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Trust, Testimony, and the Epistemic Value of Historical Narrative

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Abstract

A significant contribution of narrativist philosophy of history (whether analytical, phenomenological, or poststructuralist) lies in its critique of relying solely on "strictly" epistemic criteria to evaluate historical narratives. Rather than assessing them based on empirical evidence alone, which is often seen as neutral and value-free, narrativism calls for a broader perspective. This is because no description of people and their behavior can be value-neutral. Narrativism thus aligns with constructivist theories of linguistic meaning, linked to the "linguistic turn." I propose a dialogue between narrativism and the epistemology of testimony. By adopting the latter's concepts (trust, authority, and epistemic community), narrativism can 1) reconstruct practices of epistemic validation in history and 2) address the historian's responsibility to marginalized voices. Simultaneously, I argue that the epistemology of testimony should engage with narrativism to better understand the complexity of narrative constructions in epistemic communities.

Keywords

Epistemology, Narrativism, Testimony

Introduction

One of the key contributions of the narrativist philosophy of history (in its three branches: analytical, phenomenological, and poststructuralist) is its emphasis on the limitations of relying solely on "strictly" epistemic considerations to evaluate historical narratives. Rather than assessing narratives based only on their compatibility with empirical evidence, which is often perceived as theoretically neutral and devoid of moral values, narrativism urges a broader perspective. This is because, on the one hand, there is no value-neutral or literal way to describe or classify people and their behavior. On the other hand, following Ian Hacking (1995), there is the "looping effect" between the kinds of people and the people classified. That is one reason why narrativism found an important ally in various constructivist theories of linguistic meaning (what is generally, and somewhat vaguely, referred to as the "linguistic turn").[1] In other words, narrativists, without denying the relevance of evidential evaluation, have expanded the criteria by appealing to a phenomenological notion of temporal experience as the ultimate referent of narrative, either in terms of a non-naive sense of aesthetics, or in ethical and moral terms.[2] In fact, narrativism has undeniably facilitated a sincere "ethical turn" within the discipline, giving rise to what Paul Roth has called the "epistemic intractability" of historical narrative.[3] In general, narrativist theorists, almost without exception, have both acknowledged and contributed to pointing out the limitations of an epistemology traditionally conceived in terms of the natural sciences. However, the narrativist who is often seen as the most emphatic advocate for the irrelevance of epistemology in determining the acceptance of narratives is Hayden White.

On this occasion, I pursue a twofold purpose. On the one hand, my first objective is to acknowledge that the principal disputes in academia and in the public sphere regarding the

1 On the relation between narrativism and constructivism see Roth (2020), Akker (2018), Tozzi Thompson (2021), Kuukkanen (2015), Pihlainen (2017), La Greca (2021).

2 This has been appreciated by its most important referents. Paul Ricoeur (1983) and David Carr (1986) appealed to a phenomenological notion of temporal experience as the ultimate referent of narrative. Frank Ankersmit (2001), without denying the relevance of evidential evaluation to the basic statement, considered the criteria of narrative evaluation in aesthetic terms or the language of art. Chiel van den Akker (2018), inspired by Ankersmit and Goodman, maintains that a historical narrative expresses a historical thesis, and "historical theses, [...] are *exemplified* rather than being *justified* by the available evidence" (p. 18). A historical thesis cannot be confirmed or disconfirmed by empirical evidence, "yet such thesis has become concrete in the past under consideration, is credible, and can be *taken* to be true in the sense that it is our best *guide* to the past present at hand" (p. 18).

3 Roth acknowledges the widespread use of narratives across various disciplines: social, political, cultural history, the history of science and the history of philosophy. However, he poses a fundamental philosophical question: "whether this habit (using narrative) is to be tolerated or condemned" (2020, p. 22). Building upon and radicalizing the works of Arthur Danto and Louis Mink on the narrative structuring of the past, he elucidates those features that would complicate epistemic validation. However, Roth himself emphasizes that such a conclusion stems from a very limited consideration of "epistemic validation".

acceptability of narratives about the past continue to be in terms of epistemic values, that is, trust, truth in relation to facts, evidence or reality itself (as exemplified by post-truth and fake news phenomena). However, in these discussions, I detect the persistent circulation of certain notions of "truth", "science" and "epistemology", already questioned and/or totally challenged during the 20th century. This necessitates clarification of what is meant by "epistemology" and "epistemic validity," encouraging us to investigate recent approaches in the field, focusing in particular on interpersonal epistemology of testimony. That is, what is needed is a philosophical approach that explores the extent to which the epistemic evaluation of our factual, theoretical, and narrative accounts is framed in terms of notions of authority, trust, and cognitive or epistemic responsibility embedded within an epistemic community that recognizes or shares an identity narrative. This will lead to a philosophical inquiry into what it means for a person to believe in others, in their words, and to be believed by them. In other words, it is necessary to investigate what is involved in being or not being recognized as an epistemic agent by the community and being a victim or perpetrator of epistemic injustice. On the other hand, my second objective is to counter (or at least to attenuate) a kind of reading of White's work as part of an anti-epistemological drift in the Narrativist Philosophy of History.[4]

My personal interpretation of White's legacy aims to demonstrate that his theses explicitly critique professional historians' use of an outdated epistemological framework. However, in deploying criteria for the acceptance or rejection of narratives, he employs a vocabulary akin to the recent epistemology of testimony, explicitly referencing concepts such as trust, authority, cognitive responsibility, and implicitly (or in a precursor sense) epistemic injustice. In a series of articles on "historical system" and its connection with Erich Auerbach's "figural realism", White sheds light on the history of our disciplinary conception of "retrospective understanding of history" (White, 2000, 2010 y 2022). In particular, he asserts that adopting an epistemological perspective in the present to address past events implies a choice of previous perspectives about such events as precursors of one's own. However, he warns that "this election based on this presumed epistemic advantage at the same time exalts an entity preceding it as its own precursor

