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A Dialogue with Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen

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Abstract

The discussion of Kuukkanen's book *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography* (2015) is presented here in the form of a dialogue. The dialogue addresses the following five issues: 1) the kind of claims typically made in- and by the historical text, 2) narrativism and historical representation, 3) representational holism, 4) representationalism and non-representationalism and 5) the role of argument in historical writing. While agreement is within reach for the two participants in the dialogue in case of the two first issues, opinions begin to diverge with the third one. Disagreement boils down to the hierarchy between representation and argument: is representation the master that argument has to serve, or has representation nothing to add to what argument can and will give us?

Keywords

Kuukkanen – historical representation – holism – non-representationalism – argument in historiography – Leibniz

1 Preface

In the introduction to this forum debate I expressed my profound admiration for Professor Kuukkanen's book. If you say in the academic world that you admire someone this may mean a whole lot of different things. But one of them undoubtedly is that you believe there to be a considerable amount of agreement between the admired author's opinions and your own. And so it is here! But whether I'm actually right about this is, of course, for others to decide – first of all for Professor Kuukkanen himself.

Nevertheless, I am sure I *can* safely say that we share an interest for much the same aspects of historical writing. This makes the traditional format of the review awkward. When trying it out, I found it inadequate to express my opinion of the book with sufficient depth, comprehension and accuracy. This is why I decided, after some hesitation, for the somewhat unusual format of the dialogue. Admittedly, the format has its risks. For it compels me to present Kuukkanen as if he were actually addressing me, whereas I cannot always be sure that the 'real' Kuukkanen actually holds the same beliefs I shall attribute to him below. However, I tried to minimize the danger by quoting lengthily from his book in 'his' interventions in the dialogue and to remain, for the rest, as close to the text of the book as possible. But I may not have always been successful in avoiding the danger and must insist, therefore, on the *caveat emptor*!

2 What Kind of Historical Writing Do We Discuss?

Jouni-Matti K.

'History books include integrative views, theses or claims, and all the hundreds of pages and their sentences and statements are designed to explicate and ground those. This is what I call, the narrative insight. Most narrativists naturally call the integrative unit 'narrative', but the essential claim is that [history (F.A.)] books contain some content-synthesizing entity'. 'Many of the readers are probably familiar with the comparison of historiography to literature by the narrativist, and as a consequence, with identifying the central synthesizing entity as a literary product. It can be said up front that this is not how I see the matter' (Kuukkanen 2015; 1, 2).

What I said a moment ago about historical 'theses' could also be expressed in terms of points of view: 'historians argue for points of view' (Kuukkanen 2015; 90). And they do so on the basis of evidence and rational discussion: 'historiography is an empirical discipline, after all' (Kuukkanen 2015; 91). Finally, although books of history often, and even typically expound a development in time, this is not necessarily so and they should thus not always be read as presenting a narrative form. Narrativity, argumentativity are meta-codes for organizing the content, and none of them is strictly necessary or essential.

Frank A.

On all these counts I completely agree with you! More specifically, for me the historical text is also basically an argument in favor of some 'historical thesis', or as you put it, the proposal to see part of the past from some specific 'point

of view' (Ankersmit 1983; e.g. 2, 3, 12, 25, 26, 46, 47, 90). I am no less adamant than you that we should keep literature and historical writing apart from each other because of the historian's duty to tell 'the truth' about the past. Though we might differ with regard to truth: in my view existing conceptions of truth fail to do justice to the nature historical truth. So we need a new theory of truth taking its cue from the practice of history. That is what makes historical writing of no less interest for philosophers of language and of science than for philosophers of history.

But we are both convinced that literature will be of no help here. Even more so, while narrativists often argued that historical writing could learn a lot from literature, it is, in fact, the other way around. History came first, literature only later and it took history as its model (Ankersmit 2010). I therefore fully agree also with your reservations about the notion of 'narrative'. For it invites all kinds of misleading associations. If the reflection on the historical text did not yield what might have been expected from it, the fact that the notion of 'narrative' made people look in the wrong direction, namely to literature, was mainly to blame for this. So I shall speak from now on of 'representations' only. And in order to avoid the impression we discuss different things, I hope you'll allow me to exchange the word 'narrative' for 'representation' whenever you use the former (or cognate words) in the passages from your book I will quote below.

3 Representation and the Past

Jouni-Matti K.

"Before commencing a detailed critique, it is instructive to take a few steps back and consider the concept 'representation' in general. On the most fundamental level, 'representation' is a two-place relation, creating a link between two variables: one that represents and the other that is thus represented. There are several ways in which to understand this relation as we have already seen. The following are arguably the most obvious ones: (1) 'representation' can imply that one object is a copy of another in some sense; (2) 'representation' can be taken to mean that one object is a substitution of another; 'representation' can be understood even more widely to state that one object stands for or symbolizes another even though the former is not a replacement of the other" (Kuukkanen 2015; 53). The problem with option (1) is that historical texts (or narratives) add to the past itself an organizational pattern and are meant to do just this. 'The crux of the matter is that the text cannot lead to a consideration of the pre-constructed historical phenomenon, because no higher-level phenomenon, such as the Renaissance, that is constructed of lower level objects,

is independent of the historian's act' (Kuukkanen 2015; 54). The substitution theory is unconvincing, too: 'would a book about the Holocaust really bring the Holocaust to the reader?' (Kuukkanen 2015; 36).

Frank A.

