MINDBLIND PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

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Stephen Turner  
Department of Philosophy  
University of South Florida

*Historical explanation after Hempel came to be discussed in terms of a contrast between nomic explanations and rationalizations, and later between cause and narrative. This period can be taken as an historical parenthesis, in which the notion of cause narrowed and the notion of historical understanding as empathic dropped out. In the present philosophical landscape there are different models of cause available, especially in the causal modeling literature, and a revived appreciation, through the philosophy of mind and in light of such discoveries as mirror neurons, of empathy. The newer causal modeling literature foregrounds the problem of confounding or overdetermination, but solves it in ways inimical to historical explanation. Empathy, however, represents an alternative solution, available to the historian, in which causal relevance can be assessed and established in terms of its role in the reenacted experience of the historical subject. This suggests the idea that the art of history is using historical evidence to show what people might have thought and felt under past circumstances, in ways that engage our capacities to mind-read—capacities established by cognitive science.*

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As Roth points out in his discussion of the development of the problem of historical explanation in the philosophy of history after Hempel\(^1\), many of the issues about historical explanation have involved a contrast between scientific explanation as idealized by the Logical Positivists and other kinds of common sense, intentional, narrative explanations. Louis Mink’s formulation of the contrast has become standard\(^2\). But one might also think of the situation Roth describes, not to say its dead-end character, as a peculiar and unsatisfactory bracket or parenthesis between two somewhat different situations, in which some of the characteristic features of historical thinking were redescribed, obscured, ignored, or even ridiculed, but which now have returned, or at least promise to return.

The prehistory of the period Roth discusses, to which we seem to be returning, is one in which causality was understood in a non-nomological way and historians were understood to have an

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interest in the inner motivations of historical agents, their minds, and to have the task of bringing them to life for us. R. G. Collingwood is the usual marker for this thought, but it was also a key component of Dilthey’s view of history, along with a host of other Germans. During the period Roth describes, these considerations were tamed into the notions of narrative and interpretation, that is to say assimilated to the problems of textuality: understanding was modeled on the interpretation of texts; narratives were understood as conventional forms of historical writing, but without much consideration of whether the forms might have a point. Mink, in describing narrative as a cognitive instrument, implied that narrative served cognitive purposes, but he never said what they were. This left the impression that they were perhaps dubious purposes, such as the desire Kant ascribed to the teleologist who satisfied his need to make sense of history by imposing a purpose on it.

Today there have been two changes in the philosophical atmosphere. A different model of causality, represented by the directed arrow graphs and statistical methods of epidemiology and social science, has become legitimate as a genuine alternative to the model of physics. And ideas from cognitive science about mirror neurons and simulation have re-legitimated the idea that our understanding of the thought processes of other people is not merely some sort of dubious parlor game but rather an expression of a capacity of human cognition as fundamental as the capacity to gain causal knowledge of the physical world. It is this new situation and its implications for the problem structure Roth describes that will concern me here.

The Problem of Cause

The conflicts that Roth describes in connection with explanation are bound to a set of models of causation of which the nomological one is merely the most prominent. These models all share a version of the idea of vera causae– in this case the idea that there is some set of causes, or one cause, that is the true cause of an outcome. The tradition of metaphysical thinking about causality that derives from David Lewis, the INUS (insufficient but non-redundant part of an unnecessary but sufficient condition) model of John Mackie and the NESS (necessary element of a sufficient set) tradition that attempts to revise it, all depend on this notion of causation. For them, there may be epistemic questions about what the cause is, and even questions about whether the notion of causality applies in a given case. But if it does, the existence of one true cause excludes the possibility of others.

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The common feature of both the nomological and these non-nomological accounts of causation is that they fail because of overdetermination—the presence of more causes than necessary to account for the effect. Overdetermination and confounding are related notions. Overdetermination is the more general term—it applies to singular causal explanations as well as those involving generalizations or statistical relations. Confounding is a more obscure notion connected to statistics: where there are multiple possible causal correlates of an outcome that are also correlated with one another, the possible causes are confounded. Overdetermination or confounding is commonplace in the social and medical sciences.

