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Unheeded history: a critical engagement with Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen's 'postnarrativism'

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary theory of history struggles in finding a new research agenda 'after narrativism.' One such theoretical example is Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen's *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*. This essay argues that Kuukkanen's position falls within the ambit of his own criteria of narrativism, namely constructivism, representationalism, and holism. Yet, at the same time, Kuukkanen's reconstruction of narrativism raises serious questions concerning its adequacy. This inadequacy, in connection with Kuukkanen's view that history books argue for certain theses, leads to some sort of essentialism and 'isolation' from the relation between the narrative on the one hand and the historian and the reader on the other. What is more, the main thesis of Kuukkanen's book is untenable on the basis of the examples to which he refers and lacks concrete instances of informal reasoning in history. As a result, a truly narrativist insight into the specificity of history books paradoxically goes unrecognized and Kuukkanen's model appears prenarrativist at its core.

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Recent projects in the field of philosophy of history have been marked by the struggle for finding a new research agenda 'after narrativism,' whether or not driven by serious disagreement with the narrativists, simply because of the amount of time that has elapsed. One such theoretical proposal is Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen's *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*, which was awarded the International Commission for the History and Theory of Historiography prize in 2016 for the best monograph in philosophy of historiography. Yet, the question remains whether Kuukkanen's position truly opens up a new chapter, not to say a new paradigm. The present article answers this question in the negative, but also seeks to provide a critical engagement with Kuukkanen's project of 'postnarrativism.' Unlike the way in

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which previous reviews and critical voices have focused on issues of the adequacy of the employed notions in Kuukkanen's work, this essay argues that Kuukkanen's position falls within the ambit of his own criteria of narrativism. The aim is to demonstrate that the main thesis of Kuukkanen's book is untenable on the basis of the examples to which he refers. Importantly, this suggests that, under the aspiration of reviving the epistemic evaluation of historical narrative, a truly narrativist insight into the specificity of history books paradoxically goes unrecognized.

By previous reviews and critical voices I mean specifically the special issue of the *Journal of the Philosophy of History* published in 2017 (vol. 11, issue 1, 'Forum Debate on Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen's Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography'). In this way, my discussion is partly a rejoinder to that debate, which engaged such scholars as Frank Ankersmit, Daniel Fairbrother, Brian Fay, Anton Froeyman, and Eugen Zelenák. In their eyes, the main problem of Kuukkanen's approach is its incomplete pragmatism, resulting from the belief that standards of rationality are universal and not culture- or discipline-dependent (Fay), which transfers into a conventional understanding of given epistemic criteria (Zelenák). As a result, the categories employed by Kuukkanen are either too restrictive (Froeyman), which implies misunderstandings regarding the concepts of 'representation' (Ankersmit, Fairbrother).

However, none of those voices attempt to show the internal inconsistency of Kuukkanen's 'postnarrativism,' which is the starting point of the complex criticism presented in this paper.

Kuukkanen's project of 'postnarrativism'

Kuukkanen frames his philosophy of historiography in terms of 'postnarrativism,' which requires a rethinking of both the heuristics of 'being post' and the way in which narrativism as such is defined and constructed.

The general meaning of the prefix 'post-' is that 'post-*x*' is opposed to some of the beliefs that are constitutional to *x* but also shares some points with *x*. Thus, it is not entirely 'anti-.' In fact, this mode of thinking strongly resembles Hegelian dialectics: the moment of negation, the abandonment (*Aufhebung*) of the previous standpoint, saves some of the features of what has been abandoned, so that the result, a synthesis, is in some way 'stronger' than its predecessor. In the orthodox Hegelian version, this also implies a 'return to itself,' to what was before the negated unit. However, this is not necessarily so of all 'posts.' For instance, postsecularism returns to what was before secularism, of course in a new manner (mainly in stressing the role of private religion). It is likewise with posthumanism. Yet, it is unlikely that, for example, postmodernism refreshes Scholasticism. In other words, postnarrativism may be aimed at both a total rejection of everything that was before and a return to a prenarrativist philosophy in a new manner.