Yes, I can agree with what you said just now about the substitution theory of representation. Though with the qualification that the kind of substitute meant by the substitution-theorists is ordinarily not believed by them to be identical with what it is a substitute of. For if Leibniz's law of the identity of indiscernibles is correct,¹ it follows that if a substitute is identical with what it is a substitute of, it would not be a substitute at all, but the original thing all over again. Or think of Virginia Woolf's: 'art is not a copy of the world; one of the damn things is enough'. That would take away much of the cogency of your argument against the substitution theory and might reconcile you, perhaps, with what you apparently have in mind with 'standing for' and/or 'symbolization'.

Jouni-Matti K.

Well, I don't think this would be of much help. For the advocate of the substitution theory, or any weaker variant of it, will have to make clear, in my opinion, what conditions a text – as a substitute or symbol of part of the past – must satisfy in order to be able to count as such a substitute or symbol. "Anything can be said to stand 'to stand' for anything, if we just stipulate so. The meaningfulness of that stipulation is another matter. If I state that my coffee mug stands for an omnipotent being, my claim would be understandable linguistically, but would probably be taken as senseless nevertheless. I accept that a historical text 'is about' the past in some loose manner, but it does not make good sense to claim that a historical text stands for the past" (Kuukkanen 2015; 60). So what actually *makes* a substitution into a substitution that is true, believable, justifiable, tenable or valid (or whatever you have) does all of the real work here, while the rest (such as deep philosophical speculations about substitution) is mere superfluous ornament and embellishment.

1 Leibniz's law confronts the historicist with an interesting problem. According to the historicist a thing's identity is defined by its past. With regard to the kind of things investigated by the historians the historicist thesis has, indeed, an immense plausibility. But think now of two hydrogen atom; one having led its life in one part of the universe and the other in another part since the Big Bang. On the basis of Leibniz's law, both atoms are different: they have a different history. But are they *really* different? That they should be can only convincingly be argued by an appeal to their different histories. But an appeal to *that* argument would reduce the historicist/Leibnizian conception of identity to a *petitio principii*.

Frank A.

Yes, though I might have protested in the past against what you say here about the substitution theory, I must now confess I find it quite convincing. And when getting to what you say is 'the real work' we'd have to move on the relationship between a representation of the past and the past itself? Right?

Jouni-Matti K.

Yes, I suppose so.

Frank A.

OK, then. Let me begin with a comparison. Compare the past to a dark chamber with chairs, tables and all other kind of furniture in it and the historian to someone having a pocket torch in his hand while trying to find the place from where he can obtain the best survey of what is in the chamber. And suppose, furthermore, that the only clue he has here are the photo's taken of the dark chamber by previous people faced with the same task. Now, replace in this comparison the pocket torch by historical representations, the dark chamber by the represented past and, finally, what you can see of it and of its furniture thanks to it being illuminated by the torch light by 'aspects of the past' (or by what is 'presented', or 'revealed' of the past thanks to the representation). Actually, this sums up quite nicely how I think of historical representation. My last book was, basically, an attempt to elaborate in a technically responsible way this idea into a philosophy of historical representation (Ankersmit 2012; 1–157). The comparison suggests that illuminating the dark chamber from one place may 'reveal' more of it than illuminating it from some other(s).

Returning, then, to historical representation, I'd say that the representation 'revealing' more of the past than any competing ones gives us a 'true' or, rather, the 'truest' representations of the past.

Two unorthodox conclusions follow from this. Firstly, truth is here something that is 'revealed', hence it must be situated on the *object-side*, whereas we normally say that truth is a property that can only be attributed to what we say about the world (and is thus to be situated on the *subject-side*). Representations are the *textual instruments* we use for 'revealing' historical truth, just as torch lights may help us discover truths about what can be found in the dark chamber. But it would be nonsense to say that the torch light itself 'is true'; it formulates itself no (falsifiable) claims or assertions, as is done, for example, by statements about the world. And so it is with representations. Though, it can be said that the torch light and the historical representation *give us access to truth* thanks to what they may *reveal* to us. Or not, as the case may be.

Hence, both the torch light and the representation are absolutely *indispensable* for the discovery of truth about the dark chamber or the past. So the cognitive pretensions of historical representation remain unchallenged. Secondly, there are degrees of truth. Having the torch light on one place will show us more of the dark chamber and having it elsewhere will show us less. And so it is with historical representation.

Jouni-Matti K.

Well, your idea of these ‘degrees of truth’ actually has its analogue in my book. Let me begin with this; I shall later on return to your notion of the ‘aspects’. OK? In the penultimate Chapter of my book I propose a rehabilitation of the terms ‘subjectivity’ and ‘objectivity’ – that have, unfortunately, gone out of fashion in contemporary philosophy of history.² I distinguish between four conceptions of objectivity. In the first variant “the object is given, and an objective view reflects what is given. I call this first sense of ‘objective’ ontological objectivity because the objectivity of the view is determined by an independently existing reality as given”. Secondly, objectivity ‘is about a certain attitude to one’s research object. In order to be objective the researcher is required to approach the research object without any prejudice: neutrally’. Thirdly, it might be argued that though complete objectivity in the second sense is unattainable ‘one should nevertheless try to be as neutral or as fair and honest as possible’ (...). “The fourth and final sense of ‘objectivity’ involves justification. Its starting point is perhaps the most realistic of the four. It assumes that all views are subjective but that this is not the end of the matter. Subjective idiosyncrasies can be removed by subjecting views to intersubjective evaluation and criticism, possibly governed by some specific standards of evaluation” (Kuukkanen 2015; 169, 170). I then go on to distinguish between ‘object-sidedness’ and ‘subject-sidedness’. The first notion derives from the first conception of objectivity; examples are statements like ‘Stalin owned a gun’ or ‘President Kekkonen was born in 1900’. On the other hand: ‘the thought that historians form synthesizing interpretations or other integrative views and concepts immediately implies that historical knowledge contains subject-side elements’ (Kuukkanen 2015; 173). Obviously, ‘object-sidedness’ and ‘subject-sidedness’ are both part of historical texts; though the former will sometimes be more prominent in them than the latter, and vice versa. Hence, “I would like now to suggest that one learn to live with the ‘sliding scale’ of objectivity and subjectivity” (Kuukkanen 2015; 172).

