CHAPTER IV
NARRATIVE IDEALISM VERSUS
NARRATIVE REALISM

(1) Introduction. The narrativist philosopher who does not venture to abandon the concepts "the truth (or falsity of a narratio)" (like Fain or Gorman) is deluded by an idée fixe: that of the statement. True statements correspond to extra-linguistic reality in a way defined by the meaning and the reference of the statement; likewise the defender of the concept "the truth (or falsity) of the narratio" expects some kind of correspondence to exist between the content of the narratio and the historical reality depicted in it. He regards the narratio as a kind of picture of the past: there is a verifiable correspondence between photographs and pictures — taken as a whole as well as in detail — and that part of visible reality depicted by them. And it is believed that there is a similar correspondence between the narratio and the past. I shall call the adherents of this "picture theory" narrative realists 1. Narrative idealism, on the other hand, rejects the picture theory; the consequences of this rejection will be discussed in section (3) of this chapter.

(2) The past has no narrative structure. Narrative realism is a very plausible theory and I think that we are all, intuitively, inclined to accept it. Since such all-pervasive convictions have a tendency to be obscure and ill-defined, I will now scrutinize the unspoken and implicit assumptions behind narrative realism. Our most naive narrative realist intuition is that the narratio should be seen as the verbalization of all the individual images of a film made of the past. Each individual image is, in this conception, the analogue of a statement and the whole film that of the narratio. It is obvious that narrative realism has been inspired by the reductionist thesis we encountered in Chapter III: accepting reductionism, it seems reasonable to say that the truth of the narratio as a whole is a function of the truth of the verbalizations, in the form of statements, of all the individual film images. The narrative model that corresponds to this narrativist realist assumption has the following form: at $t_1$: $S_1$(situation), at $t_2$: $S_2$ etc. We forget, however, that the film-producer has very distinct ideas on what should and what should not be filmed. So what is filmed does not correspond to the actual past — as this variant of narrative realism suggests — but to a selection of the past.

1. In his *Tractatus* Wittgenstein develops his "picture-theory" on the relation between the true statement and that part of reality described in it (see especially numbers 2.1, 2.12, 2.141, 2.1513, 2.1514 and 2.17). Translating this theory into a theory on the relation between the narratio and historical reality gives one a good idea of what is meant by the term "narrative realism". It might be added that the scientific ideal of the model-builders of the New Economic History is identical with the epistemology advanced by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*. 
The position of the narrative realist is much harder to attack when he bases his case upon the following simile. Take a machine and a working drawing of that machine. For the narrative realist the relation between the actual past and its narrative account is of the same type as the relation between the machine and its working-drawing. We can deduce the actual movements of the machine from the working drawing; likewise we can, according to the narrative realist, deduce the actual machinery of the past from what the narratio reports. Essential to this simile is this. The idea that the narratio is analogous to the working-drawing suggests that there should be certain, what we might call “translation rules” that we ought to obey when “translating” or “projecting” the actual past onto the linguistic level of the narratio. Likewise there are rules that enable us to reconstruct the actual working of a machine from its working-drawing and rules that prescribe how a machine should be represented in a working-drawing.

The nature of these translation rules has been very aptly characterized by Perelman. He says that the task of the historian to give an objective account of the past and of past events makes him think of “une carte à relief qui correspondrait avec exactitude au relief du terrain: tout comme l’on représente l’importance d’une chaîne de montagnes par sa projection sur une carte, on devrait pouvoir déterminer d’une façon univoque l’importance de chaque événement historique et de chaque facteur qui a contribué à sa production. L’idéal de la connaissance historique consisterait en une représentation aussi fidèle que possible d’un réel historique préalable: ce serait la le sens de l’objectivité en histoire”

Perelman admits that this ideal is not attainable; historical documents have too many gaps, we have little or no information on too many aspects of the past. The suggestion is, however, that history should have at its disposal (a set of) translation rules analogous to the rules for cartographical projection, which would enable us to translate the past into narrative language. The past is supposed to be something given to the historian, it lies before him just like a landscape; it only has to be transposed into a narratio by means of these translations rules for “historiographical projection”.

