spelled out are the three fundamental components of the case study model. In order to use case studies, there has to be

(A) a theory, idea or model to be tested.

And the theory, idea or model has to be

(B) empirically accountable.

This means that it must be possible to provide empirical support or question the theory, idea or model on the basis of empirical evidence. It is important to notice that, in order to test a theory, idea or model by case studies, it cannot be definitional or analytic, i.e. true by virtue of meaning. Finally, it must be possible

(C) to investigate that part of the research object that is characterised by the theory, idea or model in question.

Now, the case study approach has been questioned recently. Since my main focus is on narrativism and the question of its empirical support, I will not offer a general discussion of case studies at length. Some commenting is nevertheless in order. In this commentary, I concentrate on Schickore¹⁶ who is perhaps the main contemporary critic of the case study approach and who also takes Laudan as a representative advocate of this approach and calls it the “confrontation model of HPS”.¹⁷ Schickore argues that the “confrontation model of HPS” must be abandoned. I am not a committed Laudanian and do not intend to defend the latter’s

¹⁵ Laudan, *Confutation*, p. 48.

¹⁶ Schickore, *More Thoughts*.

¹⁷ Other critics include: Thomas Nickles, *Remarks on the Use of History as Evidence*, *Synthese* 69 (1986), p. 253–266; Hans Radder, *Philosophy and History of Science: Beyond the Kuhnian Paradigm*, in: *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 28 (1997), p. 633–655; Alan Richardson, *Philosophy of Science and Its Rational Reconstructions: Remarks on the VPI Program for Testing Philosophies of Science*, in: *Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association Vol 1* (1992), p. 36–46; Katherina Kinzel, *Narrative and Evidence*. It seems to me that Jutta Schickore summarises the main points of critique in her article although, for example, Kinzel disagrees with her about certain points.

specific theory (whether or not Schickore's reading of Laudan is correct). My aim is to identify the potentially valuable core of the case study approach to be used in assessing the empirical plausibility of narrativism.

One difference between Schickore's analysis and mine is that she is particularly concerned with HPS and, as a consequence, with the nature of the philosophy of science and history of science in the current academic climate. For me it is not a problem if the history of science has turned to practice and materiality¹⁸ that are far removed from the concerns of the philosophy of science, or if it is not clear what "philosophy of science" is. My issue is here not the "failed marriage of HPS", but philosophical/abstract ideas and doctrines and their empirical standing in general. I also do not think that history research provides a unique access to science (assuming that the practitioners of HPS did). I agree with Schickore that there might be other fields, such as sociology, that provide empirical data to be used in theory testing.

Perhaps Schickore's central critical point is that "pure description of knowledge" is impossible. I do not know how many advocates of the case study approach believed in the possibility of "pure description"¹⁹ which seems to imply some kind of naïve positivist idea of a factual (and perhaps permanent) basis that is more or less neutrally observable and describable. In any case, it is not necessary to assume something like this. It is enough to accept that there are different cognitive and interpretative levels. Not everything is theory and not everything is data (or "facts" if desired) in any one interpretative approach. In other words, the essential commitment is to the level of lower-order data and to the level of higher-order ideas/concepts/theories and the evidential relation between them. The distinction between the levels is not absolute and may be nested so that a data level in one case may be a theory-level in another.²⁰

18 One might note that, if the historians' "mundane" material-practical view of science is correct, Schickore's suggestion that the confrontation model likens philosophy to natural science is misconceived, if the latter is understood as "a practice of confronting general theory". (Schickore, *More Thoughts*, p. 471). In other words, if this is how the confrontation model is designed, then it is not modelled after natural science but perhaps after a certain image of science.

19 In actuality, we find this attitude in some recent historiography of science, for my criticism see Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, *The Missing Narrativist Turn in the Historiography of Science*, in: *History and Theory* 51 (2012), p. 340–363.

20 Colligations such as the "Christian expansion" that refers to the spread of Christianity in the early decades and centuries of the first millennium may be understood as an arrangement of lower-order data but they in turn may be colligated further and play a role in another colligatory concept. For example, there is much discussion on the nature of "Christian expansion" including the suggestions of the "flashlight conversion model, the idea of social networking and the metaphor of the market place." (see H.A. Drake, *Models for Christian Expansion*, in: W.V. Harris, *The Spread of Christianity in the First Four Centuries: Essays in explanation*, Leiden 2012, p. 1–13).