² A rare exception being (Assis forthcoming).

Frank A.

I most warmly applaud your so very well-considered plea for taking up again the notions of objectivity and subjectivity; in my view what has been associated with these two terms all through the ages still is a potential source for theoretical insight. In fact, I used the terms myself in the last Chapter of my book on narrative logic (Ankersmit 1983; 23–248). I especially like in your account of the objectivity versus subjectivity issue your claim that decisions about it overrule normative decisions. For it can (fortunately) be ‘objectively’ ascertained that a certain historical account is right or wrong – regardless of the norms inspiring it. Some accounts inspired by norms we like, can be proven to be hopelessly wrong; while others inspired by norms we abhor, may be right. In this way historical debate may even be our guide in our search for the ‘right’ norms.

But whereas you use the objectivity versus subjectivity opposition to indicate what the historical text owes respectively to the past itself (object) and to the historian (subject), I introduced them to replace truth and falsity (Ankersmit 1983; 234, 235). Since I had tied the notions of truth and falsity to statements only, I needed new concepts for denoting their analogues for the historical text as whole – and then opted for ‘objectivity’ and ‘subjectivity’. Anyway, since the cogency of historical texts is not a black or white affair, I also ended up with your ‘gliding scale’ between objectivity and subjectivity.

This may explain why for me the ‘best’ historical text could be called the ‘most objective’ one, whereas you would argue that the ‘best’ historical text owes its cogency to the intellectual daring of the historian, hence to the ‘subject-side’: ‘an account that owes most to the subject-side is bound to be the boldest and most original’ (Kuukkanen 2015; 179). Since we both agree that boldness and originality is a condition for the cogency of the historical text, I guess our disagreement about what had best be described as, respectively, an ‘objective’ and a ‘subjective’ account of the past is terminological rather than a matter of content.

Jouni-Matti-matti K.

Well, perhaps. But elsewhere our disagreement is real enough. Let me now turn to these ‘aspects of the past’ that are, according to you, highlighted by historical representation. It is clear that they are absolutely crucial in your account of representation. But I must confess having the gravest problems with that notion: “it is not entirely clear why one would need the middle variable of the ‘presented’ or ‘aspect’ between ‘representation’ and the past if it has been admitted that representation cannot reflect the past. This variable does not seem to bring any practical benefits in terms of representational content. This casts doubt on whether the correct logic of historiography has

been explicated: if ‘presenteds’ or ‘aspects’ do not help to decipher the meaning of a historiographical text, then they do not seem to be necessary postulations in textual interpretation. Further philosophically, and particularly with respect to ontology, the added middle layer seems entirely superfluous; and is bound to create additional puzzles with regard to its ontological status, location, identification etc. In this respect, my suggestion is to apply the widely accepted maxim of Occam’s razor: all things being equal, one should favour a simpler solution over more complex ones” (Kuukkanen 2015; 62, 63). So let’s do away with these ‘aspects’.

Frank A.

From an ontological point of view there is nothing particularly mysterious about these aspects. The front-side and the back-side of a house are ‘aspects’ of that house, in the sense that it depends on the point of view from which you see the house what you will see of it, and they are no less part of the world than the house itself. In fact, one might even argue that the notion of ‘all of the house’ is a dubious and ‘unworldly’ abstraction – and as such an appropriate candidate for Occam’s razor – since we know houses only in terms of their aspects. Do you ever see the house ‘as a whole’? Things like houses, in fact, almost all things in the world are given us in terms of their aspects only and never aspect-free.³ Though it is different with sounds and smells; which raises the question whether these are things, or properties or aspects of things. Or even something different altogether.

Much more interesting are the logical problems occasioned by the notion of the ‘aspect’ (and that have, until now, rarely attracted the attention of the philosopher, if I am not mistaken). As I argued aspects cannot be satisfactorily be explained in terms of thinghood and/or their properties: ‘aspects are less than things and more than properties’, as I summed up my argument (Ankersmit 2012; 106). Furthermore, I think the funny thing is that the notion of the aspect fits remarkably well in your own account of historiography. When dealing with the issue of the object- and the subject-side we discussed a moment ago

3 On p. 66 you say: ‘if a book on Napoleon portrays him as an arrogant ruler, which would be its aspect, then it seems we that we miss this and will be left only with the shells without the content, that is, a set of separate descriptions of Napoleon and the actual Napoleon, with nothing in between. This worry is understandable but nevertheless groundless’. I agree with you that the worry is ‘groundless’. But for a reason different from yours: there *are* only the shells, and there is no content. Even more so, we need only the shells. The point was most forcefully made in (Munz 1978); a truly excellent book that never got the attention it deserves.

you say: “a particular valuable distinction that Hoyningen-Huene makes is between two different kinds of worlds: the world-in-itself and the phenomenal world. The former is unknowable and purely ‘object-sided’, while the latter is constituted by the object-sided world-in-itself and by the ‘subject-sided’ moments originating with an epistemic subject. Epistemic *subjects* are thus co-constitutive of the ‘phenomenal world’, which is ‘the scientist’s world’ and which changes in a revolutionary scientific change. The world-in-itself in turn contains ‘no moments on the side of the subject’ and is thus independent of these subject-sided moments”. And then you go on to say: ‘while I do not want to commit to the existence of the Kantian unknowable world *an sich*, I find these notions of ‘object-sidedness’ and ‘subject-sidedness’ extremely useful for indicating the origins of our views of the world” (Kuukkanen 2015; 170, 171).