In this respect, just as in the Hegelian logic that entailed a philosophy of history, every kind of ‘post’ implies a certain historical scheme: the classical epoch–modernism–postmodernism, or religious thinking–secularism–post-secularism, and so forth. In Kuukkanen’s, that would be the sequence of analytical philosophy of history, narrativism, and postnarrativism. Indeed, this explains why Kuukkanen has devoted so many pages to the delineation of the history of analytical philosophy of history and narrativism. In his own words, ‘the postnarrativism of this book suggests that we take seriously the narrativist idea of books containing central theses, but it proposes going beyond narrativism with regard to how historiography is characterized and with regard to its evaluative standards,’ with the proviso that ‘a postnarrativist philosophy of historiography provides only a framework, after all’ (Kuukkanen 2015, 200). In Kuukkanen’s eyes, analytical philosophy of history was interested in the study of historical knowledge but not necessarily the narrative. In contrast, narrativism disregards the epistemic criteria of evaluation and comparison of narratives, while postnarrativism aims at elaborating on the rational, intersubjective criteria for the evaluation of narrative. However, this already presumes an interpretation of narrativism that needs to be investigated.

According to Kuukkanen, the basic ‘narrativist insight’ is that ‘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’ (2015, 1). However, this is already at odds with Hayden White’s well-known declaration that ‘unlike other analysts of historical writing, I do not consider the “metahistorical” understructure of the historical work to consist of the theoretical concepts explicitly used by the historian to give to his narratives the aspect of an “explanation”’ (White 1973, x). Moreover, according to Kuukkanen, history books that include theses and claims can be thought of as being without ‘a narrative prose discourse.’ In this, Kuukkanen does not share White’s ‘narrativist insight.’ In other words, already at this point Kuukkanen blends narrativism with his own, supposedly postnarrativist, standpoint that history books argue for a certain thesis, a blending that has paradoxical consequences for his project.

Nonetheless, this is just a starting point for a broader reading of narrativism in terms of its ‘three tenets,’ namely constructivism, representationism, and holism. Constructivism means that ‘the past only becomes narratively structured through the imagination and the hand of the historian, who imposes order and meaning there’ (Kuukkanen 2015, 40). It has to be noted, though, that this sort of definition excludes such narrativists as Paul Ricoeur and David Carr, which Kuukkanen readily admits (Kuukkanen 2015, 72).¹

Representationalism is defined on the basis of Ankersmit’s thought, where representation is said to be ‘about’ the past without being a ‘copy,’

‘picture,’ or ‘referent’ of it (2015, 30–36). In this way, representationalism is complementary to constructivism: while the latter undermines the Rankean-realist approach to history, the former tries to recover the relation between the historian and the past via the medium of ‘representation.’ Up to this point, the use of the term ‘representation’ remains close to the basic intuition behind contemporary representationalist theories of consciousness. Nonetheless, Kuukkanen follows Ankersmit with the idea of ‘representation’ as a ‘substitution’ that makes the past present again. This being the case, Kuukkanen’s definition is tailored to the view of (late) Ankersmit and thereby becomes far too narrow to constitute a common ground for all narrativists. In fact, even such theorists as Edward H. Carr would not have agreed with this point.² Furthermore, the combination of representationalism and constructivism leads Kuukkanen to frame narrativism in Kantian terms (2015, 39, 42–43), which is also common among narrativists themselves, particularly in regard to White (Kellner 1992; Ankersmit 2009). But then again, this involves another inaccuracy in the interpretation of narrativism. As Paul Roth observes,

For Kant the ways in which the world is cognized and the categories imposed concern concepts and categories that stand in a certain *logical* relation. It is the *transcendental logic* that makes human science possible. Talks of representation is always relative to and in connection with how the categories mediate our understanding of phenomena. ‘Representation’ in this Kantian context has absolutely nothing to do with reference or aboutness; it concerns what logicians today might call a model or an interpretation. This become critical because it points to one of the very basic mistakes made by Ankersmit and possibly Kuukkanen. Ankersmit understands ‘representation’ *not* as a logical relation, but as a pictorial one. This was, so far as I can tell, *no* part of the Kantian enterprise.³

