

Essentially narrative explanations<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This essay argues that narrative explanations prove *uniquely* suited to answering certain explanatory questions, and offers reasons why recognizing a type of statement that *requires* narrative explanations crucially informs on their assessment. My explication of narrative explanation begins by identifying two interrelated sources of philosophical unhappiness with them. The first I term the problem of logical formlessness and the second the problem of evaluative intractability. With regard to the first, narratives simply do not appear to instantiate any logical form recognized as inference licensing. But absent a means of identifying inferential links, what justifies connecting explanans and explanandum? Evaluative intractability, the second problem, thus seems a direct consequence. This essay shows exactly why these complaints prove unfounded by explicating narrative explanations in the process of answering three interrelated questions. *First*, what determines that an explanation has in some critical or essential respect a narrative form? *Second*, how does a narrative in such cases come to constitute a plausible explanation? *Third*, how do the first two considerations yield a basis for evaluating an explanation offered as a narrative? Answers to each of these questions include illustrations of actual narrative explanations and also function to underline attendant dimensions of evaluation.

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## 1. Narrative explanations: some supposed problems

Although historians and others unapologetically use narratives to explain, as a category narrative explanations exist in philosophical limbo. On the one hand, absent any received explication of ‘explanation,’ this practice cannot be dismissed out of hand. But on the other hand, without any account of how putative explanations in narrative form accord with what passes as explanation in disciplines that do not (at least overtly) utilize narrative, it remains quite unclear just what normative standards should apply when assessing claims that narratives explain. This essay shows why narrative explanations prove to be *uniquely* suited to answer certain explanatory questions, and offers reasons why recognizing a type of statement that *requires* narrative explanations crucially informs on efforts at their assessment.

Philosophical unhappiness with narrative explanation can be summarized in terms of two interrelated problems. The first I term the problem of logical formlessness and the second the problem of evaluative intractability. C. G. Hempel’s (1942) proposal regarding

historical explanation nicely illustrates the logical quandary at the core of both problems.<sup>1</sup> Hempel’s model of explanation represents a textbook instance of explication inasmuch as it assimilates explanatory form to a type of argument form. The problem of evaluating explanation here becomes one with that of assessing the inference from explanans to explanandum. Formal and semantic considerations—validity and soundness—suffice on this model for purposes of evaluating the move from explanans to explanandum. And while Hempel’s specific explication may be regarded as philosophically passé, the view that evaluating any candidate for explanation requires identifying its inference license remains entrenched in philosophical consciousness.

But narratives simply do not appear to instantiate any logical form recognized as inference licensing. And indeed many erstwhile defenders (myself included) of narrative explanations maintain that narratives come as a unit—the explanandum will be non-detachable from the supporting narrative. These considerations would seem to clinch allegations of logical formlessness. But absent any usual formal features for identifying inferential links, what could justify connecting explanans and explanandum? Logical formlessness thus appears to preclude identifying and so assessing

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<sup>1</sup> The roots of this debate extend back to at least to the late 19th century and center on questions of how contextual information provided by narratives answer demands for causal connections.

what links explanans and explanandum. Evaluative intractability would seem to be a direct consequence.<sup>2</sup>

Understood from this perspective, philosophically situating narrative as a species of the genus explanation requires satisfactorily replacing the work done by validity and soundness in more traditional philosophical accounts.<sup>3</sup> In this regard, those features identified as serving replacement functions should be linked to one another at least insofar as whatever logic connects explanans and explanandum also helps underwrite claims to explanatory significance. Methodological naturalism<sup>4</sup> requires no more for scientific standing, i.e., establishing a “family resemblance” in these key respects between narrative explanations and other accepted forms of explanation. Thus, one goal will be to establish that evaluating narrative explanations turns out to be no more difficult or problematic than that of assessing other accepted explanatory practices.<sup>5</sup>

Reasons for rejecting charges of formlessness and intractability emerge in the process of answering three interrelated questions. *First*, what determines that an explanation has in some critical or essential respect a narrative form? *Second*, how does a narrative in such cases come to constitute a plausible explanation? *Third*, how do the first two considerations yield a basis for evaluating an explanation offered as a narrative? Answers to each of these questions include illustrations of actual narrative explanations and also function to underline attendant dimensions of evaluation. Together these answers and examples will locate those features that mark narrative explanations and correlatively identify the evaluative considerations that attach to them.

