



## The Role of Joint Experience in Historical Narratives

**Axel Seemann**

*Department of Philosophy, Bentley University*  
*aseemann@bentley.edu*

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### Abstract

There are historical events which cannot easily be made sense of by reference to the actions of single individuals. I suggest that one way to understand such events is by building on the involved agents' joint experience, or reports thereof. The phenomenology of joint involvement, so my suggestion, is of use in a particular kind of sense making that combines hermeneutical and explanatory elements. Such sense making, I argue, is narrative in character. I suggest a particular conception of historical narratives that aligns them with what I call, taking up an idea from Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement*, 'psychological realism' – the idea that what renders stories accurate is a reality with both physical and mental characteristics. I end by illustrating my account with a historical example.

### Keywords

sense-making, explanation, interpretation, hermeneutics, narrative, psychological realism

### Introduction

One important task of the historian is to make sense of social events that happened in the past. By 'social events' I mean events such as the English Civil War, the French Revolution, or the fall of the Berlin Wall, which cannot easily be accounted for in terms of the actions of particular individual figures, however powerful. It seems uncontroversial that such sense making involves, at least at times, a hermeneutical or interpretative dimension. And closely tied to this idea is the further notion that historical sense making is narrative in character. We make sense of history by telling a story which interprets a series of past social events in a way that presents them as

somehow connected.<sup>1</sup> This connection isn't, on a standard account, of a causal kind. To say that historical sense making is narrative just is to say, on such an account, that what makes a sequence of events cohesive is a logic which is internal to the story in question, and which can be unearthed only by engaging in a hermeneutical interpretation of historical texts. Historical, narrative sense-making is thus not governed by general laws; and therefore it is, one might think, quite radically distinct from the kind of explanation that, on a standard view, obtains in the natural sciences.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, I am going to put forward an alternative conception of historical sense making. On my view, such sense making sometimes<sup>3</sup> involves a kind of explanation that, though narrative in character, nevertheless appeals to general laws. I want to suggest that historical sense making is both causal-explanatory and interpretative-hermeneutic, and that it is precisely these two features which, together, constitute its narrative character. I will argue, furthermore, that there is a phenomenal aspect to such sense making. Historians, as opposed to (say) sociologists, need to take seriously the experience of participants in or observers of a social event, or, if the event is in the distant past, recollections of such experiences. The historian's task, on the account I am recommending, thus has a psychological dimension: it is concerned with the integration of experience into a larger context. Such integration is accomplished by telling a particular story; a story that is causal in character and thus makes available answers to Why-questions about the event.

Implicit in this psychological dimension of my account is the assumption that the subject matter of historical sense making is *actions*, and thus events that are, under at least one description, intentional.<sup>4</sup> Historical events are brought about by agents, and these agents are human persons. This view does not entail a reductive individualism about the social domain,

<sup>1</sup> L. Mink, "Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument", in L. Mink, *Historical Understanding* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1987, 182–203).

<sup>2</sup> See Karsten Stueber for an overview of narrative accounts of historical sense making: K. Stueber, "Reasons, Generalizations, Empathy, and Narratives: The Epistemic Structure of Action Explanation", *History and Theory* 47 (2008), 31–43.

<sup>3</sup> I do not claim that the account of sense making put forward in this paper is the only, or even the paradigmatic, mode of historical explanation.

<sup>4</sup> See Mark Bevir's account of the role of narratives in historical explanation, which argues that narratives explain by appealing to folk psychological concepts: M. Bevir, "Historical Explanation, Folk Psychology, and Narrative", *Philosophical Explorations* 3 (2000), 152–168.

including its historical dimension. For instance, you may think that human agency is a *necessary* condition of the existence of social-historical events, but that some social phenomena are higher-level systemic properties of sets of individual actions. As such, they are not reducible to individual actions. I follow Harold Kincaid<sup>5</sup> in thinking that accepting supervenience about the social doesn't commit you to reductivism, even though my main reason for thinking this, in the case of history, is not that social events can be multiply realized. After all, historical explanation is concerned with *particular* (rather than types of) events. Rather, I will argue that the collective phenomenology of a complex social event is constructed by means of narratives which integrate a variety of experiences that themselves have a joint dimension. The scope of this phenomenology is subject to modification after the fact. Narratives can portray an event as collectively experienced by a number of agents who were not, at the time, aware of their joint engagement.