Behind a good deal of philosophizing on history lurks the narrative realist’s conviction that there are certain “translation rules” governing the relation between a past unambiguously given to the historian and the narrative representation of this past. The following three illustrations may serve to provide an insight into the substance of narrative realism. Recent exhortations to transform history into a “social science” owe much, if not all, of their appeal to the implicit though omnipresent confidence in the existence of such translation rules. Many historians were (and still are) worried by what they believe to be the “ineradicable subjectivity” of the narrative historiography which they produce. If intersubjectively acceptable translation rules could be found it would be possible to
translate historical reality into narrative language in a way agreeable to all who are ready to subscribe to such rules. Obviously, the theories or models of the social sciences are the most eligible candidates for providing historians with these intersubjectively acceptable translation rules. Whatever data of the past can make their way into the variables of such theories or models can be projected “objectively” unto the level of a linguistic representation of the past.

The same pattern of argument we find, curiously enough, in the early 20th century German philosophy of value. Rickert’s admirable lecture on the differences between the exact sciences and the cultural sciences is, therefore, my second illustration. For Rickert, history was the paradigm of the cultural sciences, because psychology, sociology etc. have too much in common with the exact sciences to be entitled to this honour. How does the historian gain his knowledge of the past according to Rickert? Knowing that the historian cannot give a copy or duplicate of the past “an sich”, he concludes that the historian’s work should not be considered “als ein Abbilden, sondern nur als ein Umbilden des gegebenen Vorstellungsmaterials”\(^3\). How does the historian achieve this “Umbildung”? Rickert answers: “die Wissenschaft bedarf (...) fur die Auswahl des Wesentlichen eines leitenden Prinzips”\(^4\). And what could this “leitende Prinzip” be but the supreme criterion distinguishing the cultural from the exact sciences, viz. the principle of value? By looking at history from the point of view of values (and this constituted the specific nature of historical inquiry) we have provided historical reality with the “transcendental” structure with enables the historian to write an account of the past. Rickert writes: “aus der unübersehbaren Fülle der Objekte [in the past (FA)] berücksichtigt der Historiker zunächst nur die welche in ihrer individuellen Eigenart entweder selbst Kulturwerthe verkörpern oder mit ihnen in Beziehung stehen, und aus der unübersehbaren Fülle, die jedes Einzelne ihm darbietet, wählt er sodann wiederum nur das aus, woran die Bedeutung für die Kulturentwicklung hängt. Für die historische Begriffsbildung liefern die Kulturwerthe also das Prinzip zur Auswahl des Wesentlichen ebenso, wie der Begriff der Natur als der Wirklichkeit mit Rücksicht auf das Allgemeine dies für die Naturwissenschaften thut”\(^5\).

Similar observations can be found in the writings of such philosophers of the nature of history as Weber, Simmel or Meinecke. The idea always is that values can perform the function of the translation rules that enable the historian to translate the manifold historical phenomena into a meaningful historical narrative. It will be obvious that Rickert’s recommendation to the historian is equal to that of the protagonists of “history as a social science”. In both cases the historian is offered a set of translation rules, either in the form of value systems or of socio-

\[3.\] Rickert; p. 28.
\[4.\] Rickert; p. 35.
\[5.\] Rickert; p. 47. A more detailed exposition of Rickert’s relevant ideas can be found in H. Rickert, *Die Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung*, Tübingen 1921; pp. 231-256.
scientific theories, which, it is claimed, indicate how to translate the historical past into the language of historiography. And both philosophies of history are based upon the (implicit) conviction that historiography is essentially a projection in historical language of past reality in conformity with these translation rules.

Hayden White’s much discussed study of the nineteenth century historical imagination is my third illustration. White’s position is so interesting because it is a kind of transitionary phase between narrative realism and narrative idealism. Certain assumptions as to the nature of historical reality were essential in the two preceding illustrations: historical reality should be identified either with what socio-scientific theories are about or with what is known as “Kulturwerthe”. Only on the basis of these assumptions did the proposed translation rules make sense. White, on the other hand, explicitly rejects all claims as to the nature of historical reality and thus comes closer to narrative idealism. Nevertheless, he cannot bring himself to abandon the translation rules of narrative realism.