The view defended here will be that *narrative explanations* explain *narrative sentences* (i.e., an explanandum expressible as a narrative sentence). In particular, I show why *only* a narrative can explain some events formulated as narrative sentences. As a consequence, evaluating explanations that have narrative form essentially (in a sense to be clarified below) will primarily be a function of assessing *competing* explanations, and so draw on evaluative criteria more akin to theory appraisal than to hypothesis confirmation. But my case for identifying those dimensions of rational appraisal relevant to *narrative explanations* builds on features unique to having *narrative sentences* as explananda.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Narrative sentences and essentially narrative explanations

What marks an explanation as having narrative form essentially? For purposes of identifying narrative explanations, a minimalist notion of what counts as a narrative will do. Daniel Little nicely formulates a core notion of narrative for purposes of how it applies to historical explanation as follows: “it is an account of the

unfolding of a series of events, along with an effort to explain how and why these processes and events came to be. A narrative is intended to provide an account of how a complex historical event unfolded and why .... So a narrative seeks to provide hermeneutic understanding of the outcome ... and causal explanation .... ” (Little, 2010, p. 29) The notion of an “unfolding of a series of events” underscores the use of narratives to portray a temporal series. This indicates why many theorists hold that there exists a deep conceptual tie between narrative form generally and histories in particular. Psycho-analytic theorist Humphrey Morris provides a succinct expression of this view: “A ‘narrative’ ... is a particular language form that is organised according to a fundamentally temporal principle, that is, according to some variation on a ‘beginning-middle-end’ structure. Narrative, in this structural sense, is self-evidently ‘historical.’” (Morris, 1993, p. 36). Related remarks offering a minimalist characterization can readily be found in writings of literary theorists (e.g., Miller, 1990).

This minimalist approach to characterizing narrative results, unsurprisingly, in a liberal standard regarding what to count as a narrative. Yet for the purpose of getting clearer about narrative *explanations*, it matters not that by this criterion many works may qualify as narratives. Rather, what proves critical to clarifying narrative as a form of explanation involves whether or not an explanation in this form can also be non-narratively structured. That is, does it allow for paraphrase into some other, non-narrative explanatory form? For if so, then whatever explanatory import such a narrative seemingly possesses—revealing how things at the beginning of a time series came to be what they later were—turns out to be *inessential* for purposes of explanation. Hempel’s well-known example of a radiator bursting provides a case in point. A story explaining why it burst—e.g., one’s failure to put in anti-freeze—can be recast and given instead classic D-N form. In short, the core issue concerns whether or not some explanations must have narrative form *essentially*.<sup>7</sup>

### 2.1. Structural features of narrative explanations

I have in other works (e.g., Roth, 2017a) sought to establish that narrative explanations possess three key characteristics. These include: 1) the non-detachability of the explanandum from the supporting narrative; 2) the non-standardized character of event(s) explained; and, 3) the non-aggregativity of narrative histories. (1) follows from the fact that a narrative constitutes both the explanandum and its relations to the explanans—statements of the event to be explained and those that explain it. Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen rightly emphasizes this feature as the hallmark of the “narrativist turn” in historiography. “Narrativism sees historians as constructors of literary products—narratives—in the production of which they employ various rhetorical and literary techniques. Sometimes ‘narrative’ is understood as a story or story structure, but it may be better to understand it as any cognitive structure that connects individual statements and creates some general coherent plot, meaning, or interpretation of the past.” (Kuukkanen, 2012, p. 342; see also p. 355). A focus on the study of narrative construction as a defining feature of historiography reflects the ongoing influence of Hayden White’s work. For what White emphasizes and what has guided discussion within historical theory for over four decades has been the historian’s fundamental role as a creator of historical narratives. But where White typically focuses on narrative as a

<sup>2</sup> See discussion of these issues in Kuukkanen (2015) and my review (2016).

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Velleman (2003) my discussion of Velleman in (2017b).

<sup>4</sup> At least of the form that I defend (2006).

<sup>5</sup> In this regard, the attention that literary theorists devote to the analysis of narrative form typically focuses on those structural elements or rhetorical features that can be deployed to variously emplot narratives. However, while modes of emplotment impact explanatory accounts, their specific characteristics do not provide an explication of or connection to a logic of explanation or otherwise contribute to making explicit norms that might bear on logically evaluating claims to explain. These considerations indicate why those insights that literary theory offers regarding narratives invariably prove orthogonal to philosophical concerns about explanation. See Roth (1992).

<sup>6</sup> This account, if correct, turns out to have interesting implications for understanding what science is, and thus provides an additional rationale for embracing narrative explanations. See my “Kuhn’s Narrative Construction of Normal Science: Narrative Naturalized and Science Narrativized,” unpublished. Understanding Kuhn’s work as a narrative naturalizes narrative explanation through a form of mutual containment—since narrative helps constitute what counts as normal science, narrative cannot be separated from an understanding of what science is.

<sup>7</sup> I trust it clear from context that my uses of ‘essential’ and ‘inessential’ do not come metaphysically freighted. Rather, the terms mark off explanations that cannot be stripped of their narrative form and still provide an explanation from those that can.

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