I will proceed as follows. In a first step, I am going to sketch an approach to individual action explanation. This approach is going to stress the importance of the experiential dimension of agency. I will introduce a type of action explanation according to which you make sense of your doings by integrating your experience into a larger psychological and social context. This integration, I will suggest, is achieved through telling a particular kind of story. In the second part, I will be concerned with complex social events. The question arises whether the psychological kind of action explanation I recommended in the first part is of relevance here. After all, you may doubt that there is a collective psychological life that could assume, in collective action explanation, the function of experience in the explanation of actions of individuals. I shall argue that we can make sense of the idea that complex social events have a collective psychological dimension. This dimension, however, is often revealed to the participants in the event only *ex post facto*. It is hence that the model of sense making I have in mind seems particularly apt for complex historical events. I finish by illustrating my account of historical sense making with an example.

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<sup>5</sup> H. Kincaid, "Reduction, Explanation and Individualism", *Philosophy of Science* 53 (1986), 492–513.

## 1. Making Sense of Individual Actions

### A. *The Role of Action Experience*

There may, and often will, be a difference between the concepts one marshals in one's explanation of one's doings, and those employed in the execution of the deed itself.<sup>6</sup> Valid answers to 'Why'-questions about your doings can draw on concepts which did not play a role in their execution. You may be involved in an activity that involves chopping the tomatoes, boiling the pasta, and preparing the salad but that, when asked about it, you think of as 'cooking dinner'.<sup>7</sup> Or you may think of it in quite different terms: as an instance of your hospitality, for instance, or of your new health regime, even though framing the event in those terms never crossed your mind while you were chopping the tomatoes. Yet an appropriate explanation of what you were doing might require you to draw on these concepts in your description of what you did. You may say that you were chopping tomatoes because you wanted to make your friends welcome by offering them a homemade dinner, for instance, even though you never thought, in the process of chopping the tomatoes, that you were intending to make them feel welcome. On my view, explanatory concepts carve out aspects of an agent's experience. They make available, in propositional form, bits of her phenomenal life, which can then feature in an explanation of her doings. An action explanation would thus be adequate if there were indeed a bit of phenomenal life that could be so individuated. If it can't, the explanation is not satisfactory – it does then not deliver a valid account of why the agent did something.

Explanations of your doings which are adequate in this sense may not always be immediately available. This holds true for yourself as much as for other people. You might have to invest significant effort before arriving at the explanation that constitutes an appropriate response to a particular why-question – that satisfactorily explains what you did – even though

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<sup>6</sup> A. Seemann, "Why We Did It: An Anscombian Approach to Collective Action Explanation", *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 17 (5) (2009), 637–655.

<sup>7</sup> My thinking on these matters was greatly furthered by Matthew Soteriou: M. Soteriou, "Content and the Stream of Consciousness", *Philosophical Perspectives*, 21 (1) (2007), 543–568.

your explanatory concepts do, in fact, carve out an aspect of your experience. Such concepts, and the bit of mental life they individuate, may not always be in plain view; there may well be parts of your mental life that are hidden from immediate awareness. Sometimes another person can have a better grasp of relevant aspects of your state of mind than you do yourself. Suppose you are meeting an old friend, someone you haven't seen in a long time. It ought to be a fun occasion that you had been looking forward to. But the meeting isn't going well, and you realise it's all your fault. You are unfriendly, curt, and just not your usual self. Eventually the occasion disintegrates into a fight, which ends with you leaving without saying goodbye. Afterwards you think about what happened. You realise clearly that the fight was initiated entirely by you. And finally you come to see, perhaps after talking things through with someone else, that you were acting so disgracefully because you don't care for the other person's friendship; you discover that you actually dislike her. This dislike had not so far been individuated as such, and hence it hadn't been available as an explanation of your behaviour. Yet once you single it out in the way you do, a lot of things start making sense; you begin to understand why you behaved as badly as you did.