Again, I wholly agree with you here. While adding that the insight becomes far more convincing if re-phrased in terms of *aspects* and what they are aspects of. Think of the dark chamber of which we have no knowledge before and apart from how it manifests itself to us in terms of its aspects. In that case *some* of its aspects will always remain unknown to us. For we will never know what the chamber and its furniture is like if seen from *every* conceivable perspective. And we need neither the acrobatics of a Kantian argument for a reality *an sich*, nor to abandon simple reality as it is given to us for some ontologically different or ‘deeper’ one in order to recognize this: the mere fact that the number of possible perspectives from which the dark chamber can be seen is *a priori* infinite, is sufficient to explain why we will never know *all* of its aspects. Unless, of course, we become like the Leibnizian God with His infinite knowledge.

4 Representational Holism

Frank A.

Up till now a reconciliation of our disagreements always seemed within reach. This gets me to the three issues where our differences of opinion are likely to be more persistent. I have in mind here 1) representational holism, 2) representationalism vs. non-representationalism and 3) the role of argument in historical representation. Let’s begin with representational holism.

Jouni-Matti K.

OK. I think I may label you as a ‘representationalist holist’ believing that: ‘A. (e)very event or statement of the event has a definitional role in the representation, B. (n)o historian’s cognitive message can be understood without understanding the whole representation. That is, no part of a representation,

statement, etc. can be ignored' (Kuukkanen 2015; 75). That is not a very realistic option, in my view. Think of E.P. Thompson's seminal *The Making of the English Working Class*. I guess everybody will agree that leaving out a few minor details from Thompson's book of almost 1,000 pages (such as how many copies of a journal were sold) hardly affects its meaning and/or the 'historical thesis' proposed in it. Hence: your 'semantic holism has many unintuitive consequences, such as that very few, if any, would understand the main thesis of Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*'. I conclude that: 'it is unreasonable to assume that all these details amount to meaning constituting parts of the historical thesis in such a way that knowing them is required for understanding Thompson's main claim. Thompson could have dropped the mention of how many copies this particular underground journal sold and still be seen to make the same case for the birth of the English working class' (Kuukkanen 2015; 77, 78). Clearly, this is at odds with your representational holism.

Frank A.

Let me begin by saying just this. All discussion of narrative, representation, historical writing (or whatever one might like to call it) and of how it succeeds in doing what it does, presupposes having an idea of what it *is*. Imagine a discussion of sentential truth as long as you have no fixed idea of what sentences are. Then a discussion of sentential truth will get you just nowhere (or, anywhere, of course). Meaningful discussion requires that you begin with at least a minimal agreement about *what* you are discussing. Of course, intuitions about this 'what' can be refined in the course of the discussion. Hence, my (Leibnizian) definition of representations as linguistic entities that are self-referentially (or recursively) defined by all the statements they contain. Within this definition adding one sentence to a representation or leaving one out gives you a different representation already. So, yes, I hold on to your thesis A (but not to thesis B, as I shall argue later on). Let me explain.

Suppose we agree that changing one sentence does not affect the identity of the representation. But what, then, about ten sentences? Or a hundred? A thousand? Or a whole chapter? Surely, there must come a moment that we will say: 'now we *do* have a different representation'. But how to find out about when that moment has come? Some kind of 'representationalist essentialism' could, perhaps, help us out here: *some* sentences are 'essential' to the representation and can therefore not be left out, whereas others are not and can be dropped without changing the representation's 'essence'. But what, then, is the text's 'essence'? Here we will encounter two problems. First, we may equate this essence to a summary of the text leaving out all circumstantial detail. So let's reduce the original representation to that summary. We shall then have

just *one more* representation, albeit a much shorter one. But we will then face the same problem all over again. For we can make summaries of summaries. We can then repeat the procedure and cut out, again, the part that is not essential. We even *must* go on, if we wish to be consistent. For why stop here rather than there? Until we end up with summaries like: 'Burckhardt's *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* claims that the human individual was discovered in the Italian Renaissance'. Clearly, we somewhere lost all of the book on this trajectory from the original text itself to this one sentence summary. But where? Hard to say. And that gets me to the second problem. When trying to answer this question opinions will differ amongst historians – as the book's reception history amply makes clear. Each generation of historians will have a different interpretation of the book; and within each generation individual historians will differ as well. Obviously, this is a matter of interpretation.

Jouni-Matti K.