4 I am not saying that White or some of his readers consider his thought as implying that anything goes, but at least all of them imply that epistemic evaluation is subordinated to moral or aesthetic questions. In fact, the titles of Robert Doran's two collections of White articles not included in the books edited by White himself, The Fiction of Narrative (2010) and The Ethics of Narrative (2022), support this way of reading his work. On the other hand, I need to say that Doran is one of the best readers of White's work, for he understood that White never denied the cognitive dimension of historical discourse; at the same time, Doran's two collections helped to document White's concern for the ethics of historical writing. On Hayden White and Ethics issues in historical research, see Doran 2017. La Greca 2021 presents a recent approach to this ethics turn in theory of history.

and derogates it as an imperfect or partial or incomplete protomorph of itself" (White, 2022, p. 85).

Although these Whitean considerations are explicitly aimed at raising the unassailable ethical question when evaluating competing narratives, I maintain that if there is any harm here it is epistemic: if the derogation of my predecessors implies harm, it is an epistemic harm, and the chosen precursor is deprived of her epistemic authority.

As I hope to have shown by the end of the article, I propose a dialogue between narrativism and the epistemology of testimony. On one hand, I advance a narrativist philosophy of history that draws on the conceptual toolkit of the epistemology of testimony (trust, authority, and epistemic community) in order to 1) reconstruct practices of epistemic validation within disciplinary history, and 2) provide an appropriate framework for addressing the historian's responsibility to voices or perspectives excluded from historical-academic narratives or dominant social histories. On the other hand, I argue that the epistemology of testimony should dialogue with narrativism to become linguistically self-aware about the complexity and opacity of the narrative configurations that constitute the identity of epistemic communities.

In the first section, I address the challenges of reaching consensus on historical descriptions and the specific contributions of Hayden White. The second section presents the essentials of the epistemology of testimony from an interpersonal perspective. The third section revisits Hayden White's reflections on 'figurative realism' as a precursor to the epistemology of testimony. In fourth section , I propose what I consider to be the epistemic value of narratives about the past.[5]

I. The Complexities of Factual Description and White's intellectual Legacy for Epistemology and the Philosophy of History

In relation to contemporary debates in epistemology and the epistemology of history, it is undeniable that Hayden White has argued against the claim that the justification of historical narratives can be resolved in terms of objective documentary evidence that is evaluatively neutral and free of aesthetic figurations. His aim has been to highlight the complexities of disputes about the past, where epistemic, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions are at stake (White, 1973). As White himself and many of his readers (such as Butler, Doran, Kellner, and myself, to name a few)

5 My notion of historical narrative aligns with the classical positions of Hayden White and Paul Ricoeur, as they explicitly engage with the issues of language and literary theory. I also share affinities with Kellner, Roth, Akker and La Greca in particular. I worked on the thoughts of these authors in Tozzi Thompson 2023, 2021, 2018b, Tozzi 2014.

have emphasized repeatedly , this does not imply skepticism about knowledge of the past or the promotion of an "anything goes" relativism or anti-rationalism. It has, however, favored an appreciation of his work as anti-epistemological.

For the purposes of this article, which revolves around the possibility of not giving up on an epistemic evaluation of historical narratives, I want to focus on those of White's contributions where he has provided arguments and reflections in favor of two philosophical theses. These theses demonstrate the limitations of a specifc conception of epistemology and enable a dialogue with contemporary approaches within the discipline. The first thesis presents a constructivist account of historical language. The second one argues that historical controversies about the past are disputes about epistemic authority. While I will analyze each thesis separately in detail, it is important to clarify that they are closely connected. Both indicate that when accepting descriptions of human behavior (past or present), we must be aware of the lack of fixedness, or, in other words, recognize the disputability, of the concepts and classifications (of person or action) that constitute such descriptions. Therefore, the epistemology of historiographical research has to pay attention to the constitution of communal epistemic agreements around these concepts, as well as the social implications that the use and social circulation of these concepts may entail. Let's examine the first thesis, as it is the better known of the two and the primary reason for which Hayden White has been criticized.

In both "The Burden of History" 1966, and "The Historical Event" 2008, White criticizes historians' uncritical use of notions such as "event" and "fact", as if they were unproblematic. Moreover, in line with developments in the philosophy of science of the second half of the 20th century, White is surprised that historians continue to ignore "the discovery of the common constructivist character of both artistic and scientific statements" (White, 1978, 28). In saying this, White is referring to the anti-positivist philosopher of science, Karl Popper. It is therefore worth revisiting Popper's arguments concerning the epistemic status of basic statements or propositions of fact that form the empirical basis of science. These statements are used to empirically test scientific hypotheses and theories through a procedure governed by logical rules. Moreover, basic statements must be empirically corroborated in order to fulfill their function. Now, a basic statement, for example "Here is a glass of water", uses *universal* concepts which cannot be correlated with any specific sense-experience. "By the word 'glass', for example, we denote physical bodies which exhibit a certain *law-like behavior*, and the same holds for the word 'water'" (Popper, 2002, p. 76). Therefore, basic statements are fallible and falsifiable like theoretical sentences, and, Popper also explains, their validity depends on being contrasted with other basic statements themselves. However, in order to avoid falling into an infinite regress, the community

may decide to provisionally accept non-problematic basic statements so that they can perform their function of contrasting scientific theories under discussion. "Basic statements are accepted as the result of a decision or agreement; and to that extent they are conventions. The decisions are reached in accordance with a procedure governed by rules" (Popper, 2002, p. 88).[6] Let's retain two assertions from Popper's writings: the use of universal concepts to describe empirical singular events, and the epistemic decision-making about such statements based on community agreement within the scientific community. These will be relevant to our topic.