One implication of this approach is that making sense of one's own (or another person's) doings necessitates taking seriously the phenomenal aspect of agency. To get a grip on why you acted in a particular way, you have to be sensitive to what it was like to execute the action. The suggestion is not that the phenomenal character of agency will by itself make available suitable answers to Why-questions about one's doings; rather, the suggestion is that satisfactory such answers will not be forthcoming if the experiential dimension is being ignored.

### B. *Interpretation and Explanation*

The phenomenology of agency, I said, doesn't come readily individuated in sets of concepts that you could immediately draw upon to explain what you did. Often you will have to interpret what it was like to act in a particular way in order to be able to couch relevant aspects of your phenomenal life in an explanatorily helpful way. In order to see why you behaved as you did, you have to try and fit together various observations about what you did, and how you felt, and what other people may have to

contribute, in a way that is appropriately described as a hermeneutical exercise.<sup>8</sup> You may begin by considering that you didn't really feel as pleased as you ought to have been upon seeing your friend again; you may remember that it took you forever to respond to her suggestion to meet up. You may put this together with the observation of a third person, perhaps a mutual acquaintance of you both, that you've been saying a few rather unkind things about her lately. And all of a sudden it dawns on you that you'd rather the friendship were over: now you have a convincing explanation of your behaviour. You've arrived at this explanation by combining a variety of pieces of evidence – what it was like to be in the presence of your friend, your own behaviour, the third person's remarks. All of these together allow you to see what happened in a larger context, both psychological and social, that wasn't fully present to you at the time of the meeting. A hermeneutical process – of going back and forth, of putting together quite different bits of evidence in the right kind of context – has yielded the explanation you wanted.

In the philosophy of social science, the kind of hermeneutical-interpretative exercise I've just described is often contrasted with explanation in a scientific sense. The classical account of scientific explanation is, of course, Carl Gustav Hempel's deductive-nomological theory.<sup>9</sup> Its core feature is the idea that statements describing particular events which are to be explained (the explanandum) are shown to be instances of more general statements of lawlike regularities, such as natural laws (the explanans), which thus account for the occurrence of the event at issue. In this way, general laws can be invoked to explain the occurrence of a particular event. It is an approach that seems obviously at odds with hermeneutics, according to which making sense of an event requires going back and forth repeatedly between the event that is in need of being made sense of and other facts about the environment which may illuminate that event. Such sense-making, so one might think, is entirely contextual and thus quite different from the kind of explanation that relies upon the invocation of

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<sup>8</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I adopt Charles Taylor's classical account of hermeneutical interpretation: C. Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man", *The Review of Metaphysics*, 25 (1) (1971), 3–51.

<sup>9</sup> C. G. Hempel, "The Function of General Laws in History", *Journal of Philosophy* 39 (1942), 35–48. Reprinted in: Martin and McIntyre (eds.), *Readings in the Philosophy of Social Science* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press 1994, 43–54).

general laws à la Hempel. Even though he actually acknowledges the usefulness of empathic understanding as a heuristic device in historical explanation,<sup>10</sup> he maintains that the soundness of such an explanation ultimately depends on the correctness of the generalizations that are invoked to account for the event. So you may think that the kind of psychological sense making I've described is strictly incompatible with explanation in Hempel's sense. Psychological sense-making, you might think, is entirely context dependent; explaining is not.

I think this picture is false, however. There is a perfectly good way in which my account of my behaviour really is an explanation, in the sense that it portrays what I did as standing in a particular (causal)<sup>11</sup> relation to other facts about myself and my environment. And this causal relation is not singular but general; it can be couched in terms of a general law-like statement, or set of such statements. Consider the above example: my interpretation of relevant bits of evidence – that is, the phenomenology of my state of mind, observations about my behaviour put forward by others, things I've observed about myself – enables me to say that I behaved disgracefully towards my friend because I actually don't like her very much, and that I'd rather terminate the friendship. In a relevant sense, my acute (though at the time not consciously realized) dislike caused me to act in the way I did, and the cause-effect relationship at issue is completely general: other things being equal, *anyone* who harboured that sort of sentiment would have acted as I did. The qualifier is important, of course; perhaps you are a more reflective person than I am and thus have a better grasp of your emotional life, which enables you to prevent your feelings from getting the better of you. Still, even though it would be a stretch to portray my account of my behaviour as an instance of a deductive-nomological explanation, it is an explanation in the straightforward sense that it appeals to a general law-like relationship between what I did and other, antecedent facts about me and my environment.