Finally, the third ‘tenet’ of narrativism, that is, holism, results from an endeavor ‘to understand what kind of story, message or thesis a work of history as a whole amounts to’ (Kuukkanen 2015, 44). Holism entails such features as undecomposability, unfalsifiability, and analyticity (2015, 47–48). The first two features seem, on the one hand, to be generally in line with narrativist philosophy, albeit as will be argued below, their adequacy is called into doubt by the way in which Kuukkanen concretizes these notions while criticizing them for the sake of exposition of his own view. The feature of analyticity is, on the other hand, tailored to the Ankersmitian approach, particularly his view from *Narrative Logic*.⁴ It is questionable in what sense this feature can apply to White, for ‘White’s most succinct response to the question of what is history, is that it is a narrative discourse, the content of which is as much imagined/invented as found’ (Jenkins 1995, 137). This is all the more puzzling, given that narrativism has just been recognized as a form of Kantianism, and therefore should rather be associated with synthetic a priori judgments.

In any case, for the purpose of this essay (and in a quite narrativist spirit), narrativism as represented by particular narrativists (or ‘narrativism as such’) should be distinguished from the narrativism as constructed by Kuukkanen (or ‘narrativism as it is constructed’). This implies the question of the way in which Kuukkanen’s project relates to both sorts of narrativism. As shown below, Kuukkanen’s standpoint turns out to fall within the ambit of the ‘three tenets’ of narrativism (as it is constructed), while in comparison with the original narrativist insight (as such), Kuukkanen’s model appears prenarrativist at its core. To argue this point requires a more detailed analysis of Kuukkanen’s philosophy of historiography.

Kuukkanen’s weak postnarrativism I: constructivism and representationalism

The basic idea of Kuukkanen’s work is that ‘books of history typically defend one central thesis (...) The book itself may be seen as an incredibly complex informal argument for this thesis’ (Kuukkanen 2017, 107). The fact that Kuukkanen focuses on books of history means, in his opinion, that he shares the ‘narrativist insight,’ but the difference between Kuukkanen’s approach and the narrativists is that for Kuukkanen books of history are not mere examples of narrative storytelling but rather exemplify reasoning for historical theses. Historiography is a rational practice, which here implies that ‘historians attempt to persuade others to accept the views put forward in their books’ (Kuukkanen 2015, 198).

As a result, Kuukkanen rejects the holistic approach, according to which narratives are indecomposable entities, stating that one can separate the meaning of the thesis from the evidence provided for it. For instance, Christopher Clark’s book *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* argues for the thesis that the First World War was not an intentional result of actions by European countries (which is the reason why he used the metaphor of sleepwalking in the book’s title). The discussion among historians primarily concerns evidence and the way in which a given thesis or conclusion can or cannot be inferred from the presented evidence. At the same time, evidence does not speak for itself and it is consequently the job of the historian to persuade others to accept the presented historical theses and conclusions. Objectivity in the ontological sense is not an option, and hence historiography – as neither describing nor representing the past (even aspects of it) – can only be intersubjective. The role of the subjective factor lies in proposing some original, expressive thesis; the more original and counterintuitive the thesis is, the stronger the reasoning needs to be to support it. (This point has undoubtedly been brought in from the philosophy of science.) In terms of Neopragmatism, historians make inferential moves (Brandom), thereby placing themselves in the logical space of reasons (Sellars).

Further, Kuukkanen distinguishes three dimensions of cognitive justification in historiography: the epistemic, the rhetorical, and the discursive.

The epistemic dimension concerns the concepts employed in the narrative. The choice between various 'colligatory concepts' relies on epistemic values, such as exemplification, coherence, comprehensiveness, scope, and originality. Colligatory concepts (a term taken from the philosophy of W. H. Walsh) unify, by way of superinduction, a number of facts into one, thereby creating a complex notion, such as 'the Renaissance' or the 'Cold War.' There are no truth-makers for such concepts. That is to say, there is nothing real in the past to which they refer. Nonetheless, although colligatory concepts are the creations and metaphors of historians, they can be discussed using epistemic criteria.