Given this, how is “testing” then possible? Critics remark that if all data is theory-laden, data is not independent of the theory and cannot be used to test the latter. This is correct, but does not threaten the idea of empirical accountability *unless it is assumed that all data is theory-laden by all theory*. Theory-ladenness means only that a particular set of data cannot be used to test a particular theory if that data is laden by that theory. It is, of course, true that the term “test” may be too strong in that it seems to imply “instant rationality” and falsification of a theory. It might be better to talk about evaluation or assessment of empirical support in light of data.

Schickore’s suggestion is that the analysis of science proceeds through “hermeneutic analysis” “Initial case judgments—judgments that identify portions of the historical record as noteworthy—and provisional analytic concepts are gradually reconciled until they are brought into equilibrium.”²¹ One wonders how dissimilar this is to Laudan’s project in that it also began with an initial idea that was subsequently modified in light of empirical analysis. Indeed, Schickore writes that “[i]ronically, the career of the VPI [Virginia Polytechnic Institute that outlined the confrontation model] project nicely exemplifies the hermeneutic character of meta-scientific analysis”.²²

The main issue is to distinguish theory from evidence, which is something that also Schickore does (despite criticism) although she emphasises the two-way feedback mechanism more than her predecessors. Even a hermeneutist needs some kind of historical record to be described and redescribed. I would characterise the possibility of modification more cautiously than Schickore, however. At any given time, there appears to be a set of basic cognitive propositions (thus more than “data”), which is modified only as a means of last resort. They are not “pure descriptions” but *generally accepted beliefs* at a given time and in a community of historians, such as the belief that Charles Darwin travelled to the Galapagos Islands and studied finches of various bird species in 1830s. The historian’s task is to provide an interpretation and consider, for example, the reason and significance of this journey. Why did he go there? To find facts? To advance his economic interests or because of spiritual need? To find an adjustment between his kind of theory and practice? These kinds of basic statements can be modified in principle but their redescription is usually avoided because they play a foundational evidential role. I believe with Lakatos that historiography is engaged in a rational reconstruction of the historical record but that implies that there is nevertheless a record to be reconstructed. It is not universally given and it is not neutral but a set of the record has

21 Schickore, *More Thoughts*, p. 471.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 473.

to be taken as given in practice in any research work. The upshot is that this record is used as an evidence base in "testing"; otherwise the quest for empirical accountability would be pointless.

If one wishes to test whether science is structured by paradigms, for example, one should choose a case of mature science and be able to identify a certain set of fundamental laws, problem-solutions and law-schemas and a near unanimous commitment to them among scientists. If they cannot be found, then the case study can be said to show that the paradigm supposition in this form is wrong at least in this case. "Initial case judgements" may need to be revised to make the case theory-relevant but a post-hoc revision of how data is described cannot be the only course of action as a reaction to a misfit with the evidence. Naturally, it is not clear what the exact conclusion should be. Would it be that there simply are no "paradigms" in the Kuhnian sense? There might still be paradigms in some modified sense. Or is it that the concept of "paradigm" applies only to a part of science or to some sciences, which were not represented by the case studies in question? It appears that it is always possible to doubt the force and significance of a case study and to question its scope of applicability and representativeness. More generally, it is often remarked that the failure to find supporting evidence or the discovery of negative evidence alone are not sufficient reasons to reject the tested philosophical theory, idea or model. Philosophy of science contains much discussion on this, for example, in relation to the Quine-Duhem thesis of underdetermination of theory by data and more specifically in relation to the problems of Popper's falsificationism that were pointed out by Thomas Kuhn and Imre Lakatos. Nevertheless, the default assumption is that the case study approach as discussed above has a role in a *broader scheme of epistemological accountability* of philosophical ideas. In the concluding section of this paper I further discuss the role of case studies as empirical arbiters. In the following section, I move to a discussion and testing of my "case": narrativism.

Narrative as a transcendental unit of intelligibility

The narrativist philosophy of historiography (e.g. Ankersmit or White) placed texts into the focus of philosophical analysis. It suggested that the most important cognitive contributions of historiography are the narratives that historiographical texts contain. It may be said that the approach to focus on books and the outcomes of them, rather than only on some parts of them, is reasonable and an improvement in comparison to the earlier analytic philosophy of history.