I do not wish to enter here into all the intricacies of White’s narrativist philosophy, so I shall confine myself to what is relevant to the present discussion. The past as such, White argues, cannot be understood by us: in itself the past is a meaningless myriad of facts, states and events, an amorphous chaos of data that successfully resists “conscious apprehension” by the historian. Therefore the historian has to translate the “prose” of the historical past into the narrative “poetry” of historiography. The four rhetorical tropes: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony are capable of achieving this translation. These four tropes, each in its own way, make a selection or abstraction from the initial chaos of historical reality and thus succeed in making history intelligible to us. For instance, metaphor may form a part — (that which is mentioned in the narratio) — to-whole (the historical past itself) relation that can be characterized as “symbolic”: for Michelet, “Le Peuple” was the symbol of the French Revolution — consequently, the abstraction procedure he follows could be called “metaphoric”. Alternatively, in metonymy we arrange the phenomena of the past according to criteria that are in a sense external to history itself: a scientific or theoretical approach to the past (theories are things of the mind and not in the past itself) clearly embraces a metonymical analysis of the past. Unfortunately, White fails to explain why the four tropes possess the remarkable capacities he credits them with. This is probably due to his partial abandonment of narrative realism. On the basis of an assumption on the nature of historical reality and the relation between its constituent parts, he could have made out a good case for his tropes. As it is now, his opting for the four tropes to function as the translation rules that enable the historian to translate the past into the narratio remains entirely arbitrary.

I admit that there is still another way out for White. He could have

6. White (1); p. 34.
offered a “transcendental deduction” (to use a Kantian term) for his four tropes: i.e. he could have tried to prove that knowledge of the past is only made possible by these four tropes. It seems likely that Rickert, being a neo-Kantian, wished to follow such a strategy when he argued for his “Kulturwerthe” as translation rules. However, by insisting that the historian’s task is to study a specific kind of historical object (i.e. those objects in which “irgend ein vom Menschen anerkannter Werth verkorpert ist”) he has virtually abandoned this transcendental approach for a metaphysical one. In this connection, it should be noted that in the remainder of this book the transcendental procedure will be followed (see Chapter II, section (9). We shall discover that, unlike the translation rules of narrative realism, the transcendental narrativist rules do not pretend to guide the historian in solving the problem of how to “translate” the past into a narratio, but that they only determine the logical structure of narrative accounts of the past. Of course, such rules can no longer be said to be translation rules.

Apart from this consideration, I have two further objections to the picture theory of narrative realism. In the first place, narrative realism has a built-in tendency to confuse things which should be kept apart. Narrative realism is a philosophical theory on how historical reality and its narrative account are, or ought to be, related. As such, it has, or is supposed to have, its implications for the domains of ontology, epistemology and of the social sciences. When we consider the narrative realist a little more closely we discover that his views contain a number of ambiguities that easily give rise to the confusing of these three domains. As explained on page 81, the social sciences are the most eligible candidates for providing intersubjectively acceptable translation rules. Besides the merits of these sciences in themselves, the narrative realist tends to attribute an epistemological status to them, asserting that only these rules enable us to become acquainted with the past. Thus the social scientific and epistemological levels are easily confused; the programme for changing history into “a social science” owes much of its apparent plausibility to this tendency.

Secondly, it is maintained by the adherent of hermeneutic theory that we can only understand history (the epistemological level) because, and in so far as there is an ontological equality between object (the historical agent in the past) and subject (the historian). Here the idealism inherent in all hermeneutic theories results in ontology being confused with epistemology. Indeed, the perennial aversion of hermeneutic theory to mechanistic interpretations of historical knowledge should not blind us to the fact that hermeneutics is just as much a narrative realist theory (complete with translation rules) as, for instance, the ideal of a socio-scientific historiography. For in hermeneutic theory the historian’s experience of life constitutes the translation rules that enable him to understand and describe the past.

7. Rickert; p. 20.
Thirdly, there is the confusion of the ontological with the socio-scientific levels. This results in the belief that what the translation rules are capable of transmitting to the linguistic representation of the past is the essence of the past. Of course, like the first instance of confusion, this one can often be detected in pleas for transforming history into a social science. But the propaganda emanating from the adherents of this view is merely the modern variant of a much older tradition: i.e. that of the speculative philosophies of history. Both approaches to history have generated an ontology of history that is based upon the (tacit) acceptance of specific translation rules. So let us consider speculative philosophies as the more common form of this confusion.