When we address the problem of what constitutes a historical event and the conditions for accurately describing it, difficulties arise concerning the general concepts used by historians and social scientists to talk about the people and their actions involved in those events. White's specific contribution to the peculiarities of historical description revolves around questioning the sharp distinction between literal language and figurative language. I will return to this shortly. However, it is crucial to appreciate White's account as another step in the long history of reflection on this topic since the 19th century.

A first consideration notes that, like descriptions of natural events, descriptions of social and historical events denote specific events in some space-time coordinate system. However, as a social or humanistic discipline, historical research deals with collective and individual human actions (praying, greeting, buying, murdering, demonstrations, revolutions, wars, etcetera), which, unlike mere events (tides, eclipses), are described and understood in terms of meanings, interests, reasons, motives, goals, desires to act, that is, in terms of "intentionality". The intentional vocabulary involves normativity, and consequently, it complicates the sharp distinction between description and evaluation (Ricoeur, 1983).

An additional consideration arises in relation to the application of the adjective "historical", since we are not simply referring to something that happened in the past, but rather we are describing the event after its occurrence, from a perspective external to, or even inaccessible to, for its protagonists, and in terms of its (the event's) relation to other subsequent or previous events. Arthur Danto (1962) introduced the expression "narrative sentences" to provide a precise

6 For Popper, what distinguishes or demarcates a scientific discourse from a non-scientific one is that all scientific statements (theoretical or empirical) are fallible and falsifiable. "Science does not rest upon solid bedrock. The bold structure of its theories rises, as it were, above a swamp. It is like a building erected on piles...if we stop driving the 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" (Popper, 2002, 95). "I admit, again, that the decision to accept a basic statement, and to be satisfied with it, is causally connected with our experiences— especially with our perceptual experiences. But we do not attempt to justify basic statements by these experiences. Experiences can motivate a decision, and hence an acceptance or a rejection of a statement, but a basic statement cannot be justified by them—no more than by thumping the table" (Popper, 2002, 87-88).

account of historical language. Louis Mink (1987) went beyond Danto and claimed that narrative sentences express not only a temporal but also a conceptual asymmetry. The concepts that inform our (present) understanding of past events are or can be different from the concepts involved in the agents' understanding of what they were doing. From here, we derive one fundamental consequence: "New concepts and newly acquired sensibilities may motivate us to re-describe past actions" (Akker, 2018, p. 2). These descriptions and redescriptions are integrated within a conceptual framework ("narrative configuration"). For this reason, the presumption of events without descriptions as the basis of historical knowledge is not tenable (Mink, 1987, Akker, 2018, and Roth 2020).

The problem of what a historical event is and what its adequate description would be is further complicated by paying attention to social studies of memory. To the extent that the way people organize their personal or social memories is constitutive of their identity, agents' descriptions of their own present would also be "narrative sentences". But, on the other hand, even historians' reconstructions of the past are carried out in terms of conceptual frameworks informed by their affectionate community of group membership.

One of the main contributions (if not the main contribution) White has made to this exploration of the complexities of describing past events can be explicitly found condensed in "Literary Theory and Historical Writing" (1999). In this text, White emphasizes the importance of literary theory for its critical thematization of the traditional distinction between form and content in historical discourse. This distinction positions facts as the body of historical discourse and style as its clothing (1999, p. 4). Similarly, White problematizes the literal-figurative distinction, arguing that if an analyst of historical discourse were to attempt to strip away forms or styles, they would become ensnared in the effort to adhere to an impossible literalism. In contrast, modern literary theory enables "the analyst of historical discourse to perceive the extent to which it [historical discourse] constructs its subject matter in the very process of speaking about it" (White, 1999, p. 4).

Let's return to the beginning of this section. Popper emphasized the "lack of fixity" or fragility of basic statements because they use universal concepts to speak about singular empirical events. Ian Hacking (1995 and 1999), for his part, encapsulates all the complexities of description in social and historical discourse with his notion of "interactive kinds", noting that we use concepts which classify people, "kinds of people" (worker, slave, criminal, homosexual, autistic, child abuser, author, Zulu, child viewer, genius, anorexic), and that the use of these classifications interacts with the people to whom such concepts are applied. Perhaps people recognize and accept the classification and consider themselves as belonging to it, or they reject

the classification altogether. And, Hacking continues, people concepts, practices, and people interact with each other (p. 31). All our actions are subject to descriptions, and the actions we can carry out depend, in a purely formal sense, on the descriptions available to us. Moreover, classifications do not exist solely in the empty space of language but in institutions, practices, material interactions with things, and with other people (p. 34). People have knowledge of what is said about them, what is thought about them, and what is done with them. They think about themselves and conceptualize themselves (p. 34). The classifications of the social sciences are interactive, whereas the classifications and concepts of the natural sciences are not (p. 35).