On the view I have been sketching, the interpretive and explanatory aspects of sense-making thus aren't at odds with one another, at least as far as personal psychology is concerned. This isn't a novel insight: Dagfinn

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<sup>10</sup> Hempel, "The Function of General Laws in History", p. 50

<sup>11</sup> Note that Hempel's account of explanation is not meant to be a causal account. In the spirit of logical positivism, deductive-nomological explanations derive their power from the logical relations between the statements of which the explanation consists.

Follesdal<sup>12</sup> argued that hermeneutics and explanation go together in the interpretation of literary texts, and his view is in some way related to the argument at issue. But there is a crucial difference between literary interpretation and the kind of psychological sense-making I am interested in. Where psychology is concerned, it won't suffice to point out that an interpretive effort may be required to get clear about the causes of behaviour; interpretation and explanation are intertwined in a more substantive way. To understand an event by reference to its psychological dimension is to frame it in such a way that it can be integrated into its larger psychological and social context.

So my position is not that you interpret your (or another person's) mental life, thus arrive at a certain conception of your relevant beliefs and desires, which you then invoke to give a causal explanation of your doings. Rather, the idea is that a suitable interpretation of your mental life – one that enables you to integrate it in a larger context – is such that the interpretive-hermeneutical activity *establishes* a causal relation. It isn't that you individuate a belief and a desire, and then argue that these two mental items causally explain your behaviour. In telling an explanatorily helpful story, you are looking for the causal connections themselves. Consider again the meeting with your friend. What you are looking for, in trying to answer the question of why you behaved the way you did, is not merely some psychological state. It isn't the dislike of your friend that you are attempting to individuate, and thus to bring before consciousness. It is the causal connection between your behaviour and your mental life. After all, you don't individuate the mental state in question independently: what you are looking for is precisely an answer to the question of what it is that made you behave in the way you did. You individuate your dislike, on the basis of information available to you from a variety of sources (your behaviour; introspection; what your acquaintance said), in terms of its causal properties – in terms of what it made you do. This view need not be at odds with the idea that the kind of explanation at issue makes sense of a particular event by implicitly appealing to law-like regularities. I think of such regularities (in the present example, they may be expressed by the statement 'Dislike of a person tends to manifest itself in an agent's behav-

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<sup>12</sup> D. Follesdal, "Hermeneutics and the Hypothetico-Deductive Method", *Dialectica* 33 (1979), 319–336.



our towards that person', or some such) as expressing causal connections between two types of events (in the present case, a mental and a behavioural event). But in such regularity statements, you don't profitably distinguish between the events at issue and the connection between them. The events are just such that an occurrence of the first tends to bring about an occurrence of the second; and this is as much a fact about the events as it is about the connection between them. That is why a helpful answer to a Why-question about your doings will begin with the preposition 'because'. It isn't, on the constructivist picture I am sketching, that you are individuating mental states that then enable you to invoke a causal connection. The causal-explanatory connection *itself* is the target of your interpretive work.

### C. *The Role of Narrative*

Narratives, on my account, impose order on series of events, and in doing so they make causal explanation available. In order to explain well, they have to carve out a causal relation between the *explanandum* (a particular event) and the *explanans* (a set of facts about the environment of the event, from a variety of sources). Notice that there isn't, on the account at issue, a mechanism which could somehow be discovered in order to explain why a particular event took place. Rather, the various environmental facts are described in a way that establishes a causal connection. In the above example, the description of what it felt like to meet my friend again, the description a third party might give of my past behaviour towards her, the description of what I did – all of these present what happened in a way that situates the event in a larger psychological and social context, and relates it, causally, to this context.

Implicit in this constructivist account of narrative is the thought that stories can explain only after the fact. They do not merely explain *ex post facto* in the trivial sense in which any explanation can only take place after the *explanandum* has occurred. They can only explain after the fact because the right kind of description of relevant environmental features – including the phenomenological dimension of the agent's psychology – will only be available after the event has taken place. Narrative sense making thus always has a historical dimension. This consideration has important consequences, since narratives are typically not one-offs. They are told and

re-told over time; and on each such occasion the event, along with the environmental facts that explain it, is cast in a different light. It hence follows that every re-telling re-construes the explanation of what happened.