The popularity of some of the more suggestive speculative philosophies has done much to further the cause of the picture theory, because a) they depict the past for us as a kind of machine operated by the Cunning of Reason or the class struggle and b) they thus provide the historian with a set of translation rules, the evolution of the Absolute Mind or of the class struggle being the matrices for the historian’s description of the past. Speculative philosophies have been severely criticized in recent years, particularly because they frequently, though not always, claim that they should be able to foretell the future. Popper has conclusively shown in his well-known book on speculative systems that speculative philosophers attempting to foretell the future commit themselves to the “holist fallacy” and/or surmise analogies between history and science that do not exist. But the use of such speculative philosophies exclusively within the domain of historiography proper (that is, without references to the future) has not been rejected by Popper. In fact, it seems that he is quite happy with such a use of speculative philosophies; he even stresses the necessity of choosing a point of view in conformity with some philosophy of history when narratios are to be written. We have seen that this idea was elaborated by Haskell Fain: according to Fain, the historian who wants to regard the past as a socio-economic process cannot but rely on the Marxist speculative philosophy of history, whether he is aware of it or not. In Chapter II I argued that a peculiar kind of historiographical Cartesianism can be traced in such conceptions. However, in the light of the present discussion, it can be pointed out that the very narrative realism inherent in speculative philosophies should already rouse our suspicion. Speculative philosophies are either regarded as just ordinary, although interesting, narratios (but then they cannot claim the very special function Popper and Fain wish to credit them with), or they are considered to be some kind of “master narratios” (but then recourse to narrative realism becomes inevitable) (see also Chapter VII, section (4)).

8. The similarity of the approach to history advocated by speculative philosophers of history and by the protagonists of a socio-scientific historiography, has already been pointed out by White. Cf. H. White (4); p. 5 ff.
9. Popper (2); Chapter III, section (4).
10. Popper (2); Chapter IV, section (5); see also Popper (4).
It should be emphasized that these three instances of confusion are not merely accidental to the picture theory of narrative realism. They are not the unfortunate consequences of some regrettable negligence on the part of narrative realists. On the contrary, the picture theory depends for its very existence on a confusion of the ontological, epistemological and socio-scientific domains. For as soon as the epistemological and the socio-scientific levels, for instance, are distinguished, two separate sets of translation rules (if the term is still usable) appear; viz. one for each of the two levels — and the whole model collapses. The priority of socio-scientific translation rules can only be argued with the help of an epistemological demonstration or vice versa: thus the domains are inextricably tied up with one another. The same is true for the other two instances of confusion.

Now I come to my second, more fundamental, objection to the narrative realist picture theory. Not according to any current interpretation of the words “projection” or “picture” can the narratio be called a “projection” or “picture” of historical reality. And whatever concrete content we may give to the translation rules, they will never be more than arbitrary selection rules, acceptable to some historians but to be rejected by others. The past is by no means like a machine: it does not possess some hidden mechanism whose workings the historian has to trace. Nor is the past like a landscape that has to be projected onto the linguistic level with the help of projection or translation rules. For the “historical landscape” is not given to the historian; he has to construct it. The narratio is not the projection of a historical landscape or of some historical machinery, the past is only constituted in the narratio. The structure of the narratio is a structure lent to or pressed on the past and not the reflection of a kindred structure objectively present in the past itself. We should reject “the idea that there is a determinate historical actuality, the complex referent of all our narratives of “what actually happened”, the untold story to which narrative histories approximate” (Mink)\(^\text{11}\). In the same vein, Huizinga has already pointed out that it is wrong, although quite enticing, to believe that the “es” in Ranke’s dictum that the historian should represent the past “wie es eigentlich gewesen” should refer to something fixed and with incontestably having the same contours for all historians\(^\text{12}\). On the contrary, historical discussions are not concerned with how to reproduce this “es”, but with what narrative content can best be given to this “es”.

All this means that the past as such has no narrative structure — narrative structures occur only in the narratio. Munz reminds us in this connection of Poincaré’s observation that “there is no time over and above the various clocks we have. We can compare one clock to another clock; but we cannot compare any clock to time and it makes therefore no sense to ask which of the many clocks we have is correct. The same is true

\(^{11}\) Mink (6); p. 148.