All these critical considerations about what is involved in describing past actions and events call into question belief in a fixed past (or in past events without description) as the foundation of historical knowledge. However, it is extremely important to make it clear that, according to my reasoning, it does not follow from this that historical descriptions cannot be epistemically evaluated. On the contrary, it underscores the unavoidably retrospective nature of historical knowledge, where the criteria for justifying descriptions are dictated by the historian's present. This present also underpins conceptual disagreements about kinds of people and the legitimacy of their application. And the legitimacy of classifications is not the exclusive authority of historiography. The discipline is frequently challenged by the broader community in the same way that historiography itself challenges certain conceptions in the public sphere.[7] This leads us to White's second thesis: historical controversies about the past are disputes about authority. Who is guaranteed to give reliable accounts of the past? White has bequeathed us notions such as "the burden of history", "modernist event", and "practical past", whose power and relevance for cultural criticism and the analysis of present times is undeniable. But these notions also have a critical function of certain presuppositions of the disciplinary historiographical practice. In other words, historians usually claim to hold epistemic authority over the historical past because they only follow the rules of evidence and hold the advantage of a retrospective view. White finds an ethically questionable attitude in this claim by historians. I will attempt to analyze it in terms of the epistemology of testimony. But before delving into these reflections in depth, let me introduce some substantive considerations of this approach.

7 La Greca (2013, 2014, 2016) has pursued a performative interpretation of Hayden White's insights on history, narrativity, and language from the point of view of Austin's speech act theory and Judith Butler's performativity theory. This performative approach to narrativity makes possible an adequate understanding of the challenges that feminism has posed to academic narratives and it is compatible with the performative approach to testimony of Martin Kusch (2009).

II. The Essentials of the Epistemology of Testimony

The epistemology of testimony is the branch of epistemology that studies the possibility of justifying our beliefs in the external world, other minds, oneself, or the past, based on taking another's word for things (whether in daily life or in science). The relevance of the epistemology of testimony lies in the realization that, whether in social life or in professional or academic life, we know very few things from our own experience or reasoning. Almost everything we know about everyday occurrences, history, science, our families or even ourselves (such as our early childhood), we know because we have been told it in spoken or written words - by historians, scientists, friends, relatives, teachers, and so on, whom we trust and treat as authorities on these matters. As a result, the question of justifying knowledge acquired from the word of others (second-hand knowledge) arises. The dispute centers on who bears epistemic responsibility for assertions or beliefs, the witness or the believer, the speaker or the audience? According to Benjamin McMyler (2011), there are two alternatives. One is to continue the legacy of modern epistemology and its Cartesian ideal of the individual´s epistemic autonomy, that is, an ahistorical and asocial account of a human being, who follows her own reason or experience and doubts others' words, teachings, and reports. Individual subjects are epistemically responsible for their own beliefs. The other, largely the result of developments from the late 20th century in social epistemology, sociology of knowledge, feminist epistemology, and the social history of science, the very notion of knowledge ceases to be regarded as a phenomenon detached from its social context of production, and instead is appreciated as a collective good, collectively produced and reproduced (Kusch, 2008), "In securing our knowledge we rely upon others, and we cannot dispense with that reliance" (Shapin, 1994, p. XV).

The question of the place of testimony in the production of historical knowledge has been addressed in historiography and the theory of history in accordance with the ideal of epistemic autonomy 1) in analogy or connection with the evaluation of evidence (observational or experimental) in any science, and 2) in terms of the lay-expert relationship in analogy with the judicial logic of the witness in a court of law. That is, when accepting a testimonial report, the historian must make a judgment about the plausibility of the testified fact, but also about the credibility of the witness.[8] In other words, testimony in the epistemology of history has been primarily approached from the ideal of epistemic autonomy and we know that for the historian, epistemic autonomy is a value that has been earned. Jonas Ahlskog (2016) would be right to

8 Collingwood and Bloch would be two examples of this reductionist account of testimony, akin to or heir to Hume's approach to testimony. This in general terms is Coady' reading of Collingwood. See an alternative interpretation by Ahlskog, 2016.

argue that when the historian assesses the reports of witnesses who are no longer present, the methodological description of historiographical practice in terms of the ideal of epistemic autonomy is highly recommended.[9] But what could remain invisible from this kind of consideration is that, to exercise their "critical autonomy" in a specific case, historians themselves have relied on the written or oral word (testimonies) of experts (witnesses) from their current epistemic community, whether this comes from some other discipline or from general information already established and agreed upon based on shared techniques and validation practices. Let us pause to focus on this issue. The term "historical evidence" encapsulates complex processes of working with materials, (the identification, classification, and dating of objects and documents), as well as of assessing the credibility of witness testimonies—specifically, determining who can be considered a reliable witness and what kinds of people we can trust. The accomplishment of this process requires the involvement of various skills and areas of expertise that not only are not necessarily concentrated in a single individual, but also are not expected to be mastered by the historian alone. Furthermore, it is not required that the historian personally review every step of the process before accepting the evidence; in other words, the historian cannot, in turn, exercise their autonomy over these practices without risking falling into an endless path of doubting all knowledge.[10]

Historiographical practice, like any social practice, occurs within the framework of a distribution of roles and the delegation of trust to experts. For the historian, it is sufficient to legitimize their appeal to evidence in support of their narrative or interpretation of events by deferring the responsibility of proving the validity of that evidence to the judgment of experts. The point to note here is that in the standard description of the validation process, there is no reference to this web of trust and delegation of authority. Instead , it emphasizes the historian's autonomy, portraying them as someone who has subjected their interpretation to rigorous rules of evidence and positioned themselves as the spokesperson for the truth about the past. The historian of science, Steven Shapin, characterizes this process as the co-production of the order

9 "These differences depend on the fact that if I am myself addressed, then being told is comparable to being given a promise. However, in historical research, people in the past cannot be regarded as promising the historian anything. This means that testimony cannot have the same justificatory role of providing assurance in the case of history. However, this predicament is not only due to the fact that people in the past have not given historians their word. Even if Bismarck gave a historian his word, that historian would need to appeal to independently ascertainable grounds in order to show why Bismarck's word should be accepted in the matter at hand" (Ahlskog, 2016, p. 197).

