

A Language-Game Justification for Narrative in Historical Explanation

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ABSTRACT

The problem of historical explanation consists in how historical facts are put together. No mere collection of facts constitutes an explanation: there must be some underlying explanation for why those facts occurred in the way they did. Many competing theories of historical explanation have thus been offered, from the highly technical D-N or covering law model, to narrative-based explanations. This paper exposes the flaws in the covering law model proposed by Carl Hempel, and offers a justification for narrative-based explanations by appealing to the notion of language games as used by Ludwig Wittgenstein, as well as the narrative and paradigm models of Arthur Danto and Thomas Kuhn for explaining historical events.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

The problem of historical explanation consists in how historical facts are put together. No mere collection of facts constitutes an explanation: there must be some underlying explanation for why those facts occurred in the way they did. Many competing theories of historical explanation have thus been offered, from the highly technical D-N or covering law model, which imitates the methods of explanation in “hard” scientific inquiry through a careful description of initial conditions and relevant laws and formulas, to narrative-based explanations, or explanations that use a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. This paper exposes the flaws in the covering law model proposed by Carl Hempel, and offers a justification for narrative-based explanations by appealing to the notion of language games as used by Ludwig Wittgenstein, as well as the narrative and paradigm models of Arthur Danto and Thomas Kuhn for explaining historical events. The aim of this project is to prevent scientific analysis being incorrectly applied to non-scientific entities, such as persons (e.g. Napoleon Bonaparte) and places (e.g. Russia) which are referenced in ordinary language, and which are in principle irreducible to the primary entities of the so-called “hard” sciences, such as subatomic particles and fundamental forces.

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1. Introduction

The “goal” of a historical account can be described as follows: to present a collection of facts concerning the past, *in addition* to an explanation connecting those facts. The notorious difficulty of this goal is in providing a justification for why one explanation was chosen over another. For example, the French Revolution began in 1789, King Louis XVI was executed in 1793, and Napoleon Bonaparte became emperor in 1804. These are historical facts, and yet they lack an *explanation* connecting them. No doubt such facts are a crucial and necessary part of history - it’s impossible to even imagine what “history” would look like as a discipline of explanation without any historical facts - and yet nobody from any discipline, even the natural sciences, would be satisfied with describing history as a *mere* collection of historical facts. Why was King Louis XVI executed four years after the French Revolution began? Were there any lawlike generalizations connecting the particulars of these events (e.g. covering laws), or is there something “un-lawlike” about a successful historical explanation of these particulars, which produces special insight or familiarity in order to suddenly *understand* the connection between these events (e.g. historical narrative)?

Many competing theories have been offered to justify certain types of explanation of historical events. In this paper, I will first argue that the “covering law” model of historical explanation proposed by Carl Hempel is flawed, since there can be no “general laws” of history that are analogous to “general laws” in the natural sciences. I will argue against the existence of these “general laws” of history by showing that “general laws” for the natural sciences serve a useful *function* in the natural sciences, unlike in history. Using Wittgenstein’s notion of language games in *Philosophical Investigations* as the source of what explanations are supposed to do, I will then explain why “general laws in history,” proposed by Hempel, is a nonsense phrase

(borrowed from the natural sciences) which has no function in the family of language games called “history.” Therefore, there exist no sensible “general laws” of history, and so they cannot be relied on to produce understanding in historical explanations.

I will also argue that historical narrative is a successful method of historical explanation, because historical explanations can only work by immersing a reader in the immense family of language games *of a historical period itself*. I will defend narrative by referring to Arthur Danto’s conception of narratives and why they work, as well as Wittgenstein’s notion of why explanations work, which is that they serve to remove or prevent a misunderstanding by providing a change that is *looked for* in a particular set of language games. For historical explanations in particular, I will argue that immersion in the language games of a historical era provides exactly what is *looked for* to remove the confusion or ignorance that a sought explanation should remove, and historical narratives do this uniquely well, since they mirror the language games we play in human life to understand individual human beings and their actions.

Finally, I will use Thomas Kuhn’s strategy for explaining scientific revolutions by immersing a reader in the “rules of normal science” as one example of historical explanation in the history of science, and why Kuhn thinks that Wittgenstein’s discussion of “family resemblances” explains how historians can even identify historical “eras” or “events” in the first place (or paradigms, for explaining scientific revolutions in particular). Thus, no lone collection of historical facts can produce in a person this mastery of language games of a historical period. This mastery must be learned by a person’s immersion in them, and the use of historical narrative is effective at this since narratives can present many language games at once from the *perspective* of the actors themselves, culminating in the feeling of understanding which any good historical explanation should produce.