Narratives, then, have two functions. First, they serve as externalized memories of what happened. Secondly, they are explanatory devices. These two functions are intertwined. Since narratives, and the explanations they provide, are constructed rather than unearthed, each of a temporal sequence of stories about an event will alter the explanation of what happened. Different stories about one and the same event result in different answers to Why-questions about that event.

A forceful illustration of this thought is provided by the story of Briony Tallis, the main protagonist of Ian McEwan's brilliant novel *Atonement*.<sup>13</sup> You can read the entire book as an attempt to make sense of one single event, a lie told by Briony, then age twelve and, later in life, a prominent novelist, on a summer evening in 1935. Neither the reader nor, indeed, Briony herself can be said to fully understand why she didn't tell the truth about what she saw that day (I won't spoil the plot for you by going into details); jealousy plays a role, as do intimidation, an overly vivid imagination and the desire for telling a compelling tale, amongst a heap of possible other motives. The consequences of her lie, for herself as for a number of others, are disastrous, and she will spend the rest of her life not only atoning for what she has done but also trying to make sense of it. And so does the reader; the plot of the novel, as it tracks the life of Briony and others who are affected by what happened during the second World War and then takes it up again several decades later, can be described as enabling the reader to put what happened into perspective. It is a perspective that enables him to understand why Briony did what she did; and this growing understanding is made possible by the increase in temporal and narrative distance that changes the explanation of what happened. As the narrative repeatedly revisits the event, and tells of its consequences, from Briony's perspective as well as other people's, it creates a series of accounts of what happened that not only makes sense of the event by relating it to its context, but also by looking at it in terms of the consequences it has wrought, and in terms of the shifting perspectives of the key protagonists. Consider

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<sup>13</sup> I. McEwan, *Atonement* (London: Jonathan Cape 2001).

the following quote from *Atonement*, which occurs prior to Briony's lie that is at the centre of the narrative but just after she has witnessed a scene without the observation of which she almost certainly would not have told it:

Briony (...) wanted to chase in solitude the faint thrill of possibility she had felt before, the elusive excitement at a prospect she was coming close to defining, at least emotionally. The definition would refine itself over the years. She was to concede that she may have attributed more deliberation than was feasible to her thirteen-year-old self. At the time there may have been no precise form of words; in fact, she may have experienced nothing more than impatience to begin writing again. (38)

The narrator tells us that Briony, herself a writer, is 'coming close to defining' the scene she is witnessing: it is in the telling of the story that she creates the perspective which yields a particular explanation of it; and it is through the story of that attempt at sense-making that the reader is put in a position to understand the events of that summer day before the Second World War. But this understanding really is predicated upon Briony's later narrative perspective, not upon what actually happened:

(she) knew that ... it was not the long-ago morning she was recalling so much as her subsequent accounts of it. It was possible that the contemplation of a crooked finger, the unbearable idea of other minds and the superiority of stories over plays were thoughts she had had on other days. She also knew that whatever actually happened drew its significance from her published work and would not have been remembered without it.

What the narrator describes as an 'impartial psychological realism' captures nicely the role of narratives I sketched above: the accuracy of the story that is being created, over time, depends increasingly less on what happened rather than on subsequent accounts of it. The story changes as it is told and re-told over time, from different perspectives and in the light of its unfolding consequences. And as the narrative account of what happened develops, so do the explanations of the event: adequate descriptions of the event will incorporate later developments and changing perspectives, and this will affect the answers Briony, or the reader, might give to Why-questions about it.

The thought here is not that in narrative sense making there would be no fact of the matter: there plainly are better and worse narratives and adequate or inadequate explanations. But it is through the accurate description of an action's phenomenology, as well as its psychological and social context, that good explanations become possible; and what constitutes an accurate description is dependent on time and perspective of the narrative. The method of Briony's storytelling is realist because there is a fact of the matter; and it is psychological because successful explanations of what happened become available through the telling of stories that are, as time goes by, increasingly dependent upon memory. In this way, the explanatory and memory-preserving functions of narrative are intertwined with each other.