\(^{12}\) Huizinga; p. 44.
of any story, including historical narratives. We cannot glimpse at history. We can only compare one book with another book”¹³. Given this morphological or structural difference between the past and the narratio, how can translation rules ever be expected to link them together? Projection or translation rules can exist only where there are two corresponding spheres of structural similarity. But the objects in the past so often mentioned by historians, objects such as intellectual, social or political movements and even nations or social groups, have no status in the past itself independent of the narratio: they spring from and are justified solely by the narratio. In describing these “things” the historian does, in a sense, describe the past; however, he shows it in disguise. The task of the historian resembles, if I may make a rather commonplace comparison, that of a dress-designer who wants to show his creations. The dress-designer uses dummies or preferably models to display their qualities, i.e. things or women that do not form part of the clothes and dresses themselves. Just letting the dresses lie around in a disorderly pile will not do. Similarly, the historian uses concepts such as “intellectual movement”, “Renaissance”, “social group” or “industrial Revolution” in order “to dress up” the past. The past is shown by means of entities that do not form part of the past itself and that do not even refer to actual historical phenomena or aspects of such phenomena. This is what I would like to call narrative idealism. It requires us to be continually aware of the structural gap between the past and the narratio; it affirms the structural autonomy of the narratio and draws attention to the purely linguistic narrative rules that govern the narratio. There are certain rules, I assume, for displaying the merits of dresses; likewise narrative idealism claims that narrativist rules, or a “narrative logic”, can be discovered for properly displaying in a narratio what the historical sources tell us about the past.

(3) “Seeing as ...” in historiography. We should be wary, then, of intuitively looking upon the narratio as the reflection of an inherent structure in the past. We do not “see” the past as it is, as we see a tree,

¹³ Munz (2); p. 221. See also pp. 16-7: "for the truth of the matter is that there is no ascertainable face behind the various masks every story-teller, be he a historian, poet, novelist, or myth-maker, is creating. He is telling a story and the story is all we have. Nor can the problem be resolved by treating it as a problem of translation. For whereas we can translate a photograph into a painting and a painting, taking its life into our hands, into a verbal statement and an English text into a Russian text, we cannot translate what actually happened (i.e., the flow of time) into anything. We can translate what somebody thought happened into another language and seek to establish equivalences between different media - at least up to a point. But we cannot translate reality; for to do so we would have to have a picture of or a text about it in the first place. (...) But the ineluctable truth is that there is no face behind the mask and that the belief that there is is an unsupportable allegation. For any record we could have of the face would be, precisely, another mask. We cannot have proof that it is a genuine "record" of the face and every possible glimpse of the face would be, by its nature, another mask".
a machine or a landscape as it is; we see the past only through a masquerade of narrative structures (while behind this masquerade there is nothing that has a narrative structure). Here lies the difference between “seeing as ...” in the sciences and “seeing as ...” in historiography. There is no “seeing as ...” given as a starting point in historical inquiry (as speculative philosophers and their hesitant supporters such as Popper and Pain believe) as there is in the exact sciences. In the exact sciences, familiar, everyday theories or regularities form our initial “seeing as ...”, and thus the point of departure is given to us. Moreover, our initial “seeing as ...” can be and has been refined throughout the history of the exact sciences. The evolution of the exact sciences could aptly be described as a continuous process of elaborating and refining earlier modes of “seeing as ...”. Every new phase in their development represents a correction of an earlier “seeing as ...”.

In historiography things are quite different. A particular “seeing as ...” is not the point of departure in historical inquiry (in order to elaborate, apply or emend it): a “seeing as ...” only comes in conclusion, as the result of a historical investigation. This explains why historiography is rarely, if ever, cumulative in character; although for details the historian may rely on work done by others, when he writes his article or book he essentially has to make a fresh start. There are no permanent results in historiography; there is not — nor will there ever be - a book on a general historical subject that is accepted by all historians as the embodiment of a final “seeing as ...” leaving room for research on points of detail only. In contrast to the exact sciences, it is not the “seeing as ...” but the details that are generally accepted in historiography. Since “scientific historiography” came into being at the beginning of the last century, historiography has never had its Newtons and Einsteins and if ever a historian were to be honoured that way, historiography would die a partial death. Of course, “scientific” historiography does have its eminent historians such as Ranke, Pirenne, Hazard, Febvre, Namier, Braudel, Talmon or Duby. However, even during their lifetimes their proposals for a “seeing as ...” were often superseded by other proposals. On the other hand, eminent physicists like Newton, Einstein, Planck or Schrödinger have at times determined a part of scientific inquiry for many decades. The reason is that unlike the scientist, the historian does not start but only ends with a “seeing as ...”. And the results of an inquiry (i.e. a “seeing as ...”) cannot and ought not be inspired by what has been argued by others (i.e. other “seeings as ...”). For what could possibly be the purpose of such inquiries? In the sciences it is customary to elaborate on some given or generally accepted “seeing as ...”; so there it is usually inevitable to start with the acceptance of a former “seeing as ...”.