2. Hempel's Covering Law

The “covering law” model of historical explanation was proposed by Carl Hempel in *The Function of General Laws in History* in 1942. Hempel's aim was to bring historical research under the same model of explanation as research in the natural sciences, a model in which all explanations must contain a description of the initial and boundary conditions ($C_1 \dots C_n$) of an event E, in addition to at least one “general law,” such that whenever events in the initial and boundary conditions occur ($C_1 \dots C_n$) in conjunction with at least one general law, the event E can be logically deduced. By “general law,” Hempel means “a statement of universal conditional form which is capable of being confirmed or disconfirmed by suitable empirical findings.” (Hempel, 1942, pg. 35). This system of explanation (also known as the D-N model) states that both *prediction* and *explanation* serve the same function, the only difference being that the event E to be predicted or explained will either occur in the future or has already occurred in the past, respectively. In *The Function of General Laws in History*, Hempel clearly states his goal:

“The following considerations are an attempt to substantiate this point by showing in some detail that general laws have quite analogous functions in history and in the natural sciences, that they form an indispensable instrument of historical research, and that they even constitute the common basis of various procedures which are often considered as characteristic of the social in contradistinction to the natural sciences.” (Hempel, 1942, pg. 35)

Hempel often uses “universal hypothesis” instead of “general law,” and for this paper, I will use the term “covering law” to mean the same thing, since the “covering law model of explanation” is the more popular, contemporary name for this model of explanation. In fact, since the covering law model was proposed, it has been popular among supporters of rational reconstruction and lawlike generalizations, such as philosophers, scientists, and social scientists (Patton 2014, 101). I will show why I believe this to be an unfortunate trend by showing why

Hempel's covering law model is a senseless one, borrowing the vocabulary of the natural sciences and misapplying it to history.

First, a satisfactory covering-law explanation of a physical event E in the natural sciences could go as follows: we need to explain the appearance of a rainbow, the event E, by stating the initial conditions $C_1 \dots C_n$ (such as the position of the sun, the density of water droplets in a particular region, the relative position of the viewer to the water droplets) in conjunction with general laws that govern these kinds of events (e.g. light reflects off of a spherical lens at a 42° angle opposite a light source, shorter wavelengths of lights will refract at higher angles according to the refractive index of water). From these initial conditions in conjunction with the relevant general laws, we can logically deduce the E, the appearance of a rainbow. The covering law model in historical explanation *supposedly* works the same way. We need to explain a historical event, for example, the execution of King Louis XVI in 1793. We state initial historical conditions, such as "the French Revolution occurred in 1789, such and such economic conditions were present, such and such people were angry," in addition to an endless myriad of *possibly-relevant* initial conditions, in conjunction with "general historical laws," yet what these "general historical laws" might be brings out the real difficulty for a covering law model for historical explanation. "General historical laws" seem, similar to the "initial historical conditions," much more numerous and difficult to identify than the relatively specific events and general laws of natural science.

Thus, I agree with Thomas Kuhn as he states in *The Relations between the History and the Philosophy of Science* that the covering law model of explanation is a "misfit in this application" to history; not only are historical laws mostly limited to the social sciences and economics, but they are often "obvious and dubious," such as "hungry men tend to riot," and do

not actually help us explain the event (Patton 2014, 101). Even when such a law does occasionally explain the specifics of an event, e.g., “wheat prices dropped at date D because wheat surpluses were unusually high, and an increase in supply tends to lower prices in a free market,” there is something vastly unsatisfying about words such as “tend to,” and brings our attention to the difficulty of articulating any general historical law that would fully explain any historical event *without exception*. Thus, I agree with Kuhn that

“if history is explanatory, that is not because its narratives are covered by general laws. Rather it is because the reader who says, “Now I know what happened,” is simultaneously saying, “Now it makes sense; now I understand; what was for me previously a mere list of facts has fallen into a recognizable pattern” (Patton 2014, 103)