#### D. *Metaphysical Underpinnings, Part I*

The account sketched here gives rise to a number of metaphysical concerns. Perhaps most importantly, the question arises how I can be committed to a 'psychological realism' if I also insist on the constructivist character of narratives. To address this and related issues, I am going to provide, in this section, a brief sketch of the metaphysical views informing the account presented here. Within the constraints of this paper, it can only be the very briefest of outlines, which will raise more questions than it answers; but it ought to give the reader some idea about how to reconcile a few seeming contradictions in the present line of thought. There are two parts to this metaphysical excursion, the second of which can be found towards the end of the 'Social Events' section of this paper.

The foundational commitment I am building on is a relational view of experience. On this view, experience is to be thought of as a relation between the thing experienced and the experience itself. The object features directly in the experience. I interpret this view, which is usually characterised (e.g. by John Campbell)<sup>14</sup> as an account of perceptual experience, rather liberally, so as to make it applicable not only to perceptual objects but also to actions and other things that can be non-perceptually experienced. The relational view is committed to what one may call 'naïve realism' about the objects of experience. This means you have to take it that these objects exist independently of your experience of them. The

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<sup>14</sup> J. Campbell, *Reference and Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002).

relational view entails this kind of realism because you could not otherwise maintain that the object directly features in the experience. While this is straightforward as far as perceptual objects are concerned, it appears rather implausible with regard to e.g. actions. Surely your experience of being involved in an action is a quintessential characteristic of that action? It wouldn't make sense to say, after all, that the action exists independently of whether or not you have an experience of it.

To answer this worry, it will be necessary to think a bit more about the commitments entailed by 'naïve realism'. One way of presenting the core tenet of this view, favoured by John Searle,<sup>15</sup> is this: on his approach, the essential feature of naïve realism is the idea that (physical) objects are 'ontologically objective'. This means, roughly, that facts about these objects obtain independently of whether anyone observes, notices, or thinks about these facts. That Mount Everest is higher than Mount Shasta, on such a view, is an ontologically objective fact. It will obtain even if humankind dies out tomorrow.

Putting things this way can make it sound as if the realism in question were committed to the idea that not only what there is, but also how we conceptualise it were real in a naïve sense. It makes it sound as if not only the tallness relation between Mount Everest and Mount Shasta were ontologically independent, but also these very objects of experience themselves. It makes it sound, in other words, as if Mount Shasta and Mount Everest were to persist even if the human race perished. But this would surely take naivety too far. I take Hilary Putnam,<sup>16</sup> amongst others, to be correct in supposing that our conceptual schemes are not only dependent on the way the world is but also on our biologically, culturally and linguistically informed practices. Who is to say that there isn't a way of perceiving, and thinking of, a particular mountain as 'attached elevation slices'? The correct view surely is that what there is exists independently of our beliefs about it, but that how we carve it up is jointly up to the world and to us.

This joint dependence of our conceptualization of the world presupposes that there is a subject matter to be conceptualized. The defender of the relational view accommodates this requirement by presupposing a basic connection between perceiver/thinker and world that is pre-conceptual

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<sup>15</sup> J. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (London: Penguin Press 1995).

<sup>16</sup> H. Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press 1990).

and, indeed, pre-representational. It is more basic than that. Perceivers are acquainted with their surroundings in a primitive sense, and it is this connection that explains the double dependence of our conceptual schemes on both what there is and our biological and cultural practices. Furthermore, it explains how one can be a (psychological) realist about things like actions. It isn't that the action is independent of the agent who enjoys an experience of it, just as it isn't that Mount Shasta and Mount Everest are so independent. What is independent is the reality in which your perception and conception of these mountains is grounded. And the world we live in is such that its reality is not exhausted by physical matter. Its content simply is not such that the experience of it features only physical objects. Rather, it is such that aspects of it are appropriately experienced, and conceived, in mental terms. Just as we are acquainted with reality in a way that allows us to enjoy accurate perceptual experiences of physical objects, so we are acquainted with it in a way that allows us to enjoy accurate experiences of events with a mental dimension. On this view, mind really is part of reality. There is no inner-outer divide between physical reality and mental life. Nevertheless, the view is (modestly) realist because what there is gives rise to accurate experiences of it, be it of inanimate objects, other persons, or actions.