OK, I grant you that in individual cases it will be hard to draw the line between what is, and what is not part of this defended by a historian in his book. But it is profoundly counter-intuitive to sustain that no such line could *ever* be drawn. Let me formulate this in terms of the difference between *evidence* and *meaning*: 'ideally all the material in a work of history supports the main thesis (and in this sense the representationalists are correct that the whole literary work matters), but all the details mentioned do not define the meaning of the thesis, that is, what the thesis is' (Kuukkanen 2015; 79). As I said a moment ago already, leaving out a few minor details such as how many copies an issue of a certain journal sold – a piece of historical evidence – will have no effect on the thesis he defended in his book. Hence: 'distinguishing between meaning and evidence means rejecting semantic holism, as the distinction establishes a border between meaning-constituting and non-constituting parts. This kind of distinction is very traditional, and familiar from the history of analytic philosophy of history. It may appear to be a risky commitment because it resembles the analytic synthetic distinction derided by some of the finest philosophers of the twentieth century, such as Quine' (Kuukkanen 2015; 79).

Frank A.

If I'm right when sensing in the way your last sentence is formulated a covert skepticism with regard to Quine's rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction, then I'm happy to discover in you a kindred soul! For I feel much sympathy for what has been called 'the neo-Cartesian' attack on Quine's rejection of the distinction. But, admittedly, that is a different issue. So let me return to what you said just now – and this gets us, in my view, to the heart of the

matter. To begin with, sometimes you seem not to be totally adverse to holist thesis A. For example, you say about 'all the elements' of a history-book: 'they have an evidential role and that is why the whole books and texts matter and, further, why the whole book is the primary cognitive unit in historiography' (Kuukkanen 2015; 96). I couldn't agree more.

But let's not press that point. More important is that you put on the agenda the notion of the historical text's or a historical representation's *meaning* and of the *understanding* of that meaning (Kuukkanen 2015; 77, 79, 80–86). And quite rightly so. Now, understanding and what you have an understanding *of* – or meaning and what meaning is the meaning *of* – are not one and the same thing. Let me put it this way. In the first place you have a representation of the past; for example Burckhardt's *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien*. The text with this representation was published in 1860 and since then not a *single* sentence has been changed in it (as far as I know). Call this the *sign*. The sign is defined by the sentences it contains in agreement with Leibniz's doctrine of the complete concept; so, *indeed*, changing just one sentence of the sign will give you a different sign. Just as adding or deleting a letter from a word will give you a different word (even though this need not necessarily cause any problems with regard to what the word stands for – compare, e.g., 'Gorbachov' and 'Gorbachow'). Secondly, in the course of time, beginning with Burckhardt himself, many different meanings have been given to, or associated with this unchanging sign. Thirdly, historical meaning is basically 'differential', as Saussure argued about the meaning of signs (Ankersmit 2012; Chapter 7).⁴

4 'The narrative scope of a historical narrative cannot be established by considering only *that* historical narrative. Narrative scope only comes into being when one compares narrative interpretations with rival interpretations. If we have only *one* narrative interpretation of some historical topic, we have *no* interpretation' (and where 'scope' can be replaced by what is understood in the present context by 'meaning' (Ankersmit 1994; 46). To put it succinctly: if you would have only *one* historical text – i.e. only one sign – on some historical topic, this text, or sign, would have no meaning at all. The narrative then disintegrates into its constituent statements. On the other hand, if you would have an infinity of historical texts (or signs) on some historical topic – hence, what I had called in the book on narrative logic in Leibnizian terminology a 'full narrativist universe' – the meaning of each text, or sign, would be as precisely and unambiguously defined as each text, or sign, *always* is. But the 'normal' situation is that the amount of texts, or signs, you have for certain parts of the past is far from coming close to infinity. And then the nature of the signs can be determined with far greater precision – since it is determined by the set of sentences contained them – than their meaning. Again, similar precision with regard to meaning is possible only in case of an infinity of competing texts, or signs – and, once again, available to the Leibnizian God only.

Taking this as one's clue we will recognize that we should see historical narratives or representations as (very complex) *signs* to which *meanings* can be given in the way symbols can be said to have a meaning. So on the one hand there is the *sign*, i.e. the historical text, consisting of tens of thousands of sentences about the past, if not more; and on the other there is the sign's meaning which is differentially determined by other, cognate signs. Hence, one and the same sign can have, or be given many different meanings. Next, what changes of the representationalist sign will imply for its *meaning* is impossible to say right away, since this depends, again, on their interaction with other similar signs – that is to say, if any are present at all and, next, on the degree of their similarity, if considered from the perspective of to what part of the past they are related. To mention just one thing, the clarity and the precision of the semantic contours of a sign's meaning will depend on the amount of similar meanings being around in historical debate of some part of the past. Taking it all together: your argument against my claim that historical texts are defined by nothing less than the totality of the sentences they contain, results from a confusion of sign and meaning. Lastly, it is true that historians discuss meanings and not signs. But one may not infer from this that the sign should be an irrelevancy: no signs, then no meanings. The sign is like a hat-stand on which to hang the hats and coats of meaning.

Indeed, as long as we are far removed from the situation of having an infinity of texts, or signs, for historical topics, 'meaning' will be far more indefinite and vague than the corresponding 'signs' whose identity is fixed for once and forever. We may discuss the meaning of Burckhardt's *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* as long as we wish, but we're not allowed to change one single sentence of the book. If we forget about this, we may feel tempted to project the indefiniteness of representational meaning on the sign – with the result that it must seem preposterous to hold that a historical text should self-referentially and unambiguously be defined by *nothing less* than all the sentences it contains, as is suggested by Leibniz's doctrine of the complete concept. *Then* one may hold that different signs (i.e. the original historical text *and* all those from which un-essential details have been deleted) may express the same meaning. And *then* the indisputable fact that this observation is undoubtedly true *under such circumstances* may invite us to confuse the sign and its meaning – or, rather, to forget that a historical text, or historical representation is a representational sign. But as soon as we have learned 1) to recognize that historical texts are signs and 2) to discern between the sign and its meaning, we will no longer be surprised by the going together of the indefiniteness of the sign's meaning with the sign's immutable identity (being defined, in the case of a historical representation, by *all* the sentences it contains). In sum, as all this makes clear, I'm a holist in terms of your thesis A, but not in those of thesis B.