Of course, there is something mysterious about this process of “sudden understanding” of an event, and it is precisely this mysteriousness that drives philosophers and scientists to give a “rational account” of how history should be written, hence the popularity of the entirely un-mysterious, empirical covering law model. However, while Kuhn’s system of paradigms, scientific revolutions, normal science, and paradigm-shifts in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* is insightful, Kuhn never actually dismantles the covering law model, since his explanations of scientific revolutions relies too heavily on his idea of “paradigm shifts” as a *consequence* of puzzle-solving utility within a scientific research tradition (Kuhn 144). The resulting fear, then, is that we have no reason to believe that puzzle-solving is the most trustworthy indicator of scientific truth. If the covering law model just so happens to solve many puzzles, but awaits no further revolution, then Kuhn’s is stuck with endorsing the covering law model as merely the reigning paradigm, and not necessarily a system which provides the best explanation for understanding events. Therefore, I will argue that narratives are not only necessary in order to dismantle the covering-law model, but in fact offer better explanations for

events in both history and science for the *same reason*, which is that narratives provide what is *actually being looked for* when we frame questions needing explanations in the first place.

3. Language Games and the Importance of Narrative in Explanation

In *Narration and Knowledge* (1985), Arthur Danto presents a view of narrative which rejects Hempel's "general laws" of history, and his discussion is useful for bringing out the main flaws in Hempel's account. For Danto, a narrative is a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end, and an explanation is simply the highlighting of a "change" taking place from the beginning to the end in this "middle" section, where the end has no connection to the beginning in "any obvious way" (Danto 233). Danto is careful to show that the beginning *and* the end of a story are part of the explanandum, or the thing to be explained. This might seem unusual, since for Hempel the explanandum, or the event E to be explained, such as the appearance of a rainbow, seems to stand alone. But Danto's point here is crucial to understanding a major flaw in Hempel's covering law account, which is that any event E which needs explaining, the explanandum, is always presented in a context where confusion or ignorance demands an explanation in the first place. Even Danto uses the phrase "any obvious way" to highlight this, since once an account of change is already present, there exists no need for an explanation. Danto gives the example of a dented car. To demand an explanation for a dent is to demand an explanation of a *change*, namely that there was a time T_1 when the car was not dented, and then at T_3 the car is dented. To demand an explanation is merely to give an account of what happened at T_2 , to provide the change *that is looked for* (Danto 233). However, to demand a change at all is already to indicate confusion or ignorance. Either the way we've set up this change is wrong (the car was dented all along, even in the beginning), or we are ignorant about what steps happened in

the middle. Danto only focuses on this latter step to defend narrative, but he might expand his point to a greater one, which is that a narrative reveals our confusion or ignorance and *corrects* it. In many ways this point about narratives and why they are explanatory, unlike Hempel's covering law model, with its neat "event E's" and general laws, lines up with what Wittgenstein was aiming for in his later works.

Wittgenstein mentions in *Philosophical Investigations* that "one might say: an explanation serves to remove or prevent a misunderstanding – one, that is, that would arise if not for the explanation, but not every misunderstanding that I can imagine" (PI 45). Interestingly, Wittgenstein states this while discussing doubts about what exactly "Moses" refers to, or "Egypt" and the "Israelites," which is rather convenient, since Wittgenstein's views on explanations here are not simply taken out of a purely abstract context. Rather, Wittgenstein was talking about explanations of many kinds, including historical ones, and I argue that Hempel's covering law model is a failed attempt to provide explanations to remove the confusion or misunderstanding that Wittgenstein refers to, since Hempel takes "general laws" out of its native set of language games, the natural sciences (where it serves a function), and misapplies it to the set of language games of history (where it has no function).¹

¹ By "language games," I mean any set of understood rules and symbols which can, in principle, be learned and used for the purpose of communication. Wittgenstein doesn't give a definition of language games, precisely because of the point he was trying to make in *Philosophical Investigations*, which is that a word only *means* anything in the context (i.e. language game) of its use. This definition of "language games" might be too narrow or broad or inaccurate depending on the language game it is used in, but the definition I have given is, hopefully, the simplest and clearest one.

Hempel's paradigmatic science, physics, indeed operates mostly on hypotheses and explanations with very convenient, reducible events and subjects. Explanations concerning atoms and electromagnetic forces work very well within the covering law model, simply because there is less confusion about what needs explaining in the first place. Hempel states that a general law is "a statement of universal conditional form which is capable of being confirmed or

disconfirmed by suitable empirical findings” (Hempel, 1942, pg. 35). It is precisely because general laws are derived from “suitable empirical findings” that they are so difficult to find in history: history is not as empirical as physics, and its subject matter is too complex to derive any general laws. I argue both claims for the same reason, which is that history always involve irreducible subjects, such as people, countries, wars, ruling bodies, laws, technological advances, economic trends, etc. Thus, because irreducible subjects are understood in their own context, or language game, without any respect to the language games of the natural sciences, we should neither expect history to be empirical nor have general laws, because those are expectations *exclusive* to natural science: they originated out of the language games of natural science, and only make sense according to the rules of those language games.