The epistemic dimension is complemented by the rhetorical dimension, which actually does not resemble any of White's tropes, but simply signifies proper argumentation. Notably, although the argumentation is said to be informal, the question of a specifically historical reasoning remains open. Moreover, Kuukkanen neither discerns distinctive types of such reasoning nor instances of such argumentation at all (in the sense of a finite sequence of sentences supporting the thesis). Instead, he settles on the statement that the thesis is 'supported' by informal arguments but does not discuss how.

The discursive dimension, in turn, means that such reasoning is to be understood as an 'argumentative speech act,' (Quentin Skinner), meaning that historians speak within an already existing discussion and confront their own claims with those shared by the community. Accordingly, this aspect could be regarded as a pragmatic element, for it refers to the community that is external to purely semantic rules.

The rejection of the correspondence theory of truth along with the criticism of the idea that history refers to anything have led Kuukkanen to the view that appropriate justification and rational warrant are the only possible basis for talking about 'real' and 'true' things in historiography. However, what if all past historians had agreed to say that the Earth is flat? Would this not be a kind of relativism? Kuukkanen's decisive answer attempts to escape this danger:

But if we widen our community so that evaluative standards are applicable both in our and in what was previously a foreign community, do we not transcend our community by going beyond the borders of the community and by creating a new enlarged community? And if one keeps working in this manner, ideally, in the end, one would transcend all community borders and evaluative standards would be applicable in all communities (...) Truth as correspondence does not in any case work, provided the status of synthesizing expression in historiography, for the reasons discussed at length in this book. To repeat, the higher-order constructs in historiography typically lack truth-makers in the object world that would make them true and false. The central suggestion of the book is that historiography is about making rational,

argumentative, speech acts. This is based on the idea that well-performed argumentative speech acts are rationally persuasive and that historiography is ultimately a rational practice. This takes us to the final theme of the book, which is of fundamental importance: it is rationality itself that provides the prospect for community transcendence and the inter-communal validity of historiographical arguments. Alternatively expressed, a good historiographical argument has epistemic authority due to the rational properties it contains (2015, 191–192).

However, the notions of ‘rationality itself’ and ‘rational properties’ seem to be reconcilable with the language of constructivism. As a result, as Roth observes, Kuukkanen’s idea of ‘rationality’ is ambiguous and contradicts his pragmatic assumptions (Roth 2016, 280).

A key question can now be raised from the meta-level: Does Kuukkanen’s project not fall within the ambit of narrativism, even in the manner in which he himself defines it? The three main points characterizing narrativism were said to be constructivism, representationalism, and holism. Constructivism means that history as a meaningful sequence of events does not exist independently prior to the historian’s creative act, and it is clear that Kuukkanen is also a constructivist in this (and probably any other) sense. In his view, history books are only chains of arguments made by historians. Specifically, colligatory concepts are constructs that cannot be justified by evidence itself and numerous colligatory concepts can be created for the same set of evidence. In this regard, Kuukkanen openly supports Quine’s underdetermination thesis (2015, 118).

As for representationalism: with his ‘nonrepresentationalism’ Kuukkanen seems to offer no room for reconciliation. Representationalism maintains (1) that historical representation is ‘about’ some aspect of the past rather than referring to particular events and persons, and (2) that representation stands for the past, making it present again (2015, 30–36). Kuukkanen opposes both conceptions, but Ankersmit convincingly replies that with regard to point (2), the substitute is never identical to what is substituted, that is, the past. Instead, it is more like a symbol (Ankersmit 2017, 41).⁵ Perhaps Kuukkanen is fighting a straw man here, and his objection is baseless. In any case, it is, in fact, point (1) that truly defines historical representationalism because point (2), in contrast to traditional beliefs, does not involve any search for the referents of historical truths. If the dispute of point (2) is treated as a contention among the narrativists themselves, that is, as a debate concerning how the crucial term ‘about’ ought to be interpreted, it may be argued that Kuukkanen is also actually a representationalist himself. In fact, he openly admits: ‘I accept that a historical text “is about” the past in some loose manner’ (Kuukkanen 2015, 60). As Ankersmit argues,

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 represented’ by ‘part of the past’. Would you then still protest? I don’t think so (2017, 51–52).