10 Both in the production of common-sense and scientific knowledge, doubt emerges against the backdrop of trust and in relation to specific practical problems (whether from daily life or research. This point has been frequently emphasized in 20th-century epistemology and philosophy of science. In this regard, the works of Mead (2002, p. 35-60), Schutz (1972, p. 55), Shapin (1994, pp. 17-22), and Coady (1994, p. 233-248) are particularly notable. A crucial consequence of recent developments in the epistemology of testimony is the recognition that trust in the word of others is not a circumstantial phenomenon, but rather, we could say, a fundamental fact of life

of knowledge and of the social order. In producing theories, narratives, etc., the question of who the epistemic agents are who can be relied on to present them is also established. In his enquiries into the "experimental revolution" in 17th century England, Shapin traces the origins of the ideal of epistemic autonomy in science, embodied in the figure of the experimental scientist. This figure was modeled in the image of the *gentleman*, as the kind of individual one could trust to speak truth, a reliable spokesman for reality. "Veracity was understood to be underwritten by *virtue*. ... Free action and integrity were seen as the conditions for truth-telling, while constraint and need were recognized as the grounds of mendacity" (Shapin, 1994, p. 410). At the same time, in 17th -century science, assistants, technicians, and suppliers of laboratory materials and instruments, in whom the gentleman himself placed his trust to tell the truth about the results of this complex activity, were invisible to these networks of trust.[11]

These thoughts lead to a non-reductionist and interpersonal approach to the epistemology of testimony, aiming to elucidate the constitutive roles of "trust," "authority," "believing in the word of others," and "being believed by others" in both common-sense knowledge and the knowledge produced by expert communities. McMyler characterizes the justificatory role that interpersonal relations play in the production of knowledge with the expression "epistemic dependence on others." This is not merely a matter of the epistemic evaluation of others' speech acts or beliefs, but of taking things on the authority of another or trusting another for the truth. In his own words, what characterizes second-hand or testimonial knowledge is that "...mature epistemic agents -under a standing obligation to respond to relevant epistemic challenges to what they believe- are entitled to defer relevant challenges back to the original speaker" (McMyler, 2011 p.73). In Whitean terms, we have the right to choose our ancestors and precursors. By extension, we can assert that not only are the values of "trust" and "authority" established as epistemic values, but the category of "another person" and the epistemic community also acquire a fundamental role in the generation of knowledge and epistemic evaluation. As a serious consequence, in the constitution of any area of knowledge it is necessary to identify who those reliable agents are, and who are excluded from this honor (Shapin, 1994 and Kusch, 2008). In other words, being an epistemic agent involves having the right to defer epistemic responsibility. However, the exercise of this right occurs within a community that honors its authorities and denies such honor to others. This reveals that the phenomenon of knowledge is both rational and affective at the same time, or, in other words,

11 "Trust is central to social order, but the attribution of trustworthiness is not equally distributed among all human beings. Early modern scientists often reflected about whom to trust, but their solutions broadly followed the contours of social power. The word of gentlemen might be trusted—the honor-code stipulated that it must be trusted—while the testimony of the vulgar, the unlettered, and women might be held suspect" (Shapin 2010, p. 53). For a clear exposition of the consequences of Shapin's inquiries for the role of trust and truth in experimental science, see Martini 2023.

epistemic and moral. To suffer the dishonor of not being believed could imply an "epistemic injustice", the situation of harming someone "specifically in their capacity as a knower".[12]

These considerations have significant implications for the epistemology of history. They do not only, as we have so far attempted to do, account for the fact that the epistemic evaluation historians make of historical testimony and evidence is dependent on interactions within their academic community in terms of trust and authority.[13] They also provide us with an epistemic framework to address, without falling into despair, skepticism or relativism, the concrete fact of our times, when the epistemic authority of academic history is being challenged by the emergence of new subjects, new voices that demand inclusion in history or to be authors of history through various forms of activism. The task pending in this paper will be to provide a way to illuminate the interaction between disciplinary practice and these "external" and "lay" voices, in terms of the interpersonal epistemology of testimony. To this end , I will connect the reflections from Section 1 with those from Section 2. I will return to this issue in the final section, but first, I would like to highlight the main philosophical point that allows me to make this connection between White and the epistemology of testimony, given that he captured, in his own terms, the condition of epistemic dependence and the phenomenon of epistemic injustice.

III. Figural Causation and Epistemic Subalternation

Some time ago, in the first years of this century, when I read White's "Auerbach´s Literary History. Figural Causation and Modernist Historicism" (White, 2020), I felt that I could understand his thought in terms of a history of our modern conception of historical realism, instead of some sort of skeptical conception of past reality. In fact, White says that Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* offers us not only a history of realism in Western literature, but also a history of our modern concept of historical interpretation, which has early Christian "figural realism" as its "ancestor".[14] Christian theology gives us the method of this

12 I am alluding here to the phenomenon referred to by Miranda Fricker (2007) as epistemic injustice. I will return to this topic in the final section.

13 The right to defer is a right held by the listener but given that we are talking about solving scientific problems, the right is used if a specific challenge arises. And the response of the speaker could be, in turn, to defer to the practices of his or her community. One even has the right to delegate this to institutions like science, that is, to the members of those institutions. For example, if somebody asks about the authenticity of some document with a report by some witness, the historian has the right to defer the responsibility to some expert in the techniques of authentication, but the asker insists about the materials used by the technician (for example, the lens, etc.) and so on. Is it rational to put everything in doubt and try to follow the hypothetical steps of authentication?