In other words, the way we normally talk about people and countries in ordinary life involves no reference to reducible entities or general laws, so why should we expect to find them amongst the *very same* entities (e.g. Napoleon Bonaparte, Russia, etc.) in historical accounts? The answer is that we shouldn't, unless we've found a way talk about these entities in such a way that *does* conform to a reducible, natural-science model (e.g. Napoleon Bonaparte as a continuous, spatiotemporal collection of atoms starting at t_0 and ending at t_1). Such a strategy, however, would be doomed to failure, as all interesting historical questions vanish at the level of atoms and fundamental forces, or else it's impossibly-complex to unpack this “atom speak” back into ordinary-language, assuming that we even *did* possess complete information concerning all of the atoms during a historical period. However, Hempel, in striving to unify prediction and explanation under one covering model, needed a tool in order to make history a proper science, and he chose “general laws” as his tool, though it belongs only to the language games of natural science for the purpose of scientific explanations.

Historical explanations, on the other hand, involve entities such as actors, places, and events which, as we have just seen, are obviously not as reducible as atoms and fundamental forces. But what *isn't* so obvious, as Danto would observe, is how we should even frame a historical change in the first place. What do we even mean by the question “Why did Napoleon’s invasion of Russia fail?” It entirely depends on who is asking the question and what they have in mind, or what they are *looking for* in an explanation. For the answer might be simple or complex, personal or cultural, economic or geographic, tactical or strategic, or even nonexistent from a person who denies Napoleon lost, all depending on the language game being played *when* the question is asked, as well as the form of the confusion, ignorance, or misunderstanding in the person demanding an explanation in the first place. For example, perhaps the confusion or ignorance a person has when asking “why Napoleon lost” is complex: they know very little about Napoleon and need several perspectives across different language games, from Napoleon’s personal history, to economics and politics of the time, to adequately remove or prevent their confusion about “why Napoleon lost.” Or perhaps the confusion is simple: they just want to know if Napoleon lost because of a tactical error during an important battle, within the language game of battlefield tactics.

The fact that narratives can provide many different such perspectives at once makes it conveniently suited to removing the confusion or ignorance that explanations are supposed to remove, and I argue that this is no coincidence. There is something fundamentally important about narrative which make it an ideal candidate as a model explanation, which is that they mirror the way *most language games are played in human life*. That is, narratives themselves are capable of moving back and forth between different language games (such as physics, folk psychology, politics, and conversation about daily life), just as human beings are capable of

moving back and forth between them. Thus, if confusion about a topic has its *origin* in a particular set of language games, then that set of language games must be played in order to remove the confusion, and narratives do this uniquely well. Alasdair MacIntyre wrote about the unique importance of narrative in *After Virtue* (1981), stating that:

“in successfully identifying and understanding what someone else is doing we always move towards placing a particular episode in the context of a set of narrative histories, histories both of the individuals concerned and of the settings in which they act and suffer. . . . We render the actions of others intelligible in this way because action itself has a basically historical character. It is because we all live out narratives in our own lives and because we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives that we live out that the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others,” (MacIntyre, 211).

This is a perfect example of the importance of narrative, since it shows that narrative-making is a *fundamental aspect* of the language games we play when we discuss the actions of individual human beings in an intelligible way. Thus, if we understand our own actions and lives through narrative, then it should come as no surprise that any explanation which involves human beings and their actions must also involve narrative to some extent. To understand if and how the actions of Napoleon the *person* had any major effect on the outcome of his invasion of Russia, a historical explanation must involve a narrative, since it is only through narrative that we can render individual persons and places, such as “Napoleon” and “Russia” as continuous, intelligible entities.

