Feature Article 【專題論文】

Contextualism and Historical Understanding
脈絡主義與歷史理解

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Abstract

The problem of the relation between historical understanding and contextualization (or contextualization as a kind of understanding) contains a double difficulty. First, when it is a matter of the understanding of a historical phenomenon, there is the problem of the identification of the thing (event, institution, person, etc.) to be understood. Since all things historical must be taken to exist (or to have originated) in a past, such things are no longer open to observation by which to compare different descriptions with their putatively common "original." As Louis O. Mink argued, when it is a matter of comparing different descriptions of the same historical event, it is difficult to know what "same historical event" might mean. So, our first problem concerns the cognitive status of historiological descriptions.

Some historians seek to deal with this problem by setting the event to be described (and thereby "understood," if not "explained") within its original context. Here a second problem arises. The term "context" and the idea of contextualization as a way of explaining or comprehending a historical event derive from the practice of textual analysis. Here to comprehend the meaning a word or phrase by setting it into its "context" presupposes knowledge of the rules of the grammar, syntax, and rhetoric and diction of the language in which the text under analysis is cast. But it has to be said that, when it comes to the past, it is the very rules of selection and combination — the very "grammar" and "syntax" — of a given event and its context that have to be determined.

Indeed, the idea of historical development, change, or evolution presumes that not only are events and things in history continually changing, but that the principles by which events and things are related to each other are changing as well. This means that the description of the relations between events and their contexts is as problematical as the description of the events that are supposed to be "understood" by "contextualization" themselves.

All this suggests that we might approach the problem of understanding (by contextualization) by way of a theory of modes of relationship. Obviously, things in real life (as against texts) are related to one another in a variety of modalities, of which that of material or mechanistic causality is only one. They may be related also antithetically (by opposition), by similarity (generically), or merely by contiguity (relative proximity or as parts to wholes) — or all of these at once. An adequate description of a thing of the past that can be discerned only by way of documents, monuments, remains, etc., and of the thing's relationship to its

context(s) would utilize all of the modalities of relationship presumed to exist among things which are undergoing changes within contexts which are themselves constantly changing. The "understanding" of such things would consist of various kinds of "recognition," not of the essence or substances of the things described but of the modalities of their possible relationships.

摘要

　　歷史理解與脈絡化（或視脈絡化為一種認識）之間關聯的問題包含雙重困境。首先，如果涉及對歷史現象的理解，便有確認所要瞭解之事（事件、機構、人物等）的問題。由於凡是與歷史相關之事都必定被視為存在（或起源）於過去，這些事情已不可能再次公開接受觀察，以進行就各種不同描述和公認的共同「原狀」之間的比較。如同閔陸易（Louis O. Mink）曾經論證，如果涉及比較同一歷史事件之各種不同描述，很難知道所謂「同一歷史事件」可能的含意為何。因此，我們的第一個問題牽涉到歷史學描述的認知狀態。

　　某些歷史學者尋求藉由將所描述（且從而「被理解」，如果尚未「被解釋」）的事件置於其原始脈絡中的方式，以處理這個問題。這便產生了第二個問題。「脈絡」這個語詞和視脈絡化為一種解釋或理解一個歷史事件的方法的想法源自文本分析的實踐。此處，將一個字或詞置於其「脈絡」之中，以理解其意思，乃是以被分析的文本所使用語言的文法、語法、修辭和用語的規則等方面的知識為先決要件。然而，必須提到的是：當談到過去，正是一個特定事件及其脈絡的選擇與組合的規則——正是「文法」與「語法」——是必須被確定的。

　　實際上，歷史發展、變化或演變的概念是假設不僅歷史上的事件與事物在持續變化之中，事件與事物之間彼此互相關聯所依循的原則也在變化當中。這意味著對事件及其脈絡之間的關聯加以描述和對被認為可藉由「脈絡化」本身被「理解」的事件加以描述同樣有問題。