14 Auerbach's *Mimesis* (2004) offers a strict chronological organization, narrating how reality has been represented from classical antiquity to the 20th century. However, when reaching the final chapters, we realize how this historical

retroactive causation, that is, the figure-fulfillment model offers a way of construing historical processes as a development in which an entity coming later in the order of time, chooses an entity preceding as its own precursor. According to the fathers of the Church in the early Christian tradition, the events narrated in the Christian book are the fulfillment of events narrated in the Jewish scriptures, which are their figures, precursors or authorities. It is the authority of the precursor that grants legitimacy to the interpretation recognized as its descendant. In "Symbols and Allegories of Temporality"[15], revisiting his ideas from the beginnings of the 1970s[16], White (2022) argues that a community is a kind of historical system that identifies as its progenitors another group with which it may or may not be genetically affiliated and construes its collective identity as an effect of such descendancy (p. 18). And he adds, "Narrative is the discursive mode in which phenomena can be at once laid out on a timeline that is existentially pertinent to a particular society and at the same time endowed with value" (p. 22).

Some scholars have pointed out that a crucial consequence of Auerbach's exploration of the figural relation between Old and New Testaments is that it illuminates the Semitic roots of Western culture, whereas in Auerbach's day, Aryan philology struggled to show a West free of influences other than Greek and Roman ones.[17] In these studies, White presents what later in the epistemology of testimony would be called epistemic dependence. The truth of the New Testament is supported by the authority of the Old Testament. But, in "*Figura* and Historical Subalternation"[18], White warns of an undesirable consequence in this game of recognizing authority. He says, "The paradigm of this [Western] model of historicity, as retrospective endowment of some element of the past with a meaning that is specifically "historical" in nature, is provided by Saint Paul in the First Epistle to the Romans, in which he simultaneously exalts Judaism as a precursor of Christianity and derogates it as an imperfect, incomplete, or only partial realization of the relationship to the one God..." (White, 2022, p. 86)[19]. Let us consider White's warnings carefully. On the one hand,

narrative **is also a retrospective reconstruction** (under the logic of "**figural interpretation**") **of the precursors of the nineteenth century French literary realism** (led by Balzac and Stendhal). *Mimesis* says that "realism" has a history, that is, that not only literary realism but also our very realist notion of reality (which informs historical realism) is a Nineteenth century realization.

15 In White, 2022. This article is the English version of a lecture originally delivered in 1998. See the editor's note page 31.

16 White, 1972.

17 Zakai and Wenstein, 2012.

18 A text from 2000 also included in White, 2022.

19 Besides, White adds that even Carlo Ginzburg confessed to feeling uncomfortable with the discovery that his own commitment to historical objectivity, conceived in terms of "historical distance" and "historical perspective", is essentially "Christian" in nature. And, by practicing it, he had been participating in a way of representing history that required him to exclude himself from the kind of "historicality" that only a Christian could lay claim to (White, 2022, p. 90).

White denounces the figure-fulfillment model as demeaning the epistemic value of the ancestor, based on the simple fact of some temporal posteriority. Although we can appreciate, following White, the degrading effect of retrospective reconstruction as an ethical or moral problem, what the predecessor is deprived of is being a knower, he is degraded as a knower. But, on the other hand, I would make a qualification to the Whitean equation, for, while the precursor is exalted, they are also derogated as an imperfect or incomplete realization. This equation can only be sustained in the light of an ideal of epistemic autonomy, understood as the action of an autonomous and free subject. Once we become aware that autonomy in some of our beliefs is exercised in the context of a network of trust, focusing on the resolution of concrete research problems and aware of potential challenges and critiques, we are then in a position to reflect on that same network, on who and why we honor some people as epistemic agents while denying that honor to others.

Let us see what the epistemology of testimony has to tell us, through an historical example, which will lead us to revisit the discussion developed in Part 1 of this article about the vicissitudes of factual description.

IV. The Epistemic Value of Narrative Accounts of the Past

Miranda Fricker (2007) uses the term "epistemic injustice" to refer to the situation of harming someone "specifically in their capacity as a knower". Fricker points out two forms of epistemic injustice. One, testimonial injustice, is when we give a devalued credibility to another's words due to identity-based prejudices. The other, hermeneutical injustice, is when, due to the existence of an unequal distribution of interpretative resources, certain individuals are left at a disadvantage in terms of decision-making. These considerations could be seen as giving support to arguments for a definitive ethical turn (given the political and moral dimension of discrediting) and a secondary appreciation of epistemology, or its dependence on ethical issues. However, this would be a misguided conclusion. Fricker herself provides a reason with her notion of "epistemic harm." A person can suffer all kinds of harm due to identity-based prejudices, including physical violence and death. However, their testimony, even regarding their desires, interests, and needs, can be disregarded without necessarily causing them physical harm.