5 Representationalism and Non-Representationalism

Jouni-Matti K.

'My view is that it is essential to consider giving up on the pre-analytic representationalist intuition that historical writing is necessarily about creating representations and that the meaningfulness of historical discourse requires that these representations are about some specific (abstract or concrete) corresponding entities that are *re-presented*. There are two topics to consider here. One concerns my reasons for claiming that representationalism is a problematic commitment. The second involves the task of signposting a route to an alternative non-representationalist account of historiography' (Kuukkanen 2015; 61).

Frank A.

Yes, I guess I see what you mean. Nevertheless, I'm not yet wholly sure how to understand your non-representationalist claim, how far it actually goes and where exactly it differs from my representationalism. To begin with, you insist that: 'I would not characterize the position of this book as 'antirepresentationalist', even though my intention is to outline a non-representationalist account of historiography with regard to its most important scholarly products' (Kuukkanen 2015; 65). So what is the difference between anti- and non-representationalism? Later on in your book when advocating a rehabilitation of the notion of 'objectivity', you say 'someone might accuse me now of backing away from my own proposal in Chapter 4 to reject representationalism in favor of non-representationalism' (Kuukkanen 2015; 179). So I gather that you wish to hold on to at least *some* tenets of the representationalist thesis. Right? And, if so, I wonder which these are. Next, you say that my representationalism must be wrong, or at least questionable since it suggests there to be just *one* 'presented' or aspect for each historical representation, whereas 'it is notoriously difficult to spell out a historian's, or indeed any writer's message or thesis, and thus disagreements about what the message is are not uncommon' (Kuukkanen 2015; 62). I readily grant to you that I've been insufficiently clear about this in my book of 2012. But I would not have to sacrifice any crucial party of my representationalism when stating that though representations – as *signs* – are unchangeable, these 'presenteds' or aspects of the past highlighted or 'revealed' by them – and this is part of the sign's *meaning* – will vary with historiographical debate as you correctly observed in the passage I quoted just now. That is not in conflict with what I said about aspects a moment ago.

Next, you say that we should consider giving up the idea that 'representations are about some specific (abstract or concrete) corresponding entities that are *re-presented*'. Again, I'm not quite sure about the nature of your claim

here. Suppose we replace in the quote ‘representations’ by ‘historical texts’ and ‘some specific (abstract or concrete) corresponding entities that are *re-presented*’ by ‘part of the past’. Would you then still protest? I don’t think so. For we are both historical realists in the sense of believing that there is, or was, a past that historical texts are ‘about’ (Kuukkanen 2015; 64). And we also agree, for similar reasons, that the phrasing should definitely be ‘about’ and not ‘refer’: historical texts cannot be said to ‘refer’ to the past in the proper sense of that word. Apparently, your discomfort with the representationalist thesis lies elsewhere; perhaps in the associations we have with the term ‘representation’? For example, in the intuition: ‘that the thing to be known is something which exists prior to and wholly apart from the act of knowing’ (Kuukkanen 2015; 65)? But since I’m no less convinced than you that the historian is more than a passive mirror of the past, this belief would be at odds with my variant of representationalism, too. So probably you have something more in mind than just this.

Jouni-Matti K.

You’re right: I have more irons in the fire here. A moment ago I said I set myself two tasks in my book, the first being to show ‘that representationalism is a problematic commitment. The second involves the task of signposting a route to an alternative non-representationalist account of historiography’. My intention is to drop all of the idea of there being, on the one hand, a representation, and, on the other a represented, or as you wish to have it, both a represented and these presenteds or aspects. For me there are only, if you wish to go on using the ‘representation’-phraseology, ‘presentations’, that ‘present’ some thesis about the past. “My view is that we can give up on the assumption that there has to be an object that make a ‘presentation’ of history true or false, or an object to which a presentation ‘refers’ to, or ‘is about’. Historical writing contains arguments, or to say it somewhat differently. A historical presentation in total amounts to an argumentative intervention. (...) The ‘doing’ of history involves bringing about a change in the existing historiographical discourse – perhaps to make people reject a certain thesis or accept it in some modified form, or to persuade them to endorse a an altogether different thesis” (Kuukkanen 2015; 67). Put briefly: ‘representation does not define historiography, that is, it is not an essential feature of a historical presentation; instead, reasoning and argumentation characterize historiography’ (Kuukkanen 2015; 172).

Frank A.

Ah, that’s a strong thesis! Wonderful, that gives me something to chew on! Here we get to the heart of the issue and to what probably is the ultimate origin of our disagreements! Let me begin by congratulating you with your insistence

that we should not forget about the argumentative dimension of historical writing. I must confess that you are right when accusing me of being guilty of just this. I paid too little attention to this aspect of the historian's craft myself. Having admitted as much, I come to our disagreement, a disagreement that goes quite deep.