The nomological account is free of the problem of confounding, but only for the de facto reason that a case of nomological overdetermination would be one in which multiple determining causes were completely coextensive with one another. If they were, we would not be able to separate them empirically, and if we could not we would be compelled to treat them each as part of the cause, unless we have other reasons, such as the fact that a supposed causal property was unnecessary in a deductive theory which predicted the rest of the domain. This is not a situation that the historian faces, obviously, but it has analogues in a situation she does face: answering the question of whether the judge passed a sentence because of the law or because of their breakfast.

From one point of view—the God’s eye point of view of present conventional philosophical writing on causality—they are merely epistemic problems. Interesting as these might be, they are trivial and irrelevant to the question of real causal relations, and to the problem of explanation. Something determined the judge’s sentence. But the rub is that we don’t know that this point of view is God’s at all. We don’t know that the causal relations in the world sort out into non-confounded, non-overdetermined real causes. So constructing theories of causality assuming that real causes aren’t ultimately like this and applying them to history (and finding it wanting) just amounts to stating a preference for a metaphysical reality in which one’s pet theories work.

In the case of historical explanation, in any event, we are not concerned with ultimate metaphysical reality. As Mink and Roth point out, the descriptions of the things we want explained are given apart from the explanation. Nomological explanations, once one has them, warrant the choice of descriptions. In the case of history, however, there is no nomologically warranted correct set of descriptions. Non-nomological models—such as Lewis’s—handle description in a related way: the descriptions are those that fulfill the type of causality. If a given set of descriptions fails to enable us to find a unique solution to the problem of the cause (or the set of causes) we are forced either to say we don’t know the cause or to revise our descriptions until we find something that does fit. The same problem afflicts INUS and NESS causality. Without the kind of regularities that are needed to back INUS and NESS explanations, which ordinarily don’t exist for historical explanation, we have no grounds for thinking that a given set of descriptors is the genuinely casual one.

What these models exclude is the normal case of historical explanation: one in which we have an outcome we want explained, lots of knowledge about what contributing causes might be, a sense of how they work as causes to produce outcomes, and evidence—and questions—which comes in descriptions that were created apart from the needs of historical analysis—descriptions of the character of historical agents, their interests, and so forth. These descriptions are of two kinds: descriptions from the point of view of the agents themselves, and descriptions from the point of
view of the historian who is located in a specific historical setting with a particular audience that must be spoken to in a way that they understand, which might include terms of art from the sciences which they can be made to understand. To be sure, these are flexible limits, and part of the art of historical writing is to redescribe. But to the extent that historical questions are governed by the demand of intelligibility to historical audiences it will also be the case that casual accounts will be overdetermined or confounded.

Why? Consider the case of nomological regularity. With a law that is a true generalization, the law applies equally to any subset of the domain to which the law applies, regardless of the way we characterize the subset. If all swans have two wings, all black swans have two wings. In the case of statistical relationships, matters are different. Unless the categories are the same, i.e., extensionally equivalent, or randomly related to one another, dividing a category will produce subcategories with different statistical relationships than the relationship for the total category. If we divide cars into fast cars and slow cars, and get one probability for accidents for each category, then divide fast cars into red cars and non-red cars, we may find that red and non-red fast cars each have a different probability of accidents. The same would occur if we started by dividing cars into red and non-red, and then divided red cars into fast and slow. If being fast and being red were statistically irrelevant, the effects of being red and being fast would be purely additive, and we could ascribe any increase in accidents in the category fast car to the fact of being red (or some correlate of being red).