I am aware that recent developments in the philosophy of the exact sciences seem to indicate that the differences between historiography and the exact sciences are smaller than I have just suggested. Even in the exact sciences, a former “seeing as ...” is sometimes superseded by a
radically new “seeing as ...”. Consequently, to characterize the exact sciences, as I have done, as a form of inquiry exclusively concerned with the gradual elaboration of a former “seeing as ...” may be only part of the truth. I admit that there may be a certain analogy between the ordinary progress of historiography and what happens in the exact sciences during periods of so-called “scientific revolutions”. Although it is beyond my competence to formulate an opinion on this matter, my natural reaction is to regard such analogies with the utmost suspicion: in the past, they have already caused many unfortunate misunderstandings. Furthermore, the difference between the continuity in the development of scientific knowledge during the periods of “normal science” research and the historians’ habit of constantly remodelling their interpretation of the past, is far too great to be ignored. If anything, historiography does in a way resemble science in its “preparadigmatic” period (of course, this remark is not meant to suggest that history will ever become a science on Kuhn’s terms). It is not to be denied that there are considerable resemblances between historiographies dating from one and the same period. Thus we could speak of historiographical fashions. But I do not believe that these fashions should be considered the historiographical counterparts of Kuhn’s “paradigms”. For instance, does historiography have its “paradigm changes”? Differences between the event-orientated historiography of the beginning of this century and e.g. the structuralist historiographies of the French Annales-school have sometimes been labelled “paradigm changes”. But then, what are the “unsolvable problems” of the former tradition and the “ad-hoc solutions” (Kuhn’s terminology) proposed to solve them? The fact that these questions are manifestly absurd shows how unacceptable it is to transfer Kuhn’s theory to the domain of historiography. It may be argued that each particular historiography on an aspect of the past constitutes a “paradigm” in itself. But that would, of course, be violating the concept “paradigm”.

“Seeing as ...” is not the beginning but the result of a historical inquiry. Take the well-known rabbit-duck drawing of Jastrow-Wittgenstein. In order to recognize a rabbit or a duck in the drawing one must primarily know how rabbits and ducks are usually depicted. And such knowledge, such “mental images” — a condition necessary for each “seeing as ...” — are absent in historiography in contrast to the exact sciences where even the most simple regularity known from our daily experience can fulfil this function (i.e. provide a paradigm for a “seeing as ...”). However, one might ask, does it not happen often enough that historians correct their predecessors? Such corrections could be interpreted as a continual refinement of earlier historiographical “seeing as ...”. Despite its apparent plausibility this inference does not hold. One can speak of a continual refinement of a certain “seeing as ...” only if such refinements

14. For Kuhn’s reservations about the applicability of his ideas outside the sciences, see Kuhn; pp. 208-9.
are all related to theories, hypotheses and so on (roughly) bearing on the same kind of phenomena. This condition is more or less met in the exact sciences (I am disregarding Feyerabend’s and Sneed’s reservations on this subject) but not in historiography. When in physics there are two rival theories, the explanation of a (more or less) fixed aspect of reality is at stake in the discussion between the adherents of the competing theories. Two theories are “competing theories” only if they both refer to (roughly) the same kind of phenomena.

Even if the incommensurability of competing scientific theories is strongly emphasized, a conspicuous difference between science and historiography remains. When, for instance, the English historian Trevor-Roper criticizes the well-known Weber-thesis without completely denying the existence of a certain relation between Calvinism and the rise of Capitalism\(^{15}\), he has entirely different historical phenomena in mind than Weber had. Weber thought of theological phenomena; Trevor-Roper, on the other hand, tells us how a large number of bankers in the Roman-Catholic countries, frightened by the austerities of the Counter-Reformation, left their native countries in search of a more tolerant political climate. In short, there is a looseness in historical discussion that has no parallel in the exact sciences: the relation between Capitalism and Calvinism can be studied from the point of view of religion and from the point of view of the emigration of a financial élite. Probably both points of view might even be represented in one and the same book, which would certainly be a very odd thing to do in the exact sciences. For instance, one can look for the antecedents of the French Revolution on an intellectual level (as Daniel Mornet has done) and study its socio-economic causes as well (as Labrousse has done)\(^{16}\). The problem in historiography is that questions like the one concerning the relation between Capitalism and Calvinism or the origins of the French Revolution are ambiguous to such an extent that there is room for all these approaches. When we ask what the origins of the French Revolution are we are not asking a clear-cut question. Having to answer it puts the historian in a position quite different from that of the physicist asked to explain why friction causes heat or why a compass-needle deviates when an electric current comes near to it.