However, the conclusion that historiographical presentations always take a narrative form was not reached on the basis of empirical investigation, but is more like

a pre-empirical postulation designed to make sense of the nature of historiography. White postulated that the historian imposes a pattern on his subject. There is thus a whiff of Kantianism in White in the sense that Whitean tropes and other structuring patterns function as a kind of transcendental condition that organises “chaotic” historiographical data.²³ While White seemingly applies his tropological reading to a number of classic books in historiography and philosophy of history, this application appears to be an application of non-empirically conceived categories. What is more, Herman Paul has pointed out that the ten main chapters of *Metahistory* were written in the 1960s, well before the author’s “linguistic turn”. The preface, introduction and conclusion that outline White’s tropological theory were drafted later at the turn of the 1970s and reflect his fascination with linguistic structuralism. Paul writes that “whereas the introduction promises an analysis of historical narratives, few of the chapters that follow pay more than cursory attention to the historical narratives written by the authors under consideration”.²⁴

In my opinion, we need pre-empirical postulations and categories to make the world around us comprehensible (because empirical data do not provide them automatically), but all such postulations must appear reasonable intellectually and be seen justified also in light of empirical evidence. The postulation of the narrativity of historiography is problematic in this sense. First, “narrative” resembles a transcendental condition of historiography, which makes “narrative” all-encompassing and forces one to narrativise any textual product whatsoever. Second, “narrative” is seen as a holistic entity, which makes it an unsuitable object for testing by case studies. In this section, I focus on these two aspects. In the next section, I investigate some further problems with regard to the empirical vindication of narratives.

It is typical that the notion of “narrative” is not defined very precisely in the texts of the narrativist philosophers of historiography. Although Ankersmit writes at length on “narrative substances” in his *Narrative Logic*²⁵ and about “representation” in his later books,²⁶ it is still difficult to find a concise list of the conditions of narrativity. However, it is possible to compile a list of some conditions of narrativity from several sources.

Let me begin with a negative aspect. Although “narrative” is often equated with “story”, it is something more abstract for the narrativist philosophers of historiography. On one occasion Ankersmit says explicitly that any comparisons to the

23 For White’s Kantianism, see: Hans Kellner, Hayden White and the Kantian Discourse: Tropology, Narrative and Freedom, in: Charles Sills, *The Philosophy of Discourse: The Rhetorical Turn in Twentieth-Century Thought*, Portsmouth 1992.

24 Herman Paul, *Hayden White*, Cambridge 2011, p. 58.

25 Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic*.

26 Frank R. Ankersmit, *Historical Representation*, Stanford 2001; Frank R. Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth, and Reference in Historical Representation*, Ithaca, London 2012.

“story-telling kind of historiography should be avoided” and that he is rather interested in the logical structure of historiography,²⁷ although he is less explicit elsewhere on this.²⁸ White writes that “by common consent” “narrativity” is an essential attribute of “history proper”, which requires that “the events must not only be registered with the chronological framework of their original occurrence” but also be “revealed as possessing a structure, an order of meaning, which they do *not* possess as mere sequence”.²⁹ While narrativity itself, according to White, does not require chronological ordering, a chronological sequence appears to be a condition for the narrativisation of a set of events in historiography. The early narrativists, such as Danto and Mandelbaum, linked chronological ordering directly with narrativity. Furthermore, both White and Ankersmit imply that a narrative must reveal events “as possessing a structure, and order of meaning, which they do *not* possess as mere sequence”.³⁰ The requirement of structure comes down to a condition that there is some kind of central subject (such as a specific “narrative substance” or “presented”), which is the principle that provides importance or significance to events and around which the narrative is organised.³¹

The attempt to find a structure and a unifying central subject in all texts is characteristic for the narrativist philosophy of historiography, and in this way it exemplifies the assumed transcendental function of narratives. For example, one might think that a chronicle is not a narrative and that it does not include a central subject. A chronicle seems to be just a list of events. However, according to White, even chronicles contain a central subject: “the capacity to envision a set of events as belonging to the same order of meaning requires a metaphysical principle by which to translate difference to similarity. In other words, it requires a ‘subject’ common to all of the *referents* of the various sentences that register events as having occurred”.³² It appears that White and Ankersmit assume that all historiography must take the narrative form, and White is thus prepared to extend this assumption also to boundary-cases like chronicles.³³

27 Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic*, p. 16.

28 Frank R. Ankersmit, *Narrative and Interpretation*, in: A. Tucker, *A Companion to the Philosophy of History and Historiography*, Chichester 2008, p. 199–209.

29 White, *Value*, p. 9 (emphasis in the original).

30 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

31 Some have also suggested that a narrative (or “plot”) must include causal links between events, e.g. Morton White, *Foundations of Historical Knowledge*, New York 1965, p. 223f.; E. M. Foster, *Aspects of the Novel*, London 1927, p. 60; Noël Carroll, *On the Narrative Connection*, in: Noël Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics. Philosophical Essays*, Cambridge 2001, p. 126.

32 White, *Value*, p. 19.

33 White admits, however, that chronicles cannot be proper narratives, because they do not terminate and remain unfinished, *Ibid.*, p. 24.