It is time to analyze what epistemic harm might consist of in the disciplinary practice of historiographical research. Building on the observations made in section 1, I will argue that academic historiography is constantly challenged by various marginalized groups, not so much regarding the facts of the past, but concerning how those facts are discussed and how historiographical narratives classify and describe, for example, women, the inhabitants of former colonies, and the

indigenous peoples of the Americas (previously referred to as "Indians"), among others. As noted, the disputability of descriptions and classifications in the social and human sciences arises from the fact that there is no neutral or literal way to describe or classify people and their behavior, on the one hand, as well as from the "looping effect" identified by Hacking, on the other. Consequently, the interactive dimension of these classifications blurs, without eliminating, the boundaries between disciplines and cultural practices, and between experts and laypeople, thereby altering and redescribing the very narratives that historians and scholars construct about their discipline.[20]

Many of the ideas discussed in this article will become clear when an exemplar case of interaction between indigenous population, scholars, and legal system is analyzed. I have in mind the Napalpí Massacre, a police operation undertaken to repress the Qom and Mocoví-Moqoit peoples on July 19, 1924, as well as the Truth Trial regarding the Napalpí Massacre, which took place between 2021 and 2022. That repression was carried out by police forces acting under the orders of the local government with the consent of the national government.[21] The Qom and Mocoví-Moqoit peoples were forced to live in the indigenous state reduction of Napalpí, in northeastern Argentina, to work on the cotton harvest.[22] The repression aimed to silence the protests of the indigenous people against their living conditions. Between approximately 500 and 1,000 people were killed: men were mutilated or decapitated, and their bodies hung, while women were sexually assaulted. Those who fled were pursued through the forest, as no witnesses were intended to be left. It is estimated that 38 children and 15 adults escaped. Although a police summary and a case file in the ordinary justice system were assembled shortly afterward, the assailants were exonerated, claiming they acted to "ensure the safety and property of residents threatened by the insurgent indigenous people."[23] Although the local press contributed to the subsequent silence

20 For a proper understanding of the historiographical problem of determining the boundaries of science as distinct from the traditional demarcation problem, see Martini 2023. "The new formulation of the problem assumes the performative character of language and questions the situated practices through which a scientific community creates and stabilizes the uses of "science" and "scientific knowledge" in accordance with the interests of said community of practice" (Martini, 2023, p. 198).

21 The province of Chaco was founded in 1951. From 1884 to 1951, the Chaco region was denominated "Territorio Nacional del Chaco". The police forces stationed in the territory answered to the national government.

22 Marcelo Mussante (2013) characterizes the state-run civil reductions for indigenous people as a concentration-like system implemented by the national government to settle, discipline, and control the indigenous population defeated in the military campaigns of the Chaco region.

23 Case file n° 910/24: "Sublevación indígena en la Reducción de Napalpí http://portal.amelica.org/ameli/journal/607/6073558008/html/
Alejandro Jasinski explains "a police summary and a case file in the ordinary justice system which, within a few weeks, led Judge Juan A. Sessarego to conclude, based on the recommendations of Prosecutor Gerónimo Cello, that the investigations did not reveal any criminal responsibility for those involved in the events—police officers, gendarmes, and

throughout the 20th century, the events remained in the oral and collective memory of the Qom people.

In September 2021, a federal judge in the province of Chaco empowered a truth trial to investigate what happened and to seek historical reparations for the Qom and Moqoit communities. On May 19, 2022, the Federal Court No. 1 of Resistencia issued the following verdict:

- Declaring as proven facts, what occurred during the Napalpí Massacre
- Determining the responsibility of the Argentine national state in the planning, execution, and cover-up of the crimes committed.
- Declaring the Napalpí Massacre as a crime against humanity.
- Publishing and disseminating the sentence and including the proven facts in educational curricula.[24]

That is, **a key mandate of the reparation is to produce new narratives** of the past to counteract the hegemonic national narrative that perpetuates the discrimination and marginalization of the indigenous population.

Now, **in the light of the epistemology of testimony**, we will be able to determine what the epistemic responsibility of academic history would be in cases like the Napalpí Massacre. The research that culminated in the trial was the result of the collective work carried out by the Napalpí Foundation. Its promoter and founder was the Qom leader and historian Juan Chico (1977-2021).[25] A filmed interview with Juan Chico, conducted by anthropologists Cecilia Hidalgo and Lena Dávila, was included as testimony in the trial. The gathering of "evidence" (oral and written testimonies, photographic documentation from the time, archaeological remains) that concluded with the affirmation that **"what happened in Napalpí did occur"** involved the creation of an epistemic community of trust. This community listened to oral testimonies in the indigenous

Chaco landowners, as well as those who had ordered them" (Jasinski, 2022a).

24 The verdict of the Federal Court also ruled:

- Establishing that this sentence itself constitutes a form of reparation and ordering the translation of the final arguments and the sentence into the Qom and Moqoit languages.
- Accepting as appropriate reparations measures the apology issued by the governor of the province of Chaco and the actions taken by the State to recognize the languages of pre-existing populations in educational settings.
- Establishing a memorial site at the location.
- Taking measures for the care and archiving of historical information, among others, of the Qom and Moqoit people.

25 Albino Juan Oscar Chico (Napalpí Indigenous Colony, 1977 - Resistencia, 2021) was a writer, poet, researcher, historian, documentary director and producer, and teacher from the Qom (Toba) people. He founded the Napalpí Foundation in 2015, of which he was president until his death from COVID-19 in Resistencia in 2021. His Las voces de Napalpí (Chico, 2016) is essential reading. Sadly, Juan Chico died from Covid, right at the beginning of the trial.

language passed down clandestinely from generation to generation, which opposed the official narrative embodied in the media and justice system of 1924. In general, we think about the reliability of witnesses from the perspective of experts (historians and the law system). But we must note that the acts perpetrated against indigenous peoples are not limited to specific acts of physical violence, but also include the ongoing discrimination and stigmatization perpetuated by the state, society, and hegemonic culture—in other words, epistemic injustice (Fricker) and epistemic violence (Pérez, Moira, 2019).[26]

According to Silvana Perez, Secretary for Human Rights and Gender of the province in 2022, Juan Chico used every available tool (not only demands from indigenous peoples but also from women, victims of the dictatorship and ecological activists) to build bridges and foster a community of cooperation among the elder *Qom*, academics, and the legal system. That is, Juan enlisted and trusted activists and academics with a gender perspective or those who had been involved in memory, truth, and justice trials, as authorities to advance the Qom's claims, meaning individuals whose social activism and academic practices predisposed them to trust the victims. What has become clear in this process is that indigenous peoples have not only been victims of a massacre, but also of the sustained exercise of epistemic injustice and violence, which has disregarded their testimonies and excluded them from the writing of the national narrative.