The differences between “seeing as ...” in the exact sciences and in historiography may be exemplified as follows. The physicist arrives at his kinetic theory of gases by way of a mathematical elaboration of “seeing” the molecules of a gas “as” completely elastic little spheres; the historian, on the other hand, has only to attempt to develop such a Gestalt, such a “seeing as ...”. The historian’s task is completed when he has demonstrated that the late Middle Ages in Northern Europe

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should not be “seen as” the beginning of a new epoch but rather as the end of what historical reality was before that time (cf. Huizinga’s *Herfsttij*). What is mere heuristics in the exact sciences, is the whole of historiography.

From these considerations it should not be concluded that the historian — just like his colleague from the exact sciences — could mathematically elaborate the *Gestalt* he has proposed in order to come to a truly scientific study of the past. When in the exact sciences something (say: system $S_1$) is seen in the terms of something else (say: system $S_2$) this serves its purpose only if system $S_2$ is better known than system $S_1$ and therefore, as is the case in the example of the kinetic theory of gases, permits mathematization. We say that system $S_2$ is better known than system $S_1$ (think of the elastic spheres of the kinetic gas theory) when a (preferably mathematical) description of $S_2$ can be conceived of that solves the relevant problems of $S_2$ — and, in consequence, of $S_1$. But it is utterly impossible to imagine a description of a narratio that should solve the problems pertaining to this narratio and, in consequence, the problems of the relevant part of the past itself. In the exact sciences a “seeing as ...” is logically distinct from the description of physical reality inspired by it; in the narratio no such distinction is possible. The difference between “seeing as ...” in historiography and in the exact sciences, is, fundamentally, that in the exact sciences the meaning of the *Gestalt* is already given. To speak in the language of the rabbit-duck drawing, the physicist knows beforehand how ducks and rabbits are usually drawn, whereas the historian does not. The content of the physicist’s experience of reality is always greatly influenced by relevant theories of an older date or, perhaps, by expectations based on daily experience. The conscientious historian, on the other hand, who does not wish merely to paraphrase his predecessors, is never in such a favourable position. The historian who is dealing with British colonial expansion or with family life in Medieval Germany has no fixed patterns, paradigms or analogies he can rely upon. He has no models in terms of which he could try to translate his problem. In fact, his actual purpose is to construct such a model and if he succeeds he may be satisfied with having accomplished his task.

(4) Conclusion. At first glance, it may seem as if surrendering the narrative realist position is tantamount to abandoning all certainty in history. However, we can expect some solace from the philosophy of the exact sciences, because the idea that they should describe what really happens in nature was given up as early as the time of Mach and Helmholtz; or, if one would prefer to go back as far as that, since the time of Kant’s *Copernican Revolution*. And for our time a “scientific idealism” (analogous to the narrative idealism advocated in this Chapter) has been formulated with nearly existentialist *pathos* by Popper: “the empirical basis of objective science thus has nothing “absolute” about it. Science does not rest upon solid bed-rock. The bold structures of its

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17. Mandelbaum (2); Chapter 14.
theories arise, as it were, above a swamp. It is like a building erected on piles. The piles are driven down from above in the swamp, but not down to any natural or “given” base; and if we stop driving these piles deeper, it is not because we have reached firm ground. We simply stop when we are satisfied that the piles are firm enough to carry the structure at least for the time being”18. A similar situation obtains in historiography: there is no past that could serve as bedrock for our narratios and there are no translation rules that could serve as the indestructible piles to buttress the narratio. Yet Popper never concluded - and was never compelled to conclude — that the study of nature and the discovery of scientific theories should be regarded as purely arbitrary. If, then, we give up our intuitive confidence in a machine-like or mappable past that is linked to the narratio by translation rules, this does not in the least compel us to decide that historiography expresses nothing but the whim or the moral and aesthetic values of individual historians. If philosophers of history and of science nevertheless tend to draw that kind of conclusions (unfortunately there is a tendency in that direction in much writing on history) this shows merely that not history itself, but the philosophy of history is on the wrong track. Much historical scepticism and relativism is due to the confusion between an awareness of narrative idealism — inspired by being acquainted with actual historiographical practice — and narrow narrative realist convictions. The fluidity of historical interpretations is contrasted with the fixity of the historical past — and the result is scepticism. Becker’s essay on historical facts is a striking illustration of this relativist fallacy19.