Moreover, White attributes a transcendental cultural function for narratives. Although he thinks that “real events do not offer themselves as stories”,³⁴ which makes their narrativisation so difficult, “narrativity is a metacode, a human universal on the basis of which transcultural message about the nature of a shared reality can be transmitted”.³⁵ In his later works, Ankersmit writes about representation rather than about narratives. He says that the former is a more suitable term, because the latter might lead one to assume erroneously that “the historical text is essentially a story, a variant of novel” and conceal that the historiographical text should do justice to the past.³⁶ “This, then, is why we had better speak of ‘(historical) representation’ than of ‘narrative.’”³⁷ In essence, “representation” is an updated version of “narrative” and shows continuity from earlier to later attempts to define the theoretical content-synthesising unit of historiography in terms of its function and attributes. Despite this terminological change the (scholarly) transcendentalising approach in Ankersmit is as explicit as in White. In his most recent book, *Meaning, Truth, and Reference in Historical Representation*, he puts it as follows: “My main thesis will be that there can be no historical writing outside historical representation”.³⁸

If narrativity is then a necessary requirement of all historiographical writing, no writing in historiography can exist without it. A text without narrativity, if there is such, is not a text of historiography. This creates a motif to find a central unifying subject and temporal order in *any text* of historiography. The assumption also constitutes a condition for adequate writing of history and the expectation that all existing pieces of historiography are narratively structured. In the final section of this paper I will subject this postulation to an empirical test by a case study. The question to be tested is thus: does the postulation of the narrativity of historiography receive empirical support? However, before the investigation of this meta-level assumption on the nature of historiography, I will concentrate on an object-level inquiry: could *individual narratives* themselves be tested empirically by way of case studies?

The empirical immunity of narratives

A central feature of narrative, as the narrativist philosophers of historiography emphasise, is the fact that it is a whole. In other words, a narrative cannot be decom-

34 Ibid., p. 8. Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Baltimore, London 1978, p. 1–25.

35 White, *Value*, p. 6.

36 Ankersmit, *Sublime*, p. XIII–XIV.

37 Ibid., p. XIV.

38 Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth, and Reference*, p. 47.

posed into smaller components without losing its essential identity. This mode of thinking is already embedded in the narrativist approach on the practical level. The narrativist does not cherry-pick separate statements, but treats and reads historiographical a text as one unified piece, trying to understand the kind of message or narrative that it as a whole amounts to. The best example of this approach is arguably White's *Metahistory*.

Ankersmit emphasises that the list of statements that a "narrative substance" contains must be seen to form a totality and create a new kind of narrative entity situated above the level of singular sentences. Any statement of the narrative contributes to the "image" it articulates. Ankersmit writes that "[h]istory and historical debate is holistic in that the universally shared assumption in historical writing is that only the whole of the text conveys the historian's cognitivist message, and to which the parts only contribute".³⁹ In his later vocabulary, Ankersmit compares historical "representations" to paintings, which cannot be decomposed into parts, but must be taken as wholes. According to Ankersmit, portraits, for example, are experienced as "representational wholes", and not as constellations of information on hair, nose, colour, the forms of the eyes, etc.⁴⁰

One consequence from the holistic nature of narratives is that *all statements* of a narrative define what a narrative is. In other words, they are definitionally true of the narrative. Or yet alternatively, in Ankersmit's words: "The thesis that all statements expressing the properties of Nss [narrative substances] are analytical is, perhaps, the most fundamental theorem in narrative logic".⁴¹ Now if a specific narrative substance N1 is composed of the set of statements, s1, s2, and s3, then to say, for example, that "N1 is s1" does not bring any new information, but is necessarily true due to the definition of this narrative substance. It follows from the account that one cannot change any statements in a given narrative, since that amounts to creating an alternative narrative and to replacing the original with a new one: "Whichever Ns we may choose, none could ever be different from what it is, without ceasing to be the Ns it is [...] as soon as one statement is omitted or added we have to do with a different Ns".⁴²

It should be evident why this account is problematic, if one wishes to rely on empirical testing and case studies. Provided that a narrative is a whole, one cannot corroborate or falsify any singular part of it, but should focus on the testing of the

39 Frank R. Ankersmit, Rorty and History, in: *New Literary History* 39 (2008), p. 92. Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth, and Reference*, p. 159.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 98.

41 Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic*, p. 127; see also Frank R. Ankersmit, *Statements, Texts and Pictures*, in: Frank R. Ankersmit und Hans Kellner, *A New Philosophy of History*, London 1995, p. 225f.