　　這一切暗示：我們或許可以運用一個關係模式的理論來處理（因脈絡化而產生的）理解的問題。顯然，真實生活（相對於文本）中的事情以各種不同的形式彼此互相關聯，物質或機械的因果關係只是其中之一。它們也可能（由於對抗而）互相對立，互相類似（同為某一屬類），或僅只是彼此近似（相當接近，或同屬於整體之部分）——或同時具有以上這些關係。要適切描述只能藉由檔案、紀念碑、殘件等方式予以辨識的某一發生於過去的事情及此事與其脈絡之間的關係時，常會採用被假定存在於事物——正在發生變化，且其所處脈絡本身也持續在變化中——間的所有關係形式。對這些事物的「理解」常包括各種不同的「承認」，不是對所描述事物的精髓或本質（的「承認」），而是對事物間可能存在關係的形式（的「承認」）。

Today I am going to presuppose — following the lead of the philosopher Arthur Danto — that understanding is a kind of "explanation by recognition" — a feeling that an object adequately described has been shown to occupy a place proper to it in the system of nomination and classification provided by the "common sense" (and/or the artistic-literary practices) of a culture of a given time and place. For example, a description of a battle that occurred in a remote time, a distant place, and under cultural circumstances different from those prevailing in the time, place, and culture in which the description of it is being composed, will be a product of translation procedures that mediate between different styles of imaging, on the one hand, and different languages, codes, or structures for identifying and classifying it, on the other.. Needless to say, since we are dealing specifically with historical descriptions [descriptions cast in the idiom of historiology] or — and this is not quite the same thing — descriptions of historical phenomena [which is to say, phenomena that have already been designated and classified as possessing a substance of "historicality"], I will concentrate on verbal descriptions which is to say, verbal descriptions of entities in the past intended to conjure up a mental image or picture thereof [on the basis of a "historiological" study of written and monumental evidence deemed sufficient to establish the reality and the nature of changes occurring in a given entity in a given time and place in the past]. The features and structures of such images can be "recognized" as the kind of features and structures that any literate person of any culture or linguistic endowment would look for in an effort to identify and classify anything appearing alien — or in the present case, simply "past" — o the "space of experience" of their own time.[1]

Since it is verbal descriptions we are speaking about, we might wish to call upon the distinctions drawn in modern semiotics among indexical, iconological,

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1 Reference to Reinhart Koselleck on "space of experience" (Erfahrungsraum) and "horizon of expectation" (Erwartungshorizont) as the lived experience of the relation between the past and the present of a given society. *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. by Keith Tribe (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985).

and symbolic sign systems in order to characterize the different kinds of descriptions met with in discourses such as historiography, ethnography, travel writing, biography, testimony, novels, jurisprudence and, yes, even philosophy. Historiographical descriptions are normally thought of as being of at least two kinds: first, technical in which the idiom used to represent a given historeme or unit of historiological interest functions as a metalanguage with specific signifieds assigned to specific signifiers such that any entity deemed indescribable in terms of the code specified is automatically ruled out as a possible object of historiological inquiry; and secondly, natural or commonsensical descriptions in which the rules of usage and mention of things "historical" are those of everyday educated speech and, it must be added, both utilitarian and artistic writing. [E.g., in modern historiography, miracles and ghosts are ruled out as possible objects of historiological inquiry — except when it is a matter of trying to understand why people of an earlier or different time believed such things to be possible.]

Descriptions of things purporting to be "scientific" are typically cast in a technical language, and it is characteristic of historiography seeking to emulate or utilize one or another of the social sciences to be cast in technical language or jargon even when it is primarily descriptive rather than explanatory (or nomological) in intent.[2] But even after historical studies first sought to become "scientific," the mainline of professional historiography remained committed to the protocols and conventions of ordinary, educated speech as its preferred idiom of presentation. This was especially true of narrative historiography, which is to say, historiography that wishes to represent veridictally congeries of historical events established as having occurred in the same time-space ("chronotopical")[3]

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2 An example would be a famous exercise in "cliometric" historiography: Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1974).