The challenge for historians concerning responsibility is, therefore, how to fulfill the command of "Publishing and disseminating the sentence and including the proven facts in educational curricula", without reproducing, through the expert-lay distinction and the ideal of epistemic autonomy, a new epistemic injustice. In other words, we academics, historians, narrativist philosophers of history, post-linguistic philosophers, and sociologists of knowledge have learned that there is no objective, value-neutral, and literal way of describing or classifying people and their behavior. This does not mean that description and classification are merely subjective or arbitrary. Therefore, we must be careful with the expert-lay distinction—not eliminating it, but at least redefining it.

Interpersonal epistemology of testimony does not discredit the genuine critical activity that historians engage in when evaluating the relevance or reliability of testimonies according to their own criteria or the criteria of the expert community. However, this critical activity is not performed without assumptions. On the contrary, knowing things through others' words is a basic fact of life. Criticism, doubt, or the personal evaluation of others' beliefs are secondary phenomena.

26 "The notion of epistemic violence refers to the various ways in which violence is exercised in relation to the production, circulation, and recognition of knowledge: the denial of the epistemic agency of certain subjects, the unacknowledged exploitation of their epistemic resources, their objectification, among many others" (Pérez, 2019, p. 82).

They happen against the background of communities of trust, that is, epistemic communities of membership.

Let me put it this way: if we consider that the academic duty to pay attention to non-academic voices or to the perspectives of victims of genocide, discrimination based on race, gender or sex, totalitarian regimes, colonialism and exploitation, is only moral in nature and not epistemic, we are depriving them of their capacity as "knowers". We are committing an "epistemic injustice".

In conclusion, when historiography seeks to produce historical narratives that incorporate subalternized perspectives, it also commits itself to:

1. being attentive to avoiding narrative figurations that derogate the epistemic value of those voices.
2. expanding the epistemic community, that is, the network of trust and authority.

Ultimately, the search for new and more inclusive historical narratives should lead historians to rewrite the narrative of their own epistemic community.

Final Considerations

In this work, I have presented reasons to appreciate the indissoluble link between epistemic validity and epistemic responsibility, that is, the cognitive-moral emplotment underlying our research practices. In doing so, I have paved the way for going beyond the simple observation that the narrative structuring of the past is an effective and widespread—indeed, even moral—strategy, in order to demonstrate in what sense a historical narrative could be epistemically valid. My main hesitation about going along with the "ethical turn" is that I find it extremely difficult to provide an answer to what is implied by the statement that the choice between different narratives is ultimately ethical. Would it require us to simply make our ethical commitments explicit, or does it mean that the research should be grounded in the ethical commitments held by the researchers? In this case, must we also discuss whether we should expect a Kantian, utilitarian, or Aristotelian justification? I would justify my proposal as a heuristic recommendation rather than a moral one, grounded in the assumption of a fallibilist attitude. As outlined in Section 1, disputability is a hallmark of classifications and descriptions of individuals (interactive kinds of peoples). Therefore, any researcher would or should assume that their perspective may be flawed. In the interests of fostering further research for more accurate narratives, it is crucial to attend to the challenges and alternatives that emerge, and to consider the consequences these may have for the public sphere.

An important background of this approach owes much to considering scientific and historical research through the lens of Collingwood's question-and-answer logic or Dewey's problem-solution framework. These perspectives emphasize the dynamic and problem-driven nature of inquiry, where the formulation of questions and the search for solutions guide the development of knowledge in both the sciences and the humanities.[27]

Given that, we can think of perspectives not only in terms of what they actually assert but also in terms of the questions or problems that motivated those assertions. If they are considered in this way, we will note not only that perspectives are not fixed and private, but that we will appreciate them as long as they raise important and relevant problems and questions for us. From this, we derive two important methodological consequences. First, we pay attention to what Ann Rigney and Judith Butler have called the problem of "sayability". When accounting for or representing the past, we must be careful with the words we use to both describe and emplot the events and people involved (Rigney, 2016). Second, White's account of the figural relationship must not be conceived in a negative way, because I prefer to call attention to the fact that it is at the same time both exalting and derogatory, as this relationship is none other than the problematic nature of research. Therefore, the fallibilist and pragmatist attitude advises or recommends remaining open to concrete challenges to the historical narratives or perspectives we uphold, without dismissing the use of narratives as inherently morally derogatory. This latter attitude stems from a philosophical spirit indebted to the masters of suspicion.

To conclude, my proposal advocates an alliance between narrativism and the epistemology of testimony. That is, on one hand, I promote a narrative philosophy of history that assumes "trust" as a basic epistemic value and being attentive to avoiding epistemic injustice. And, on the other hand, I also promote an epistemology of testimony linguistically self-aware with respect to the complexity and opacity of the narrative configurations which constitute the identity of epistemic communities.

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27 This issue is what Dewey referred to as the practical meaning of factual statements, highlighting the future-oriented dimension of epistemic evaluation. To assert or maintain that a factual belief, a judgment about facts, is true, implies within its meaning the possible reasons or evidence to support it (Tozzi Thompson, Penelas, 2022. Tozzi, 2018a).

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