42 Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic*, p. 213.

entire narrative. But narratives are like meanings, i.e. they are definitionally and analytically true. No amount of empirical information can prove definitions empirically justified or unjustified. Consider the case of “bachelor”, a classic example of an analytic meaning in philosophy. If it is analytically true that a “bachelor is an unmarried man”, no information on the number of bachelors, married and unmarried men, etc. can change it. To claim to have found a married bachelor merely reveals poor understanding of the sentence.⁴³ Definitions are what they are. One can of course choose to change the definition, but that results in a new alternative stipulation and not in the falsification of the old one. This characterisation is in accordance with Ankersmit’s own understanding of narratives and representations. He writes that “[e]ach historical account of the Renaissance is true, since it can be derived logically from how the historian in question proposes to define the Renaissance [...] what is then said about fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italian civilization is, admittedly, true *by definition* – but true it is”.⁴⁴ And Ankersmit has further pointed out that it is impossible to misdescribe a historical object of this kind. The “Renaissance” and the “Fall of the Roman Empire” are historians’ stipulations. They are “nothing more and nothing less than what individual historians tell us that it is”.⁴⁵

This leads to the conclusion that holism and the analyticity of narratives imply that narratives are empirically immune and unfalsifiable. Narratives thus violate the condition B) introduced above, which requires empirical accountability: narratives as holistic and analytic entities cannot be tested. Empirical immunity means that case studies do not have any effect with regard to their epistemic standing. A change of a narrative is a non-empirical decision. In the end, this is in accordance with what the narrativists have argued for: that historiographical narratives are to be compared to literary entities. White writes that “history progresses by the production of classics, the nature of which is such that they cannot be disconfirmed or negated. [...] And it is their nondisconfirmability that testifies to the *literary* nature of historical classics”.⁴⁶ Indeed, how would one confirm or falsify a novel?

It should be noted that there exist non-empirical criteria which could be used to rank different narratives. There can be moral or aesthetic criteria or some rational non-empirical standards, such as coherence and consistency. But it seems reasonable to request some kind of empirical accountability of historiographical narra-

43 I now simply assume that there are analytic sentences and do not comment on Quine’s challenge here. Discussion on the problems of analyticity itself would take this essay too far from its main focus. (Willard Van Orman Quine, *Two Dogmas of Empiricism*, in: *Philosophical Review* 60 (1951), p. 20–43.)

44 Ankersmit, *Historical Representation*, p. 38.

45 Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic*, p. 201.

46 Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse*, p. 89.

tives as well. Arguably, not all narratives are empirically on a par regarding just any part of the past. That is, they (should) have some kind of evidential relation to what they are narratives about and some may be empirically preferable. It would seem possible for the narrativist to retreat from full-blooded holism to some kind of partial holism or molecularism,⁴⁷ in the case of which only a part of the literary content defines the narrative. I think this would be a step to the right direction, but I am not aware of any narrativists to have chosen this path. It is more common to think with Partner that the “plot” must be “intelligibly connected, *every component* standing in some logical relation to the others”.⁴⁸

In addition to making historiography immune to empirical challenges, the holistic condition is very demanding in that the historian would need to construct the text in such a way that its every component has a justified role in the whole of the narrative. If the narrativist were nevertheless to opt for the molecularist option, she/he would need to make a distinction between the meaning-constituting and the non-meaning-constituting elements of a historiographical text. The latter could be seen to have an evidentiary role in a book of history. I think again that this would be a reasonable way to go.⁴⁹ But would the narrativist be ready to differentiate between what is essential for the historian’s narrative and what not? In any case, it is a job for narrativists to develop “molecular narrativism”, if that is seen as viable. I detail later in this essay a different suggestion for how to understand historiography. In the next section, I examine whether the postulation of the narrativity of historiography is empirically plausible.

A case study of narrativism: Christopher Clark’s *The Sleepwalkers*. How Europe Went to War in 1914

How could we test the tenability of narrativism by way of case studies, if we have just concluded that narratives are immune to any kind of empirical testing? It may appear that one can either assume the possibility of empirical testing and test, or assume the impossibility of empirical testing and then not test. The solution to this dilemma lies in the distinction between two kinds of analysis. Above we operated in the narrativist framework, within which narratives are definitional stipulations.

47 The semantic molecularist thinks that “there are other beliefs that we must also share if we are to share the belief that P, but [...] denies that all our other beliefs have to be shared” – Jerry Fodor, Ernest Lepore, *Holism*. A Consumer Update, Amsterdam 1993, p. 31. Arthur C. Danto has used the term “molecular narrative” but he understands it as a narrative that contains multiple causes and sequences of change and not as a meaning defining entity (Arthur C. Danto, *Narration and Knowledge*, New York 2007, p. 252).