3 The allusion is to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin which postulates a particular kind of "lived" or "practiced" time-space nexus as characteristic of specific genres of literary expression. The (modern) city, for example, would be one kind of chronotope while that of the colonial outpost or "frontier" outpost would be another. Other chronotopes might be the classical "locus

locale, as possessing the manifest form of the kinds of stories met with in myth, epic, legend, and fable but without detracting in any way from the "factuality" of the events thus treated. And for some historians the presentation of events in the form of a "true" story constitutes a kind of explanation of "things as they really happened" or "things as they were" in the past. Thus, in seeking to characterize the cognitive force or value of narrative historiography as a description, we must get beyond the idea that "description" is an interruption of "narrative" and recognize that, grosso modo, narrative history is itself a description of a world in which significant processes manifest themselves in the form of stories. And that: in narrative histories the story told is intended to be taken as a description which explains by the emplotment of events as recognizable as a story of a particular kind: tragic, comedic, romantic, epical, farcical, etc., as the case may be.

In my opinion, this idea is plausible, because in most if not all cultures a narrativization or narrativized account of how anything has come to be what it has realistically or commonsensically or artistically been taken to be, counts as an "explanation" of that thing even if, lacking explicit designation of the causal laws that determine its natural order of being, it still would not count as a scientific explanation. But the problem with any attempt to assess a description (or even explanation) of an object presumed to be located "in history" or simply in "the past" is that there is no state of affairs or situation that can be invoked as an "original" body of phenomena against which different descriptions of what

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amoenus," the sea traversed by the great steamships linking the metropolitan with the seats of empire, the (Greek) polis, "Siberia," and, of course, the concentration camp, the prison, the missionary establishment, and so on. Cfr. The essays collected in Carol Emerson and Michael Holquist, eds., *The Dialogic Imagination* by Mikhail Bakhtin (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981). In this view, genre is conceived as more of a product of certain concrete practices occurring in a real place over a real time-period, rather than as a literary form that could be projected onto a putatively "real" world or world of real things and thereby "fictionalizing" them. The genres of literature, which would include all kinds of prose and poetic discourse, realistic or imaginary, factual or fictional, would function as models or paradigms for the indication or description of events that could possibly occur or be recognized as actually occurring only in a given chronotopical site. A chronotopc would correspond to what is connoted about a place in the German word "Staette" (in contrast to other words, also meaning "place," in the same language: der Ort, die Platz, and die Stelle).

they are thought to have been, can be compared and assessed as to their relative accuracy, precision, and truthfulness. When it comes to past states of affairs, there exist no undescribed congeries of phenomena with which to compare those versions offered as descriptions of it. As Louis O. Mink has pointed out, when it comes to trying to compare different descriptions of the same phenomena in the past, it is difficult to comprehend what "the same" might mean. For, of the past there are no phenomena to observe either in their raw or in any pre-descriptively processed state.

This problem of the unobservable referent is not mitigated by the contention that the state of affairs postulated as "original" is to be found in the documents and monuments serving as the "sources" of the historiological operation. And this because, although these sources do exist in the present and in a mode of being that allows them to be perceived, read, studied, and criticized as to their relative accuracy, precision, relevance and truthfulness with respect to the matters of which they speak, the sources seldom yield unalloyedly consistent accounts of "what happened" in the chronotopical domains from which they have descended. In other words, the problem with the sources is the same as that with the original state of affairs against which we would wish to measure the relative realism and truthfulness of any given account thereof. One can compare different descriptions of what may be agreed to have been a common referent, but one would have to describe an undescribed state of affairs in the past in order to use this as the referent against which the different descriptions under critical consideration could be assessed as to their truth, relevance or adequacy.