In other words, if historians are in dispute ‘about the past’ and history consists of claims put forward by them, is history then not ultimately ‘about’ the past? The belief in community-transcendent rational standards even strengthens the realist flavor of this idea. Eugen Zelenák has justifiably pointed out that Kuukkanen’s criteria for evaluating historical works are understood in terms of representationalism. Is it, for instance, possible to consider a criterion for ‘a scope of application to historical phenomena,’ without presuming any kind of representation? (Zelenák 2017, 31) This all goes to suggest that Kuukkanen is not only a constructivist but also a representationalist in the basic sense of the word.

Kuukkanen’s weak postnarrativism II: holism

Kuukkanen repeatedly criticizes holism and this critique seems inscribed in his main point that historians argue for certain (separate) claims, rather than offering a single complex image of the past. Nevertheless, Kuukkanen maintains holism in at least two senses. First, he agrees with Quine’s holism and the underdetermination thesis. That is to say, historians’ claims are neither analytical⁶ nor synthetical, and different theories can stem from the same set of evidence. As Kuukkanen writes, ‘in terms of evidence or “confirmation” it is correct to say that I am some kind of a holist: in historiography the content of an entire book may function as reason or evidence to accept the thesis it formulates’ (2017, 103). Furthermore, along with the notion of ‘colligatory concepts,’ he introduces another sort of holism, according to which such concepts as ‘the Thaw’ or the ‘Swedish deluge’ are holistic modes of representation of events. Kuukkanen notes; ‘what is remarkable in the historiographical use of colligatory notions is that they manage to colligate seemingly very diverse phenomena under one label’ (2015, 105).

The somewhat surprising critique of holism presented in Kuukkanen’s book runs as follows:

- (1) According to narrativists (namely Ankersmit), the cognitive message of a narrative cannot be grasped without understanding the whole representation.
- (2) The whole representation can be understood only if all of its statements are taken into account and neither ignored nor forgotten.

- (3) Nevertheless, in reality, it is not necessary to keep in mind every sentence and part of the narrative (probably even the author could not truly do so), because
- (4) that is not needed to grasp the narrative's cognitive message, that is, its main historical thesis.
- (5) Hence, narrativists are wrong.

To begin with, consider the issue of adequacy. Narrativists, in fact, do not claim that narratives or representations consist of totally separate sentences in the same way that, for example, a school register is a list of names. For the early Ankersmit, sentences are rather 'properties' of a narrative substance.⁷ Even for Danto, 'narrative sentences do not constitute a narrative in any theoretically relevant sense of that term, but typically they imply one' (Roth 2016, 273).

A second problem in Kuukkanen's interpretation is that he takes both the narrative and the sentences as given, when in fact only the sentences may be deemed given. As Ankersmit argues: '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' (Ankersmit 2017, 50). Yet Kuukkanen is correct in his objection to the explanation that the relation between sentences and narration speaks against holism: 'Does a change in the broader sign context, in a historical debate, automatically change the meaning of a particular text? If it does, should we not conclude that all signs contribute to, and even determine, the meaning of the Sign' (Kuukkanen 2017, 104). However, in discussing even a single sentence from a book, insofar as it leads to putting forward a claim, the sentence has to be considered in the light of the rest of the text, and probably its whole. Moreover, taking Kuukkanen's 'discursive dimension' seriously, such consideration would additionally have to be given in the light of the current state of the art. This consequence of Kuukkanen's statements is also undoubtedly holistic.

Kuukkanen's weak postnarrativism III: argumentation and history

A comprehensive analysis of Kuukkanen's postnarrativism also requires examination of its most elementary statement: saying that historians make arguments to support a thesis. Yet, even considering Kuukkanen's own examples, for instance *The Making of the English Working Class*, it would be difficult to conclude that historians prepare arguments for the thesis. Instead, they rather develop their theses in the form of narratives. It is no coincidence that historical works bear no resemblance to Spinoza's *Ethics* or Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. If Kuukkanen's claim were taken literally, as a belief that historians in the first instance argue for a certain thesis and only secondarily – for the purpose of argumentation – narrate the events, the

consequence would be that narrative is not the primary object of historical theory. In other words, the matter of narrative becomes superficial and superfluous. From this point of view, it is indeed questionable whether Kuukkanen truly shares the ‘original narrativist insight.’ Narrative is here no longer an inherent and irreducible element of history writing, for one can differentiate the narrative and the line of argumentation and reduce the former to the latter. Moreover, implying a sort of essentialism, Kuukkanen’s approach directly contradicts White’s declaration to ‘treat the historical work as what it most *manifestly* is: a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse.’