48 Partner, *Foundations*, p. 502–503 (emphasis Kuukkanen).

49 For how one could make a difference between meaning-constitution and evidence in a history book, see Chapter 5 in my book *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*.

Now the purpose is to evaluate narrativism from a meta-level and ask whether narrativism itself receives empirical support. In other words, above I evaluated the empirical status of individual narratives as perceived by the narrativists, now the focus is on the empirical status of the narrativity postulation of historiography itself. The preceding section was philosophical by nature. The section to follow is empirical in that the focus is on the evidential relation of the narrativity postulation and a sample text of historiography.

The empirical component is a book of history, which may be thought to represent historiography more generally. The book that I have chosen to discuss here is Christopher Clark's *The Sleepwalkers. How Europe Went to War in 1914*.⁵⁰ I am interested to find out whether this book is narratively constructed in the sense suggested by the narrativist philosophy of historiography. If it is, then the postulation of the narrativity of historiography receives empirical support. In this case, we are left to live or deal with the conceptual problems discussed above. But if we conclude that the book is not narratively constructed, then our consideration casts doubt on the narrativity postulation.

Clark's book is not unique, of course. Another study could have been chosen equally well. But this is exactly why it is suitable to play a role of a "test case" in this paper. It is a typical book of history in terms of its structure and organisation. In other words, it could be said to be narratively organised in the following senses: (i) It contains a clear time dimension. Clark's book tracks the development and the years prior to the Great War that led to the outbreak of the war. (ii) The events and other elements appear to be arranged in a chronological order that seems to amount to an advancing "story" or a narrative of the origins of the Great War. It may also be added that Clark is an eminent historian known for the quality of his research. One could thus say that *The Sleepwalkers* is a paradigmatic case of narrative historiography. For this reason it also functions ideally as a target of my critical analysis: Is this a paradigmatic example of narrative historiography, in fact, narratively organised?

If the conclusion is that the central organising principle is not that of narrativity, it would seem a significant conclusion against "narrative essentialism",⁵¹ which perceives all texts of historiography as narratively organised. In order to make the task manageable, I will concentrate on two conditions of narrativity that I have outlined above, holism and chronological order. In the case of holism, the specific question is whether all the components of the text contribute to the main message. In the case of chronological order, the question is whether the different elements of

50 Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*.

51 See Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist*, p. 70–76.

the text can be seen to be integrated by their participation in a chronologically advancing series.

I begin with an outline of the central message of Clark's book. What is it that Clark wants to argue for in his book? In Clark's case, the clue is not hidden but explicit in the title. It may be said that Clark's *The Sleepwalkers* is written to convey the message that Europe and more specifically the great powers of Europe went to the Great War like sleepwalkers. Although they had some understanding of some of the consequences of their decisions, they did not fully realise what the outcome of the chain of their decisions would be. They thus walked towards a goal they did not know or understand. In Clark's words, "The protagonists of 1914 were sleepwalkers, watchful but unseeing, haunted by dreams, yet blind to the reality of the horror they were about to bring into the world".⁵² I call this sleepwalking hypothesis the message or the thesis of the book. The narrativists would undoubtedly understand it as the central subject around which the whole book and its narrative are organised. The question is then whether it is reasonable to assume that every statement and every detail in the book is a necessary component of the sleepwalking thesis, and furthermore, whether it is necessary to know all the details in order to understand this thesis. Holism would require one to say "yes" to both, because all the details are definitionally part of the central subject. If one component is missing, then the subject is different and one would consequently deal with a different thesis, or a different "central subject".

However, it seems very unreasonable to insist that every single statement and detail defines the message in a historiographical text. If this were the case, different editions or slight corrections of the "same" book would count as different books constituting different messages. Let us take a concrete example from the book. Clark begins his book with a description of the incident, which led to the assassination of Serbian King Alexander and Queen Draga of the Obrenović dynasty.⁵³ Would it not be possible to understand the sleepwalking thesis without the description of this incident? This account of assassination illustrates, of course, very well the tumultuous nature of European politics at the time, but it is hardly required for the understanding of the main thesis of "sleepwalking". Or, if this is not convincing enough, let us take yet another, more detailed example. Is it necessary to be aware that it was the king's first adjutant Lazar Petrović, who led the assassins through the "darkened halls" in the hunt for the king,⁵⁴ in order to understand the main point of the book?