Now, it is here that the idea of context can be used effectively to mitigate the tendency to skepticism to which the elusiveness of the historical referent may conduce. Recall that "context" derives, first, from theories of sacred (and later, literary) texts in which the term denotes the "speech, writing, or print that normally precedes and follows a word or other element of language" in a patch of writing and has to do with the difference in meaning that may occur when a word

is quoted "out of context" versus its meaning as affected by the words preceding and following it (its context) in a given usage. When extended to refer to non-linguistic or extra-textual elements of the surround of a word, idea, or concept, "context," as The Oxford Concise Dictionary has it, often refers to "a situation," such that any "meaning expressed in terms of context" can then be termed *reference*, as against *sense,* which "exists in and among language elements regardless of context." The OCD goes on to say: "To illustrate the meaning of *ram* by pointing to a picture or an animal is to use context, but to define it as *male sheep* in contrast with *ewe* is to do so by means of sense."[4] Thus, we could say that a contextualist description or a description of a historical entity cast in a contextualist mode provides understanding of it by composing a verbal image of the relationship(s) existing between that entity and the "situation" in which it abides and has a specific function. Thus, the meaning of any given verbal image and a fortiori of any description of the world or part of it can be of two kinds: contextualist when the description refers to or mirrors or mimics a relation between an agent, agency or event and the situation it has arisen; and semantic or inter-semiotic, when meaning is produced by intralinguistic (grammatical, rhetorical, poetic, dictional) exchange or the arbitary substitution of signifers of one sign-system for signifieds of another and vice versa, as in poetic, oratorical, or simply "playful" speech and writing.[5]

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5 Deconstructionism, à la Jacques Derrida or Paul De Man, operates on the presumption that the two kinds of meaning—contextualist and semantic typically "interfere" with one another, creating zones of indeterminacy or aporias that make it impossible to extract a coherent or consistent body of assertion from any extended body of speech or writng or determine what is being designated as "the" referent of a discourse.

One problem this tack raises is that the referent of the context of an event or an action in the past is as difficult to specify as the event or action itself. For unless one is willing to invoke a theory of some kind — such as the Marxist model of Base and Superstructure or the primacy of modes and means of material production over ideas and beliefs as causes of historical change — to guide one in the search for what is active and what is merely passive in a given situation, then the context of any given event can consist in anything whatsoever that appears to be contiguous with the event or with the agents presumed to be responding to the situation under consideration.

The philosopher Stephen Pepper has argued that "contextualism" is one of the four principal "world-hypotheses" generated by philosophers and scientists in the Western tradition of metaphysics and epistemology (Formism, Mechanicism, and Organicism being the other three).[6] Moreover, he has argued that contextualism, far from being only one method or procedure for producing historical descriptions of past objects and events, is the method tout court of the ideology called "historicism." In other words, abstract the procedures and protocols typical of mainstream historiography in the West and what you will come up with is a contextualist world-picture (Weltbild) with all of the "facts" left out.

The interesting thing about contextualism, in Pepper's estimation, is that, like historical inquiry, it is not only not theory-driven but is anti-theoretical in principle. Which is to say that, much like historiography, its theory, insofar as it has one, is its practice of an ad hoc inquiry or research. This is to say that in historical research fixed on context, you use whatever you find in the archives and you write up the results of your research in the mode of a "report" about what you found in the archives revelatory of your targeted object of study or you compose a "story" that tells of changing relationships between your object of

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6 Stephen C. Pepper, *World Hypotheses: A Study in Evidence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966).

inquiry and its successive contexts over time. In the latter operation, which we can call the "narrativization" of events (i.e., casting sets of events in the mode of a story or fabula), there are strictly speaking no rules or methods that can be stipulated in advance of the composition itself. There are, to be sure, conventions, generic models, archetypes of meaning and significance, modes of emplotment, commonplaces and ideas of "propriety" available in the culture of the composer of the narrative on which he can draw as it suits his purposes. But the composition of a narrative about real events (in the past or the present) is an inventive operation: sets of events in real life do not take the form of stories. If anyone thinks that he "sees" a story in the documentary record of the past, it is because the story has been built into the record by its composers or the composer is mistaking his own fantasy for an external perception. More likely, the historian looking for a story in the events he is studying has endowed those events with the attributes of a specific kind of story (or plot) by his initial description of them in his notes.