Our task wil now be to discover the mechanism enabling the historian to give a narrative representation of the past. We know that a narrative structure cannot be attributed to the past as such, and we do not possess a set of translation rules either. That means that if we want to know more about this mechanism we shall have to analyze the narrative level separately. Clearly, there are certain rules governing the narratio which we cannot risk ignoring. If the past itself, contrary to the hypothesis underlying narrative realism, does not force upon us specific ways in which it should be represented in a narratio, and, on the other hand, rules apparently do exist for the narrative representation of the past, then we must conclude that such rules can only be found by means of an inquiry into the nature of our narrative knowledge of the past. This is the position I have called “narrative idealism”. Maybe the word “idealism” is a bit strong. I am certainly not suggesting that we should be able to discover the nature of historical reality by means of an a priori inquiry into narrative philosophy20. I merely use the term “narrative

18. Popper (1); p. 111. It should be noted that there is also an important realist strand in Popper's thought: cf. K.R. Popper, Conjectures and refutations, New York 1965; Chapter 3, section (6).
20. Neither is the term "narrative idealism" an invitation to resuscitate (an interest
idealist” to underline the fact that the narratio has a quite particular autonomy, embodied in the logical structure of our narrative knowledge of the past and of narrative accounts of the past. In a similar way the physicist is obliged to present the results of his inquiry in an orderly and logical way. Only in this transcendental way can narrative logic be said to constitute the structure of our knowledge of the past. However, the facts in history (i.e. what is expressed in statements in a narratio) can only be established by a close and thorough investigation of documents and primary sources.

Nevertheless, I believe that in historical critique, scholarly discussions, reviews and critical notes, practical applications of narrative logic play a very significant, hitherto unnoticed role. In scholarly reviews the truth of the facts mentioned in the historiography under discussion is only rarely challenged. The reviewers do not verify the study a historian has made of his sources. The reason is not that the reviewer is too lazy or that such a task would be too cumbersome to accomplish — although very often that may be the case as well — but that reviewers rightly take the truth of the facts mentioned for granted. Only in some very rare cases — take the historiography produced in Nazi-Germany or in the Russia of Stalin — is this attitude obviously over-optimistic. When reviewers criticize historiographies, they most often point out inconsistencies in the historian’s work itself or inconsistencies between the work and other well-known historical accounts. In other words, they show the narrative shortcomings of the work under discussion, the failure in this particular historiography to live up to narrative standards of consistency and explicitness. Similarly, experienced history lecturers have little difficulty in pointing out the mistakes in essays written by their undergraduate students, even if they know next to nothing of their subject-matter. Finally, then, we can say that according to narrative idealism there is a narrative logic which structures our knowledge of the past, while according to narrative realism, the “structure of the past itself should exclusively determine the ultimate structure of our narrative knowledge of the past.

But, we may ask, what does such a narrative logic look like, in what way does it play its rôle in the construction of narratios: how can narrative logic account for traditional problems such as the subjectivity or for) speculative philosophies of history. It is a peculiar illness afflicting much of contemporary philosophy of history that in spite of the perennial aversion of historians to speculative systems, many philosophers of history nowadays are tending to become more and more accommodating towards speculative systems. The cause of this illness is probably a dissatisfaction with current Anglo-Saxon philosophy of history because it is so exclusively interested in the details or the elements of historiography (i.e. the problems of historical research). Many philosophers of history are now looking for a theory on the more synthetical aspects of historical accounts of the past. Speculative philosophies of history seem to provide the most obvious point of departure for the development of such theories. However, in my opinion, both extremes should be avoided and I think that only a narrativist philosophy of history enables us to do so.
objectivity of historical writing or the problem of historical explanation? In the following chapters I shall try to answer these questions.