To begin with, my rejoinder would be that we do not argue at random, but always for or against a certain claim, view, theory or thesis and where all of these things are to distinguished from how they have been argued. I mean, one and the same claim can be argued be means of different arguments, and different arguments can be used for arguing the same claim. Hence, our disagreement is, basically, that I would like to interrupt the stream of argument now and then by stating that successful argumentation has produced a new 'representation'; whereas you'd rather do without these occasional codifications of specific stages in the flow of argumentation in the form of some historical representation.

Next, I think our disagreement concerns, basically, what separates the advocates of pragmatism from those who oppose it. You are an advocate of pragmatism, as is amply clear from the Chapter in your book entitled: 'from truth to warranted assertion' – and, indeed, I'm not. What I distrust in it is, for me, summarized admirably in Rorty's so well-known metaphor of 'the conversation of mankind'. The metaphor presents the history of philosophy and of science as an endless 'conversation'; and to a certain extent the picture suggested by the metaphor is undoubtedly correct. But what it obscures from view is that all this conversation always crystallizes out around certain claims and that if you leave these out, the conversation becomes pointless and aimless. It is as if you were to tell the history of physics without ever mentioning Newton's theory on gravitation, Maxwell's theory on electro-magnetic phenomena or Einstein theory of relativity. Whereas all debate in physics has in such theories its indispensable point of departure. The result is an extreme and hyperbolic form of historicism where all claims made in philosophy and science dissolve in the arguments made in favor or against them like lumps of sugar in a cup of tea. But, again, without claims, no arguments. And so it is with historical representation. Or, compare it to democratic politics. Political representation gives us every four years a new government. In the period between two elections a lot of political argument goes on in the public domain about the government's actions, changing the political climate of opinion. The newly elected government and its actions will reflect such changes. That is how representative democracy works. Pragmatism is like having freedom of opinion and debate, but no representation, no elections and no new governments.

This is also what I find unsatisfactory in the pragmatist notion of 'warranted assertion' you subscribe to in Chapter 8 of your book entitled 'From Truth

to Warranted Assertion'. According to the pragmatist we can do without the notion of truth – and all that makes it into the philosopher's hornet's nest that it is – since argument and what can be supported on the basis of 'warranted' argument is all we need. But I don't think we can dispense with the notion of truth and, hence, with something (sentence, theory, representation, and so on) to which we may apply the predicate 'true' (or 'false'). Suppose you wish to replace 'truth' by 'warranted assertion', it may be asked: 'do both mean one and the same thing?' If the pragmatist answers 'yes', this will occasion the question what could possibly be the point of replacing the former by an artful neologism like 'warranted assertion' that no one not being a philosopher will understand. But if the pragmatist answers 'no', there must be a difference in the meaning of both. And this compels the pragmatist to accept the possibility of assertions that are 'warranted', but nevertheless 'untrue', or vice versa. And this is a situation each sensible person would wish to avoid getting into.⁵ So both options are equally unattractive for the pragmatist. Of course, the pragmatist might now decide to bite the bullet and urge us to remove the words 'true' and 'false' from our dictionaries: he can then no longer be confronted with the unpleasant dilemma mentioned just now. But as we know, such attempts at a purification of our dictionaries ordinarily result in a return of the repressed, to put it in a Freudian way.

6 Argumentation in Historiography

Jouni-Matti K.

Well, if you don't mind my saying so, I don't think this is the right place to discuss pros and cons of pragmatism and that you'd better make clear where you disagree with what I've said about argument in historiography.

5 In your discussion with Tucker you take up the issue yourself with the belief in the existence of witches (Kuukkanen 2015; 189). The belief was a 'warranted assertion' in the second half of 16th century in Europe (with some rare exceptions, such as the Netherlands), while we would like to reserve for ourselves the right to call the belief that witches should exist 'false'. On the other hand – *pace* the Quine/Duhem thesis – we cannot even begin to think of what amount of evidence might make us doubt the truth of the theory that combustion is oxydization. Any argument attempting to do so is automatically discredited by the theory – in this way *theory* sets certain inexorable limits to *meaningful argument*.

Frank A.

You're right; I strayed from our subject. Now, with regard to argument I think we should discern between two kinds, of contexts of argument. The former being where the validity of argument is independent from historiographic context. Think, for example, of economic historians attempting to figure out the inflation rate in England between 1770 and 1780 with the help of modern economic theories and models. The result will be an 'argumentation' which is, in principle, acceptable to all economic historians of the period in question, regardless of the historical theses about that period they defend. However, the conclusion of the argument will be part of such a thesis; or, to put it differently, the conclusion can be used to support quite different historical theses. Though the argument may be part of different representations, it will be part of any of them, if it occurs in any of them (my apologies for the pleonasm). But, if it *is* part of any one of them, both the argument and its conclusion will lock, stock and barrel be part of *that* representation as a whole and thus relate to that whole as defined by your holist thesis A.

Secondly, a historian may offer arguments in favor of the thesis he defends in his book or article. Then the situation is more complicated in the sense that it suggests this separation between 1) argument and 2) the thesis I mentioned already when we discussed your nonrepresentationalism. Obviously, this seems to support your anti-holist view that a representation has parts that do (the thesis), and parts that do not (the argument) belong to the thesis defended in it. Nevertheless, I would uphold the claim that arguments in favor of the thesis defended in the representation self-referentially or recursively define the nature of that representation no less than a representation's more 'normal' components, such as sentences describing past states of affairs. Or this first type of argument. This could be expressed as follows: it is part of the thesis defended in a representation that it is argued with just *these* arguments and not any *others*. The threat to holism has then been removed.

Jouni-Matti K.