The description (and redescription) of historical processes is much more difficult than the description of a historical structure or locale. This is because historical processes typically display evidence of changes in both the substances and the attributes of their objects of study and the substances and attributes of the contexts with which their objects of study are related as well. In the study of any historical place, one looks for elements and relationships that remain relatively stable rather than those that change or transform. This is why a logic of identity and non-contradiction can be used to control for consistency in descriptions of those things in history considered to be stable rather than changing or are at least more stable than changing, like contexts. But a logic of identity and non-contradiction cannot be used to guide inquiry into the relationships obtaining among different phases or epochs of an individual entity's life-course or serve as a control on the rationality and therefore the realism of any given narrativized account of historical entities in the past. Part of the fascination with anything apprehended as "historical" is its appearance of its continuity in change and its

change in continuity. Indeed, historical entities have conventionally been conceptualized as undergoing not only metamorphoses but also transubstantiations. Things historical do not "hold steady," do not remain "fixed" so that we can capture them, as it were, in a "snapshot" or painted portrait

And yet convincing narrativizations of sets of historical events get written, are recognized as credible descriptions of the states of affairs of which they treat, get lodged in the canon of historiographic classics which serve as paradigms for what will count as "proper" historiographical practice, and come to claim an authority that transcends cultural and temporal differences as interpretations if not as explanations of why what happened, happened as it did, when and where it happened. In my opinion, this is because the historiography in question — works by Burckhardt, Ranke, Michelet, Mommsen, Huizinga, Braudel, Hobsbawm, Lefebvre, Bloch, Cantimori, Le Goff, Duby, and, yes, the Marx of the 18th Brumaire, and so on — is composed on the basis of principles of composition more literary and discursive than either commonsensical or scientific in kind.[7]

This is not to say — as I have been accused of saying more than once — that the great classics of historiography belong in the end to the category of fictional writing. Imaginative writing, yes, to be sure, in the sense that it is as much to the imagination of readers as to their rational consciousnesses that the great historians appeal. This does not mean that these historians dissolve the difference between fact and fiction. It means that they dissolve the barrier — purely conventional, in any case — between history-writing and literary writing. This distinction between history and literature, and the taboo against any mixture of them in modern culture was based on conceptions of the nature of literary writing prior to the revolution in culture and society effected by modernism. Although modernist writing — the paradigms of which are to be found in the

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7 This was the burden of my study of the historical imagination 19th century Europe, entitled *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

works of Joyce, Proust, Woolf, Melville, James, Stein, Kafka, and so on — is continuous with the great tradition of "realistic" writing found in the work of Stendhal, Dickens, Balzac, Flaubert, and Fontane, and is therefore marked by its focus on the present construed as "history" which is to say, social structures in process of constant change, disruption, and revolution, modernist writing operates on the conviction (à la Giambattista Vico) that everything in culture is made by men and that, not only history itself is so made but so too are the "facts" that comprise the knowledge men possess of their own self-making.

To be sure, a certain kind of historiology was based on the conviction that a fact was something that one could "find" or "find out" by simulating a visual perception of certain acts, events, or constellations of events in the past. This conviction produces the genre of history as "spectacle" of the kind favored by popular culture in the age of video reproduction — as in the "History Channel," the "History Book Club," and the heritage industry. Here it is history which "dazzles," history which "thrills" that is on order. In spectacle historiography, the facts are indeed "fictionalized" by being deprived of their cognitive content and transformed into fetish-objects, engaging the drives, desires and anxieties of subjects conditioned to live out fantasies of consumption fed by simulacra of "sublime objects of desire"[8] rather than by real relationships of intimacy and community with other, real people.

I mentioned above Danto's belief that a "fact" is "an event under a description" and that, whereas events belong to the order of things and material processes, facts belong only or at least specifically to the order of language.[9] This is why it can be said, as the late Richard Rorty was wont to do, that "truth" is not a quality of things that exist "out there" in the world and inheres in them, but is rather a quality of a certain kind of language-use and a feature of language.

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8 The phrase is taken from Slavoj Zizek's book, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso Books, 2009).

9 Or as Roland Barthes was wont to say, "Le fait n'a qu'une existence linguistique." "Le discours de l'histoire," *Information sur les sciences Sociales*, VI-4 (1967), pp. 65-75.