4. The Problem of Writing a Narrative

However, even assuming that narratives do play a special role in explanation, a major objection to using narratives remains: just how does a historian write a good narrative? There seems to be no “rational” or “scientific” principles guiding the historian in writing this narrative, and in fact the historian’s method in writing it seems *just as mysterious* as this “feeling of sudden

understanding” which Kuhn thinks is the standard of explanation. It is as if the historian requires some “special” insight into a time period in order to write an explanatory narrative which *cannot* involve a careful, rational use of facts and general, lawlike principles, such as Hempel’s “general laws” of history. Furthermore, even if historical narratives themselves do not appeal to “general laws” of history, but rather present an immersive set of language games from the perspective of historical actors, it seems that *historians* actually writing successful narratives (with which readers can say “now I know what happened”) are somehow able to consistently focus on the aspects of the historical events that lead to a reader’s “sudden understanding.” Thus, there is still room for an attack to be made on the historical narrative by asking “What do all historians have in common when they write a successful historical narrative?” and “What sort of seemingly-rational process occurs when a historian decides to emphasize relatively few, specific aspects of a historical event, out of an endless myriad of facts and concepts, which consistently lead to sudden historical understanding in the reader?” I will use Thomas Kuhn’s solution to a similar problem that he presents in explaining scientific revolutions through paradigms.

In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn discusses what scientific paradigms are in order to explain what is going on when historians write successful narratives, and how a rational account of their narrative-*writing* is as unnecessary and impossible as a rational account of historical narratives themselves. First, Kuhn mentions a very old problem in philosophy, which is the problem of determining what is meant by simple concepts such as “leaf” or “game.” That is, in order to understand a concept such as “game,” we must “grasp some set of attributes that all games and that only games have in common” (Kuhn 1962, 45). Kuhn himself then appeals to Wittgenstein’s solution to this problem, which states that a set of all such essential attributes is unnecessary, because even though some finite set of specific games might

share specific attributes, this does not mean all games contain those attributes. The games merely share a *family resemblance*, and all simple concepts such as “games, and chairs, and leaves are natural families, each constituted by a network of overlapping and crisscross resemblances” (Kuhn 45).

What Kuhn proceeds to show from this argument is crucial to understanding how historical narrative-writing cannot and *should not* be rationally-reconstructable from lawlike generalizations and principles. Kuhn makes an analogy, stating that just as simple concepts may not be construed as sets of fully discoverable attributes and rules, *neither can scientific traditions*. Scientific traditions are characterized by “severe difficulty of discovering the rules that have guided particular normal-scientific traditions. That difficulty is very nearly the same as the one the philosopher encounters when he tries to say what all games have in common,” and furthermore, most importantly, “Scientists, it should already be clear, never learn concepts, laws, and theories in the abstract and by themselves. Instead, these intellectual tools are from the start encountered in a historically and pedagogically prior unit that displays them with and through their applications” (Kuhn 46). The key phrase Kuhn uses here is *encountered in a historically and pedagogically prior unit*. He is arguing that scientific research traditions, and their vocabularies, theories, and laws, cannot be separated from their *displayed use in practice* throughout that particular historical and pedagogical context, i.e. the context in which professors, scientists, and other intellectuals exchange ideas by using the sets of particular vocabularies and conceptual tools – Wittgenstein would call them language games - which dominate that time period and discipline.

This is a crucial point, and one which can finally explain how historians can consistently write historical narratives which produce a feeling of “sudden understanding” in the reader

without appealing to rationally-derived, lawlike generalizations such as “hungry men tend to riot.” All we have to do is broaden Kuhn’s point about the scientific traditions to include not just scientific traditions, but *general historical eras*. That is, if scientific traditions are characterized by their difficulty in identifying a full set of clear rules, as well complex and idiosyncratic vocabularies, conceptual tools, etc., which concern the popular scientific problems within that scientific tradition, then *so too* are general time periods. Only instead of a “full set of clear rules,” we might instead say a general time period is characterized by its difficulty in identifying *a full set of the explanatory language games* which all share a family resemblance within that time period (since human cultures do not exactly follow “rules” in the same way scientists are thought to during “normal science” periods). This set of explanatory language games which belong to a particular historical era might include, for example, the spoken languages, dialects, culture, legal system, politics, major personalities, economics, meteorology, geography, history, philosophy, conceptual tools across cultures, etc., which concern, instead of popular scientific problems, *popular cultural, national, or global circumstances*. The reason that the perspective of the historical actors themselves is important is because only it can convey which explanatory language games (e.g. economics, politics, agriculture, etc.) are connected to *the event being explained*, and *how are they are supposed to explain that event*. However, this is not to say that the language games of the time period are *exclusively* explanatory; rather, they supplement modern, more recent language games that provide tools for handling previously misunderstood phenomena. If, for example, we are trying to make sense of a religious account of some celestial phenomenon many centuries ago, but modern astronomy tells us that a supernova happened at the time, then we may recognize that two different language games can, in this instance, intersect on some real-world event by describing it from two different perspectives. These language

games have supplemented each other to give us a richer picture of the past, *without* privileging the astronomical perspective as the “real” or “actual” one; rather, they’ve reconciled previously-mysterious historical data (e.g. religious descriptions of the celestial event) with new technology and astronomical language to make us “suddenly understand” that two different pieces of data originate from the same entity, spoken about in two different ways.