52 Ibid., p. 562.

53 Ibid., p. 3–5.

54 Ibid., p. 4.

It seems absurd to require every part of the book to be a necessary component of the representation or narrative (or central subject around which they are organised). Some elements seem to clearly serve a different role, for instance an illustrative or an evidentiary role. And holism would in practice render all understanding of historiography impossible. One can hardly find a person, including the author, who has a mental access to all the elements of the historiographical text no matter how well s/he has studied the text. The human capacity has its limits. No one would thus understand historiography and no one could communicate its results to others. Hence, there are practical reasons to retreat to a weaker position than full-blooded narrative holism.

The second condition of narrativity to be investigated is the chronological order of presentation. Chronology arguably requires a temporally ordered set of events. Now, if the historian does not order events temporally or her text contains elements that could not be a part of a chronology, then one must conclude that the mode of presentation is not chronological.

It is not difficult to identify components of Clark's text that cannot possibly be events in a chronologically advancing set of events. For example, the chapter 3 "The Polarization of Europe, 1887–1907" is organised systematically. The central claim in the chapter is that the polarisation of Europe's geopolitical system was a precondition for the First World War, but that the bifurcation into two alliances did not cause the war. Clark says that polarisation into two blocs both muted and escalated the conflict. This conclusion is reached by posing and consecutively answering four interrelated questions in separate sections of the chapter: Why did Russia and France form an alliance against Germany in the 1890s? Why did Britain opt to throw its lot with that alliance? What role did Germany play in bringing about its own encirclement by a hostile coalition? And to what extent can the structural transformation of the alliance system account for the events that brought war to Europe and the world in 1914?⁵⁵ These elements do not form a consecutively advancing temporal set of events, but rather a systematic organisation. Arguably, they accord to a conscious and reasoned attempt to pre-empt certain points of criticism and address potential interpretative problems. In other words, they do not form and are not part of any chronology.

Perhaps it is worth taking another example to show that this is not just one exception. The following chapter 4 "The Many Voices of European Foreign Policy" considers decision- and power-structures in pre-war Europe by analysing each great European power in turn. Clark studies whether power was in the hands of monarchs, ministers, military, or press and public opinion, for example. It is im-

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 123.

portant to note that his discussion responds to earlier literature and suggestions on the topic, criticising some suggestions and anticipating potential criticism of his own account. Clark rejects, for example, the suggestions that it was Germany's decision to build a navy and that it was general anti-German sentiment which channelled Europe to the path to the Great War. Again we must conclude that this discussion has nothing to do with chronology, but is drafted in a different discursive mode.

Another problem with chronologies is that a temporal order of presentation may be broken when the historian goes back and forth in time. This is very common. For example, when Clark reaches the events of June 1914 and discusses the role of the French president Poincaré, he goes back to the year 1912 to describe the meeting between the German kaiser and the Russian tsar at Baltic Port Paldiski in a chapter explaining *Détente* in European power politics in 1912–1914.⁵⁶

The significance of this cannot be played down. If the point of writing historiographical texts was to present narratives, and it is assumed that narratives necessarily imply chronologies, then why break temporality and go back and forth in time or stop reasoning on other matters? There must be some other reason for this practice, because narrative-chronological description does not call for it. Naturally, one might insist that, despite the fact that the texts contain chronological breaks and parts that are non-chronological altogether, in the background there is a temporally ordered set of events, which in Clark's case is the pre-war events of negotiations leading to the outbreak of war. One should note though that this suggestion already grants that not all elements of the text non-chronological define its narrative. Second, there is no need to deny that there is (usually) some kind of time-frame in the background of a historiographical text. Yet, the central question is, what *explains best* the presence and function of all different textual elements. If it is necessary to choose the most important principle that structures the results of historiographical research, what is it? What is the main rationale to write books of history?

In my view, it is not narrativity, but argumentativity or reasoning that defines the mode of discourse in historiography. But my intention is not to identify only one textual element or strategy to the exclusion of others. In other words, I do not claim here that a historiographical text forms a monolithic unit around which everything is organised. Pluralism in terms of argumentative strategies seems justified. It is not a problem to agree that texts typically contain also narrative parts. My suggestion is that both the systematic ordering of some parts and chronological breaks reveal implicit *patterns of reasoning* in a text. The historian argues and tries to persuade his/her readers to accept a certain path of reasoning leading towards a par-

56 Ibid., p. 308–326.

ticular thesis. The thesis in Clark's case is the thesis of sleepwalking. Also narratives in a text are subservient for reasoning towards certain conclusions. Narratives can be seen as adding to the rational persuasive force for a thesis defended in a book of history by connecting together a set of events in a specific way in order to make the case for the main thesis. In the "sleepwalking" case one such narrative could be the set of failed attempts of communication and meeting between the Serbian and Austro-Hungarian officials. There may be many local narratives that assume this kind of role in the chain of reasoning.