It is probably even less plausible to talk about ‘preparing arguments for the thesis,’ since this may suggest that the thesis comes first, and only then is the historian looking for the evidence that supports it. The thesis should emerge from the narrated story, while the story should be well-rooted in the evidence. What is here called a thesis looks more like a ‘summary’ than the goal of a history book. Consider the following random excerpt from Thompson’s masterpiece:

The great London reform demonstrations, of November 15th, December 2nd and 10 December 1816, at Spa Fields, were convened on the initiative of a committee in which the ‘Spenceans’ (Dr. Watson, Thistlewood, Preston, Hooper) were most influential. Cobbett, indeed, refused an invitation to speak at the first, and the main orator at all three meetings was Henry Hunt. Hunt was a wealthy gentleman-farmer, who had been a reformer of Cobbett’s disposition for ten years and had first won national prominence when he fought an impressive campaign as a Radical in a Bristol election in 1812. Bamford’s description of him – as he remembered him in 1817 – is of a handsome man, ‘gentlemanly in his manner and attire, six feet and better in height’ (Thompson 1962, 622).

It is clear that this fragment is not an argument for the thesis that the English working class created itself. Nor is it a chain of arguments, for the height of Henry Hunt was not a reason for (or an argument explaining) Cobbett’s refusal of the invitation, while this refusal was not a reason for (to skip through the next steps) the emergence of the English working class. Rather, the passage is definitely about *how* the English working class came to life. The relation between those sentences and all the other sentences in the book is neither a relation of deduction nor any other informal kind of inference. If the story were reorganized in order to ‘extract’ a narrative (representation) from it, it would be seen that the relation linking the separate segments is not a relation of deduction but of abstraction and concretization. Now reconsider the example wherein the underlined words indicate what is further concretized (that is, narrated in more detail), while the indentation suggests a lower level of abstraction:

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(Dr. Watson, Thistlewood, Preston, Hooper)
Cobbett, indeed, refused an invitation to speak at the first
the main orator at all three meetings was Henry Hunt
Hunt was a wealthy gentleman-farmer
‘gentlemanly in his manner and attire, six feet and
better in height’

Furthermore, if concretization is understood as an increase of information revealed in additional sentences, it will be clear that the relation between those sentences is not inferential in character, such as $[(\alpha \rightarrow \beta) \ \& \ (\beta \rightarrow \gamma) \ \& \ \alpha] \rightarrow \gamma$. Rather, the relation would amount to $\alpha, \alpha + \beta, \beta + \gamma, \gamma + \delta$. This does not imply a return to the famous claim of Windelband that history is an idiographic science, but it does make it very difficult to argue for the presence of reasoning when there are no conditionals in the narrative.⁸ What is more, and quite emblematically, Kuukkanen does not provide any concrete examples of informal historical reasoning. Hence, it is not entirely clear what is intended by ‘informal reasoning.’ Would it be Johnson and Blaire’s program of ‘informal logic,’ pragmatic logic, cognitive logic, or simply rhetoric? Further, is there any particularly historical informal reasoning and how would it then be connected with knowable temporal logics? Those questions sadly remain unanswered in Kuukkanen’s publications.

A reasonable solution to the problem that most of the sentences of historical narratives do not work in any argumentative context would be to deny the importance of such sentences and look for other statements that are more essential to the thesis. Kuukkanen seems to accept this solution with the proviso that, just as ‘there is a vague line after which one can be regarded as bald, there is an indefinite limit after which one can be said to understand the historian’s message or meaning (...) I have suggested that holistic narrativism could be made plausible through such a distinction’ (Kuukkanen 2017, 102). However, this also implies some kind of essentialism, which can hardly be reconciled with constructivism. It would also be quite unacceptable from the perspective of narrativism (as such), especially that of Ankersmit. The most reasonable solution, escaping both the Scylla of history-as-an-argument and the Charybdis of essentialism, would be to understand narrative as a concretized thesis/claim/conclusion and, accordingly, to interpret the thesis (summary) of the book as an ideal, one-sentence model of the narrative. Or, as Roth suggests, to treat the narrative itself as a genuine explanation in the form of a developmental sequence (Roth 2017).