But in the usual case the situation will be this: red cars will be proportionally over- or under-represented in the category fast car. Ascribing the effects of being fast and being red by first dividing into fast and slow and then dividing into red and non-red and ascribing the changed probability to the fact that the car is red will produce a different number than one would get by starting by categorizing into red and non-red and ascribing the increased probability of accidents entirely to the fact of redness. If the two were closely related, categorizing by fast and slow would not change the probability much. But concluding that it was the color of the car rather than whether it was fast or slow that altered the probability of accidents on the basis of the small size of the change resulting from adding the categorization would be a mistake— the small size was a result of the arbitrary decision to divide into red and non-red first rather than second.

This is the nub of the problem of confounding. Despite its apparently strange logical structure, it is pervasive. And the problems of attributing causal effects do not end with the simple two case situation described here— any of an indefinitely large number of other potential causes, or different descriptions with different extensional meanings, could be inserted ahead of these two in this list of influences on rates of car accidents, with the consequence of changing the apparent contribution. We can keep adding controls, or partialling for a potentially relevant causal variable, as long as our imagination can invent them. There is no point at which we can be sure we have eliminated all the possible common causes or confounders.

Statisticians have invented ways of dealing with this problem, to be sure. There are indirect tests of whether the system is complete. And there are also ways of using the statistical relations to eliminate confounding. But they do not avoid the problem of the judge’s breakfast. Instead they solve it by fiat— by the assumption that those causal relations which are most stable are the most
causal\textsuperscript{7}. This solves the problem at the expense of history. The most stable causes of wars are well understood by international relations theorists in terms of the balance of power. For them, wars are either kinetic or errors. The historian is not satisfied with this. She wants more. But what is this more, and how does it relate to the problem of confounding? If the answer is “a more satisfying story in the sense of fitting some standard narrative form better,” we have no answer. But thinking of the problem of cause differently than the model of true cause suggests opens up some other possibilities.

Back to Understanding

The period Roth describes is one in which explanation is taken either to be a matter of appealing to law or to narrative. The recognition that there are no such laws, and the idea that causes must be law-like leads to the despairing rejection of the idea of cause through turning to its radical opposite, the treatment of causal accounts as no more than narrative conventions. The possibility is that we can break out of this argumentative cul de sac. The earlier history of the philosophy of history shows us what has been missed, and can be recaptured, if we move beyond this set of dilemmas.

The part of the philosophy of history that dropped out in this discussion, partly as a result of ridicule, but partly for the reason that positivism had undermined its cognitive claims, was the idea of history that was especially connected with entering into the mind of historical agents. Verificationism put this idea out of business— in principle. But in practice, the tasks of understanding the actions of figures in history from their point of view continued to supply a point to history. Narrative convention supplied a kind of answer, but an incomplete one. Understanding what went on in the heads of historical agents is an aim which could be ascribed to narrative other than sheer convention. Yet this whole domain of intuition, \textit{Verstehen}, historical imagination, and the like remained a taboo topic in the philosophy of history itself. Interpretation was accepted, but only because it could be modeled on the discursive, on the interpretation of texts, which could be given legitimacy and in some sense freed from subjectivity. The fact that textual interpretation existed in a well-developed form in literature, Biblical study, and elsewhere without falling into “subjectivity” meant that it was acceptable as a model. Other minds, in contrast, were a “problem.” Terms like intuition were philosophically illegitimate, and phrases like “historical imagination” were suspect and unscientific.

Something important has now changed, thanks to the philosophy of mind and to cognitive science. The terms have changed, but the cognitive processes that the older literature was pointing to with the fluff terms of “imagination,” “intuition,” “\textit{Verstehen},” and the like, are now regarded as fundamental human capacities under such labels as “simulation” and “mirroring”\textsuperscript{8}.

They are essential for our social interaction, pervasive, and most strikingly, on a par with casual knowledge. The core idea is that we understand others by thinking like them, and we do this pre-reflectively and continuously as part of our navigation of the world.