Statements, propositions or utterances can be true or false or neither or both. But of things we would not ask if they are true or false, for here we are interested in what they are and what they may mean in combination or collection. It is their reality that is at issue, not their truth or falsity. We may want to make true statements about them, but the truth in question is more semantic than epistemological.[10] We are just as interested in what they were and what they meant in the contexts in which they once acted and suffered and had their being.

But, at the same time, we must conjure with the fact that statements, predications, and discourses belong to the class of things written or spoken, of which it is legitimate to ask not only whether they are real or only imagined but also whether they are true, or contain truths, or have the feature of truthfulness.[11] And this brings us back to the problem of whether there can be descriptions of things no longer open to perception (because they are past and are known to have existed only by their "remains" or vestiges in the present) which can nonetheless be judged to be true or false in any scientific or factual sense.

At this point I would like to indicate that not all descriptions of complex phenomena invite judgments as to their truth or falsity so much as, rather, as to some other kind of adequatio rei et intellectus (adequacy of things to intellect). In the West, the truth of propositions about the world has been conventionally assessed by appeal to criteria of correspondence and/or coherence. These alternatives suggest the two kinds of relationship between signs and their referents differentiated by William Sanders Peirce as iconic and symbolic respectively.[12] As images, descriptions can be said to bear some kind of mimetic relationship to their referents: they may more or less "resemble" the structures or

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10 See Jerry Fodor for this distinction between epistemological and semantic truth. *LOT 2: The Language of Thought Revisited* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
11 Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).
12 It goes without saying, I should think, that a verbal description of a thing is not an indexical sign of it in the manner of a photographic negative, because a verbal description is not in any sense "caused" by its referent in the way a photographic image is "caused" by the chemical reaction of light rays falling on a colloidal surface of film.

the attributes of their referents; but in the case of representations which have no referents that could be inspected by observation or measurement, as is the case with past objects, it is difficult to conceive of what a historical description could be said to be a description of. So if we use semiotic conceptions of the sign-referent relationship, we will not wish to consider them to be either indexically or inconologically related. As a result, from a semiotic perspective, the prospects for basing the truth of descriptions of historical phenomena do not look good.

It is in the face of this problem that many theorists have fallen back on a "coherence" model for testing the truth or falsity of historical descriptions. On this view of the matter, the truth of a given description of a historical entity or process has to be determined on the basis of an analysis of the logical consistency obtaining among the various propositions (predications) that make up the whole of the discourse in which the description is presented. And here the "logic" in question is that of identity and non-contradiction which requires that the elements of the description be first translated into concepts and then correlated as an "argument about" the referent rather than as a representation of it. But this is already to abandon the ground on which the claims for the representational nature of the truth claims of a description of things historical might be founded.

So let us back up a bit. If the pertinence of a description of a historical entity depends upon a representation of its relationships to its context(s) and this representation depends in turn less upon established rules and procedures for determining these relationships as they obtain in a specific (or as it is said, concrete) time and place in "history," rather than upon the improvisation of such rules and procedures appropriate for the description of individual (which is to say, individualizable) situations in the past, then it seems obvious to me that the techniques and protocols for establishing these relationships will have to be more "poetic," which is to say, figurative and tropical, rather than conceptual and logical, in kind. They will have to be improvised and, as it were, "bricolated" in the process of analyzing the documents and monuments relating to the situation

under investigation — so that, the result will be a description whose "coherence" and "consistency" are those of a symbolic, rather than of an indexical or iconic kind.

The philosopher Louis O. Mink has argued that the truth of a narrative account of a real set of events is not to be determined by the truth of the individual propositions that may comprise it taken distributively. And this is because, as we all know, even the greatest historian text will contain errors of fact or misstatement or misconstrual of evidence at some point in its enunciation. On the contrary, Mink argued or rather implied, the truth (or, if one wishes, the realism) of a narrative account of some part of the past resides in the sense it generates of a whole which is not so much "greater" than the sum of its parts as rather "other" than what it asserts or seems to assert on the literal level of its elaboration. But to say that the truth or meaning of a historical account cast in the mode of a narrative is greater or other than the sum of its individual statements taken distributively is to posit meaning and truth as relational rather than causal or structural.