In other words, the whole narrative can be idealized (and in this way constructed) in the form of just a single sentence/claim. If so, it also

becomes possible to delineate a number of intermediate stages in this process. For example, it might be said that ‘the state of Qin became the first Chinese empire because of its social structure’; ‘the state of Qin became the first Chinese empire because of its social structure, which consisted of only two strata: soldiers and farmers’; ‘(...) and farmers, who due to Qin’s conquest of the fertile Sichuan region obtained more stable crops. ...’ etc. At some point in this example, it would become quite necessary to move forward with the argument to report *how* it was so. In this example, that may be done by mentioning some representative historic farmers who either suffered or benefited from the politics of the Qin state, and further by narrating their stories, describing their clothes and living conditions, and so on. In the case of reducing a history book to such a summary, however, it would be the reader who creates the summary for her or his own purpose. These purposes could be of a mnemonic, didactic, or polemic nature, which is paradoxically in line with Kuukkanen’s understanding of the ‘discursive dimension’ of histories, but that is not how he presents the term.

Notably, Ankersmit did not exclude such an understanding of the continuum between sentence and narrative either; rather it seems to be in complete agreement with the Leibnizian *lex continui* to which he often refers: ‘from the individual sentence to the narratio taken as a whole we do not come across very obvious breaks; metaphorically speaking, we wander through a continuous density’ (Ankersmit 1983, 37). This, of course, quickly becomes a problem with regard to how to explain the double movement that unfolds between the claim and the narrative. One of the solutions to this problem was proposed almost forty years ago by the main representative of the Poznań school of methodology, Leszek Nowak (1943–2009). Nowak developed a method of idealization and concretization, which has been applied to the analysis of historical works. The scope and topic of the present essay does not allow for further details, but the literature on that topic reveals that the task at least is manageable (Nowakowa 1990; Brzechczyn 2009, 2014).⁹

Finally, it becomes clear that what Kuukkanen misses with the so-called ‘thesis,’ is the fact that the thesis is ultimately an element constructed by the reader. It is possible not only to argue for a thesis, but also to inquire about it simply by asking: What is the thesis of this book? Often, this inquiry is not explicit, which again goes to show that the nature of historical writing does not lie in putting forward claims and arguing for them. For instance, what is the thesis of Norman Davies’ book *Europe*? And further, how can a 1,500-page book be summarized in a single sentence? Surprisingly, Kuukkanen seems to think that the thesis is somehow ‘there,’ on the historian’s side, because otherwise he could not invite the reader ‘to understand the historian’s message or meaning.’ The idea that there is some thesis a historian has in mind, which is then written down and dressed in the costume of a narrative, and which finally is successfully understood and

accepted by a reader, who thereby ‘enters’ the historian’s mind, is reminiscent of Dilthey, but not very much at all of the discussions that followed in the wake of hermeneutics and narrativism.

The fact that historical books primarily narrate events and only imitatively propose any thesis is equally clear from the perspective of the actual work or craft of the historian. The historian must commence the task by making a selection and interpretation of separate sources, attempting to connect them in a coherent, readable way. This is not to imply that historians write without any theses, that their narratives are chaotic, and that it is only owing to the reader (or, Heaven forbid, the reviewer) that they realize what they are writing about. However, even a superficial look at any classical history book shows that historians are patient enough to write thousands of pages in lieu of just a few lines of argument and that they are humble enough to let the narrated (constructed) events, and not themselves, argue to the reader. This could have been explained if it were not for the lack of reference to the auto-descriptions of historians, which are drawing increased attention in the theory of history (Paul 2014).

Conclusion

In view of the above, it is here argued that Kuukkanen is definitely a constructivist as well as a representationalist in the most fundamental sense of this word. Further, when taking his three kinds of holism into account, he must also be seen as a holist. If so, his endeavor must still be considered as falling within the ambit of narrativism even as he himself defines it. Consequently, Kuukkanen’s attempt to go beyond the ‘three tenets’ of narrativism ultimately proves unsuccessful.