We do not have access to other minds in any special epistemic sense, which is what earlier accounts of historical intuition seemed to require. But at the same time we do not construct our understanding of other minds from scratch empirically, as the problem of other minds assumed (though perhaps autistic persons do something like this). The philosophy of history followed this strange idea– it treated historians as mindblind. Normal people are minded, and aware of others as minded, at a more basic level, which allows us to do such things as mirror their movements, and to feel as they do, not by making complex casual inferences but by observing them, which triggers, at a neuronal level, a response similar to the response we would have by doing the thing we see them do. We feel their pain as pain, for example, as a result of our possession of very basic and perhaps innate knowledge of what a person in pain looks like and is feeling. If this is the case, the problem of historical intuition and of the tasks of the historian look very different. If our experience of others is riven with this kind of knowledge, if we react to cues as others do because of a deep capacity to mirror their actions and the feelings they have, the task of the historian becomes one of providing the kinds of information that allows us to do this about historical figures.

Consider the episode in Antonia Fraser’s *Marie Antoinette*[^9], in which the fourteen-year-old Austrian princess, traveling to Paris to be married to the future Louis XVI, is taken to an Island in the Rhine, stripped of all her clothes as well as of her Austrian possessions, including her dog, and refitted in French clothes, as a French royal. The event is jarring, but precisely because it is evocative. The humiliation, the fear and confusion, and the messages about power and submission that could be inferred from the ritual, and also, powerfully, about the nature of national identity at the level of courts and courtiers, are things that the reader feels. The reader is drawn into the scene with, so to speak, the simulative eye rather than the causal one.

It is part of the art of historical writing to make such scenes work– to supply the right details to produce the right response in the reader. And this can obviously go badly wrong. The feelings we attribute may be anachronistic and misplaced, because the cues we use to simulate have a different causal significance for the historical figure, whose experiences are very different from ours. But these are the sorts of things that can be argued about, and about which evidence can be brought to bear. The core remains: we experience the events in some sense as our own experience.

**Bringing Cause Back In**

The relationship between this kind of empathetic understanding and cause becomes clearer once we appreciate the limitations of causal analysis in the face of overdetermination.. There is no answer to the problem of the judge’s breakfast to be had by refining our causal analysis: some large and irreducible set of possible sufficient causes of the judge’s choice of a sentence will remain after the causal facts are in. But the historian has access to the other eye: to the simulative or empathic. And while these considerations will not necessarily solve the problem of the judge’s

breakfast, they can cut it down to size— to the size of what is humanly intelligible as a response to a concrete situation. That is the reason that historians specialize in the telling detail, the revealing archival find, for these details make the situation concrete and thus open to simulation. Sometimes this cutting down is very effective, and a long list of putative causes of an individual’s actions can be reduced to a few— the few that would have meant something to the historical individual making decisions and acting in the moment. Sometimes it is not, because we do not know enough, or because many of the possible causes remain after we think our way into the situation of the agent.

These empathic considerations have a great deal to do with the mysteries and dead ends that Roth’s account describes. They tell us that narratives have a point: they are anchored in our desire to make sense of historical agents as comprehensible beings, who respond to the world as we do. Historical detail has a point: to construct the concrete world to which they respond in such a way that we can respond empathetically. Redescriptions, similarly, are not merely arbitrary reinventions. They have the point of making it possible for us to employ our simulative capacities in settings in which we are at sea, or to correct past historical accounts by producing different simulative experiences. Empathy is still a mysterious process, with much that is unknown. But, ironically, what is unknown is now the subject not of phenomenology or speculation, but of the kind of cognitive science that isolates neuron systems. Dismissing it in favor of cause today is to embrace a bizarre ideology: the idea that we should reject our own mindedness and capacity for simulation, which are the very basis of our capacity to cope with the world of people.

Stephen Turner
Department of Philosophy
University of South Florida
Tampa, FL 33620
turner@shell.cas.usf.edu