Thus, on this view, we are finally in a position to justify how a historian can write a historical narrative which successfully produces “sudden understanding” in the reader. Going back to the original example: *Why* was King Louis XVI executed four years after the French Revolution began? If a historian were to write a successful narrative which explained this event, the historian would have to do more than arrange a chronological set of facts, diaries, newspapers, etc. What the historian must do then, similar to Kuhn’s strategy for explaining paradigm shifts and scientific revolutions, is to immerse the reader in a robust description of the language games of the late 18th century, as well as a robust description of the popular circumstances *that would be explanatory to the historical actors themselves* during the late 18th century. Such circumstances might include, for example, the cultural perception of King Louis XVI within France, important events and images (e.g. political cartoons) that were floating around during this time, economic conditions in and around Paris as well as a description of how “economics” was understood, different cultural factions in Paris and their perceptions of rival cultural factions, and “cultural factions” would have been conceived, etc.

However, a question remains: how does a historian know which sorts of facts, events, and concepts to emphasize in the narrative? Wittgenstein’s family resemblances are very helpful here, since the only “special insight” the historian needs in order to write a successful historical explanation is a mastery of the language games of the time period which would permit him to

recognize *just those language games which would be explanatory for an actor at that time*. For example, German economics and a rise in nationalism in the 1930s, the Great Depression, the history and theory of jazz, the causes of prohibition in the United States, Hitler's personal biography and philosophy, and the biography of Ernest Hemingway, are all language games, some narrow and some broad, which share a family resemblance in that they focus on the general time period of the 20's and 30's. But which particular language games among them, and others from that time period, best explain the imminent outbreak of World War II? A historian, already a master of the language games of a particular era, should already be able to recognize which particular language games in that time period are explanatory for a given event. After the historian can recognize the characteristic language games of a general time period, the only work left is the actual writing process of putting-on-paper an immersive description of *just those* language games which the historian recognizes as explanatory, or understanding-producing, so that the readers *themselves* can learn to recognize the language games which were used at the time. This way of writing history is bound to be unsatisfying - as it was to Hempel - since it forever leaves open the possibility of missing the mark of what *really* happened, or else being biased in whatever way the idiosyncrasies of a historian influence his or her "emphasis" on some language games or other. However, this particular problem is not exclusive to history. It exists in modern journalism, daily news, predicting the weather, and in any field which attempts to distill an intelligible narrative out of endless facts. This might even be a philosophical problem about human communication, and whether or not any single person can convey a *simple* event to another person as it really happened. However, insofar as this is not a history-exclusive problem, I'm not attempting to solve it here. I'm only objecting to the way in which Hempel tried to characterize history without its necessarily irreducible and narrative elements, which can only be

understood through immersion in language games deemed explanatory by experts on those particular language games – historians themselves.

A perfect example of this immersive process leading to understanding can be found in *What Are Scientific Revolutions?* by none other than Kuhn himself (1987), in which Kuhn describes his “sudden understanding” of Aristotelian physics:

“I could easily believe that Aristotle had stumbled, but not that, on entering physics, he had totally collapsed. Might not the fault be mine rather than Aristotle’s, I asked myself. Perhaps his words had not always meant to him and his contemporaries quite what they meant to me and mine. Feeling that way I continued to puzzle over the text, and my suspicions proved well-founded. [...] Suddenly the fragments in my head sorted themselves out in a new way, and fell into place together. My jaw dropped, for all at once Aristotle seemed a very good physicist indeed, but of a sort I’d never dreamed possible” (Patton 2014, 74).

Kuhn’s example is limited to scientific understanding, but it is easy to imagine an analogous example in historical understanding; if two historians have different approaches to explaining a historical event, for example with one focusing on an economic cause, and the other focusing on a political cause, then the likely cause of their difference is *just that* their approaches are different: they are emphasizing the importance of particular language games. Which approach is “correct,” or which explanation is “justified,” is an enigma, and specific to each case, since the intelligible entities of history are irreducible and enigmatic as the language games from which they originate. Each historian must *convince* the other, or the reader, that his or her explanation’s particular emphasis on certain language games (e.g. economics or politics) is justified, or more representative of what really happened. The result of disagreement among historians, then, might be explained by the mere difference of exposure to different language games.

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