The meeting between Serbian prime minister Nikola Pašić and the Austrian foreign minister Leopold von Berchtold in the autumn of 1913 could also be seen as exemplifying the main thesis. Despite several attempts to communicate with each other, the two failed utterly to connect. The central message, namely that Vienna strongly objected to Serbia's occupation of Albania, never came across.⁵⁷ The description of this incident illustrates well and provides one "chain" of reasoning for the "sleepwalking" of European decision makers on the micro level.

The crux of the matter is that it is not narrativity but argumentativity that characterises historiography. In sum, my view is that the governing function of historiography is reasoning or argumentation for certain historiographical theses and in this task several rhetorical strategies, including narrative presentation, are used. Although it is not possible to present a detailed description of my argumentative view of historiography in this paper, the main points that favour it are the following: The first is the negative case against narrativism as presented above. If historiography is not "essentially narrativist" and historians are no "great narrativizers",⁵⁸ then what is their practice like? Second, this question can be answered by observing that historians make intentional acts and argumentative interventions in their discursive contexts. That is, they try to persuade their peers to accept a certain view or thesis about the past, and in doing this, they typically argue against or correct some prevailing account. This means accepting what I have called the narrative insight, the idea that historians put forward synthesising theses and views about the past that can be identified in their books. But they do so without a commitment to narratives. The third reason to favour the argumentative view is that it is also possible to show that books of history can be analysed in terms of their argumentative structures so that the kinds of techniques used by historians function as reasons for the main thesis argued. For further details of the argumentative view with a number of concrete examples, see my book *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*.

⁵⁷ It is worth reading Clark's descriptions of the whole episode. Ibid., p. 98.

⁵⁸ Hayden White, *An old Question Raised Again: Is Historiography Art or Science?*, in: *Rethinking History* (4) 2000, p. 395.

Conclusion

Since this paper is part of a theme number on case studies, it is in order to end this essay with a discussion of what my arguments imply for case studies in general. Let us begin with conclusions. First, I showed that individual narratives cannot be tested by case studies in the framework of narrativism because narrativism assumes that narratives are holistic and analytic entities, and thus immune to empirical testing. Second, I argued that it is nevertheless possible to test the tenability of narrativism itself, when conceived as a suggestion that historiographical texts are necessarily narratively organised. Narrative organisation implies holism about the content of texts and chronological ordering. I showed that holism is practically unreasonable and that texts contain non-chronological parts. In the end, I proposed that historians attempt to argue for historiographical theses and that this explains the existence and role of different discursive elements in their texts.

It seems that the method of testing by case studies defends its role in the philosophy of historiography despite the problems associated with it, because it requests empirical accountability, and the philosophy of historiography must be empirically accountable with regard to its research object: historiography. However, it would be naïve to assume that support or negative evidence from case studies yielded conclusive results: there are hardly clear-cut falsifiers in any empirical field. If they were, we would probably have already settled philosophical questions on historiography. Furthermore, any set of empirical data is open for several interpretations. Could a narrativist then ignore my "empirical case" against narrativism? I do not think so. While the case does not show that narrativism is once and for all incorrect, case study testing in the form performed in this paper is part of an overall evaluation of empirical standing and plausibility of this view of historiography. The crux of the matter is as follows: if there is an empirical challenge, in the form of a case study or otherwise, it requires a response. At the very least, the narrativist should go and modify his/her account to answer to the critique raised. There are naturally also non-empirical parameters that can be used in evaluations. One could compare, for example, the coherence of the explanations that two rival accounts offer of shared historiographical data and choose the one that fares better in comparison.

Finally, it is worth noting that "argument" as a central theoretical notion does not suffer from the problems of narrativism. In other words, arguments are composable, do not suffer from holism or analyticity and therefore neither from the problem of empirical immunity. They cannot be shown true or false either but they *can* be shown to be more or less appropriate, more or less fitting, more or less warranted, etc. Finally, the role of case-study testing serves the same role as other argumentative strategies. It serves to create a rationally persuasive account of some

view or conclusion. The value of case studies is thus that they are part of an empirical case for a view and increase (or decrease) of the degree of rational warrant for one's conclusion. It is my claim that the practice of historians and of the historiographical texts that they produce supports the view that historians are intentional and argumentative agents who bring forward informal arguments about the past in their books. In this sense, the view of historiography as argumentative and rational practice is plausible in light of the empirical data about historiography.