Yet at the same time, Kuukkanen’s reconstruction of narrativism raises serious questions concerning its adequacy. The inadequacy is problematic for Kuukkanen’s main claim, stating that a history argues for a certain thesis, because it not only ignores a genuine narrativist insight as represented especially by Hayden White, but it also assumes some sort of essentialism and ‘isolation’ from the problems stemming from the relation between the reader and the narrative on the one hand, and between the historian and the narrative on the other. This inadequacy also concerns overall debate about narrativism, which too often takes criticism of narrativism as its goal and starting point. Perhaps, instead of aiming at dismissal of narrativism, we should try to understand it more deeply and develop those narrativist ideas that have been overlooked and have not found significant continuation. The way in which our present reception of narrativism is still poisoned by reducing it to some sort of textualism, allegedly neglecting the relation between a textual ‘interior’ on the one hand and an ethical and social ‘exterior’ on the other, is strictly connected with

tendencies towards essentialism and specific ‘isolationism,’ as shown by the example of Kuukkanen’s view. Essentialism, however out-of-date, may seem to defend us from ‘dissolving’ philosophical problems of interpreting history in an ocean of social factors. This leads to ‘extracting’ and isolating narrative from its relation to writer, reader, and their background. This assumption is shared by not only Kuukkanen, but also by such thinkers as Paul Roth, who by means of focus on ‘essentially narrative explanations’ attempt a revival of analytical philosophy of history. In fact, from a broader and less orthodox perspective, the difference between the idea of informal arguments contained in the narratives (Kuukkanen) and the concept of explanations in the form of a narrative (Roth) is more a matter of degree and terminology than a serious bone of contention.

As a result, from the viewpoint of narrativism, Kuukkanen’s project remains quite pre-narrativist at its core, all the more so because it is focused on the epistemic evaluation of sentences or concepts in history. However, this is not to suggest that Kuukkanen’s philosophy of historiography is misdirected and baseless. In fact, the extensive discussion that his book has already inspired is more than enough to prove the great value of his work. Rather, the point to be made here is simply that, for the reasons laid out in the present essay, Kuukkanen’s position cannot legitimately be called ‘post-narrativist.’ In fact, any such line of argument needs to be improved upon by confronting it exhaustively with narrativism and its legacy.

Notes

1. ‘The overarching thesis of *Time and Narrative* (...) is not that historians impose a narrative form on sets or sequences of real events that might just as legitimately be represented in some other, non-narrative discourse but that historical events possess the same structure as narrative discourse.’ (White 1991, 142).
2. ‘When, therefore, I spoke of history in an earlier lecture as a dialogue between past and present, I should rather have called it a dialogue between the events of the past and progressively emerging future ends. The historian’s interpretation of the past, his selection of the significant and the relevant, evolves with the progressive emergence of new goals.’ (Carr 1987, 123–124). For discussion of the passage, Jenkins (1995, 55–60).
3. Private correspondence with Paul Roth, 19.12.2017. Published with permission.
4. ‘The thesis that all statements expressing the properties of Nss are analytical is, perhaps, the most fundamental theorem in narrative logic.’ (Ankersmit 1983, 127).
5. Kuukkanen’s question, ‘Would a book about the Holocaust really bring the Holocaust to the reader?’, results from a misunderstanding (that is, ontologization) of representation.
6. While historical claims are not analytical, analyticity was mentioned by Kuukkanen as one of the constitutive, holistic features of historical

representation. With this being the case, his position is even closer to that of Ankersmit.

7. The ‘statements they contain are not their constituent parts but their properties’ (Ankersmit 1983, 94).
8. I restrict myself to framing this particular piece of narrative in terms of an aggregate of sentences in order to point out the insufficiency and inadequacy of Kuukkanen’s approach. I do not claim that narratives in general are such aggregates (that would be a ‘Windelbandist’ point of view). Narratives obviously contain different kinds of statements, including conditionals and even counterfactuals.
9. For a similar approach of searching for different strata of historical narrative yet one not derived from the method of idealization and concretization, see Topolski (1981).

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