Which suggests that the sign systems brought together and composed as a narrative description of some part of historical reality might be understood to consist of symbols rather than only of indices and icons of the things to which they refer.

In other words, the truth of a description of anything considered to have existed in the past or in history is symbolic truth. This means that a description of a referent in terms of the systems of symbols shared by a given community for the endowment of things and events considered to be "true" in the sense of "having actually occurred" with meaning or what, in this case, amounts to the same thing, with value, is and can only be a symbolic description. In this sense, descriptions of any given past or a part thereof deemed to be "historical" in kind — and whether produced by professional historians or amateurs, novelists,

antiquarians, poets, biographers, romancers, or social scientists, etc. — partake of that activity of human self-making in which and by which human beings constitute or seek to contribute to the constitution of their identities as members of groups whose modes of affiliation are experienced as being both symbolic (legal, customary, and conventional), on the one side, and material (i.e., genetic or genealogical), on the other.[13]

Now, a symbol is a sign whose signifier is a verbal, visual, auditory, or haptic image (such as a circle or a cross or the words "circle" or "cross") and whose signified refers to other images of things considered to be of distinct positive or negative value by the culture in which they circulate as carriers of meaning. Thus, the word "cross" and the image **"X"** refer not only to a "quadrivium" or the Greek letter "chi" but also to a particular scene in Christian lore in which the Christian God in the form of the man Jesus undergoes a sacrificial death on a cross which, by its association with that event, acquires the value of "sanctity" wherever it appears in proximity with other symbols of Christian meanings or values. So, too, the inscription of a sign of the cross in any scene of the most banal occurrences can have the effect of transforming the meaning conveyed by the description of the rest of the scene in symbolic or only parasymbolic code.

Of course, in this example, the signifieds of a religious kind are manifestly symbolic and function to endow things with meanings on the basis of a shared identity of substance between the sign and its referent, on the one side, and its semantic content, on the other. But the same thing happens with putatively

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13 Scientific historiology may attempt to explain the development over time of this web of material and symbolic affiliations by developing some version of Darwin's theory for explaining the "origin of species" and "the descent of man" by random mutation and natural selection. Whence the current interest among some historians in the neurobiological and cognitive sciences and the theory of "cognitive evolution" which hopes to assimilate the historical phase of human species development to the story of its evolution. Here of course it is "the brain" rather than the "mind" or "intelligence" of the human species that becomes the favored object of study, but more importantly this kind of "historiography" would seek to assimilate the processes of the human brain to those of the brains of other animal species.

secular or non-religious sign systems, wherein a thing or scene is endowed with value simply by the in-scription within a de-scription of it will have the effect of endowing it with a value, say, of "nobility" by the use of a sign such as a "white plume" or the arms of a gentleman (a sword, say) versus those of a villain (a dirk) or of a peasant (a club or ax). "To mean" or to have meaning is to manifest the attributes of or have one's "proper" in the things and scenes that are good, true, beautiful, noble, light, pure, and esteemed by the virtuous of the world. Needless to say, the meaning of a thing or scene may also consist in the opposites of the foregoing set of values. The important point is that although one can "explain" any worldly phenomenon without assigning a value to it, it is impossible to describe anything without also assigning a value or set of values to it.

This is because natural languages consist of mixtures of technical and common signs fraught with symbolic meanings. This is especially the case with the class of signs known as deictics or locators of things in terms of conceptual pairs — here/there, now/then, near/far and the like — that have no meaning apart from their relation to the time and place of their use in discourse or their antithetical relation to one another (high/low, early/late, full/empty, part/whole, noble/base, good/evil, and so on). What happens in a description is that a thing or scene or event is successively re-described in such a way as to be progressively endowed with a substance or essence worthy of bearing a Proper Name. The principal technique is called "adjectivization" or the identification of a thing by the number of adjectives and adverbs that can be convincingly applied to it and its actions. Thus, description can succeed in producing an explanation-effect by progressively revealing or uncovering the putative substance that unites all of the attributes of a thing to make it seem to be this kind of thing rather than some other kind.♦

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