Well, I suppose you are saying this in order to make the world safe for your holist thesis A. But we discussed holism already; and I believe we'd better not return to that again. Anyway, your suggestion to discern between different kinds of arguments and their contexts seems useful to me. In the Chapter of my book entitled 'The Tri-partite Theory of Justification of Historiography' between three kinds of argumentative context or, as I put it there between 'three dimension of evaluation'.

In the first place, there is the 'epistemic dimension'. I distinguish between 'cognitive' and 'epistemic' criteria for the appraisal of historical texts as follows:

“‘cognitive’ here signifies any appropriate and reasonable criteria that make a historical thesis or expression concerning the past – that is, as a knowledge claim – compelling to accept. ‘Epistemic’ is here a sub-concept of cognitive and a more restricted notion referring not to truth-conducivity as it typically does, but to the *relation* in which a historical presentation stands *with* its *objects of research* (the past) and *with evidence* directly. (...) Epistemic values form a familiar set of such virtues as exemplification, coherence (including consistency), scope, comprehensiveness and originality that a notion should possess to make it epistemically valuable. The functioning of epistemic values was already discussed at length in Chapter 6”. Secondly, the historical text has a ‘rhetorical dimension’: “I have chosen for the term ‘rhetorical’ because the point is that every work of history attempts to persuade its readers to accept its central thesis. It is important to notice that we are not talking here about just any kind of persuasion, but a of a specific kind of argumentative persuasion that relies on informal argumentative strategies and reasoning. For this reason the second dimension could equally be called ‘argumentative’. Finally, there is the ‘discursive dimension’: ‘it is evident that no historical work appears as a self-contained piece from an intellectual vacuum but emerges, instead, inevitably as molded by existing historical knowledge and historiographical arguments’. This context ‘has been shaped by various kinds of intellectual, political and other interests’ (Kuukkanen 2015; 156, 157).

Frank A.

I have no problems with your ‘rhetorical’ and ‘discursive dimension’. With regard to the ‘epistemic dimension’ I have, to begin with, one minor problem: you say that these ‘epistemic values’ are a sub-set of the ‘cognitive’ criteria. So there are more such ‘cognitive’ criteria than these five virtues ranging from exemplification to originality. But as far as I can see, you don’t mention them. Perhaps these fall under the rubrics of the ‘rhetorical’ and the ‘discursive dimension’? Anyway, let’s not insist on this, for it is of no importance. Of more interest are, indeed, what you refer to as these five ‘epistemological values’: exemplification, coherence (including consistency), scope, comprehensiveness and originality. There is considerable overlap here with the criteria for historical objectivity (i.e. truth) I once proposed (Ankersmit 1983; 238–247) – all the more so, if I’m right when assuming that coherence and comprehensiveness can fairly easily be deduced from the scope-requirement. So our disagreement would then be reduced to exemplification only. However, I’m happy to add exemplification to the list, together with you and Chiel van den Akker (Van den Akker 2009, 2012).

Now, my concern is not with what should be on the list and what not, nor with who invented what, but rather with how these epistemic virtues are

located in your and my philosophy of history. More specifically, you do not offer some kind of deduction of these values, if I'm not mistaken; you present them more or less casually, almost as if they are, for you, a list empirically established on what appears to be 'best practice' in the writing of history (Kuukkanen 2015; 121–128). But this is emphatically not how I would look at the matter! For me that list is directly related to very the nature of historical representation as such. Hence, I tried to derive scope and originality from the Leibnizian account I gave of historical representation and from its metaphorical character and – much later – from a theory of the aspect. Again, my claim is not that my efforts were successful. Perhaps I made an awful mess of things here. What counts, however, is that, for me, these 'epistemic values' are directly related to what historical representation basically *is*. Put differently, these are the criteria for the acceptability of historical representation that overrule any other such set of criteria. Put still differently, these criteria follow directly from historical representations being historical representations. And then one last reformulation: there exists such a thing as the 'logic' of historical representation which is the source and origin of historical rationality and the minimum condition all historical writing has to satisfy. Your five 'epistemic values' follow from that logic.

This gets me back to our most basic disagreement – your non-representationalism versus my representationalism. For the non-representationalist these criteria, or epistemic values, are negotiable and can, or may even have to be given up – just as the historical text's being representation may, perhaps, have to be abandoned without much ado. This will be the case when we embrace the pragmatist's account of historical writing seeing in the history of historical writing an exchange of arguments only, whereas the occasional stops in that exchange, as embodied in historical representations, are seen as adding nothing of any substance to that exchange. For me it is exactly the other way around: in my view it are historical representations – not arguments – that are ultimately decisive in the confirmation, or disconfirmation of other historical representations. Only representations support or refute other representations; and the representationalist criteria of exemplification, comprehensiveness, originality and scope are decisive here. Historical debate, if understood as the exchange of arguments takes place only in the lee created by these historical representations and will be robbed of all sense and purpose without them. That is to say, arguments are effective insofar as they suggest or contribute to historical representations that are decided to be superior to those existing already on the basis of these representationalist criteria and they fail to be so, if not. In history historical representation determines the relevance and what one might call the 'relevantial meaning' of arguments.

With this I come to the end of my dialogue with you. Though I trust you will carry it a little further in your reply to your critics in this forum debate. You will have the last word here, which always is a nice windfall in academic debate. But I could not possibly take my leave from you without having thanked you most cordially and most warmly for this debate. It was a truly exquisite pleasure to discuss with you things for which we have a shared interest. I rarely found debate in our discipline very fruitful and stimulating. Our debate is a unique exception to that rule!

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