A certain view about the nature of explanation follows from this account. Explanation, on the relational-realist view, works by accomplishing two tasks: first, by correctly individuating explanans and explanandum; secondly, by establishing the right kinds of (helpful) connections between them. Whether these tasks succeed depends, in both cases, on both the world and our practices. Your acquaintance with reality gives rise to accurate experiences of what there is. And your acquaintance with reality gives rise to accurate conceptions of the connection between the objects of perception and thought. The world isn't itself causally or narratively structured; but it is such that it renders accurate our experience of and thought about the events we aim to explain by invoking a particular connection. The kinds of cause-effect relationships invoked in scientific explanation are one connection of this kind; narratives are another. Narratives are informed to a greater degree than scientific explanations by our practices, and to a lesser degree by what there is independently; but both can be said to be truth-apt in the sense that they make it possible to accurately (or not) individuate events and the connections between them. Yet they both are

constructed, and thus not ‘objectively true’ or false in a simplistic sense: it isn’t that they depict an independently existing reality. It is, rather, that they conceptually carve out aspects of experience in a way that, if they are accurate, is grounded in what there is.

I mentioned one further distinction between narrative and causal attempts at sense making: narratives, particularly about social events, often serve as externalized memories of what happened in a way in which causal explanation of natural events typically do not. It was part of the psychological realism I espoused (illustrated by the role memory plays in Briony’s writing) that layers of narratives come to depend increasingly on previous accounts of the same event and ever less on the event itself – after all, these accounts are the only way in which access to the event is still available. So the question arises to what extent the narrative account of a past event is about anything real, and thus what renders such narratives accurate. On the relational-realist view I have presented, the answer to this question is not that the accuracy of a narrative depends on how faithful it is to earlier accounts of what happened (all the way back to the first story about the event in question). My view is not a version of the idea, defended by causal theorists of reference, that the accuracy of a referring expression is secured by, first, a ‘baptism’ (the naming of a particular object or, in the present case, event) and subsequently a series of causal connections that, if all goes well, maintain the connection between ever more distant uses of a referring expression and the referent. It can’t be this idea because such a theory operates with a distinction between ‘world’ and ‘mind’ that the present account rejects. After all, externalists about reference insist that meaning isn’t ‘in the head’ – that the reference of referring expressions is determined not by mental content but the way the world is – which view relies on the presupposition that a principled distinction can be drawn between mind and world.

Consider, once again, that it is part of Briony’s ‘psychological realism’ that subsequent accounts of what happened may change the description of the event without thereby rendering it false. What makes a narrative accurate is thus not necessarily that it truthfully depicts what originally happened. Rather, it is rendered accurate by what there is – the reality with which you enjoy an experiential connection. This reality isn’t defined by how things were at a particular moment in the past. Briony’s later accounts of what happened do not correspond exactly to the events of that summer

day in 1935, but that doesn't render these accounts inadequate. They are rendered accurate by a reality that is as much defined by Briony's mental life as they are by the past. Once again, it is important to see that this consideration does not result in some kind of relativism about the past. The account presented here is realist because there is an independent reality that renders accounts of what happens accurate or not. Not all memories, and narratives that build on memories, are truthful or adequate. But on my account, what renders memories, and the narratives that build on them, accurate is the experiencing subject's acquaintance with what there is. And what the subject is so acquainted with is a reality that has mental as well as physical characteristics.

## 2. Making Sense of Social Events

The blueprint for narrative sense-making I outlined in the first part of this paper can be applied, so I shall argue, to historical events also. There are, however, crucial differences between historical sense making and action explanation more generally, and in this section I will address some of them. The aim is to show that those differences do not make the model developed in the previous section unsuitable for historical explanation; if anything, so I suggest, the contrary is true.

### A. *Two Kinds of Historical Events*

There is one class of historical events for whose individuation, and explanation, the account of the previous section seems particularly apt. These are events whose adequate description will bear individual-intentional traits. You might ask, for instance, why Caesar crossed the Rubicon, why Cromwell dissolved the Long Parliament, or why Hitler invaded Poland. In these examples, you are looking for answers to a question about the actions of one particular historic individual. What distinguishes such cases from that of Briony Tallis, apart from the obvious fact that her storytelling is itself subject of a story, is that the narrative is not told by the protagonists themselves. You may thus think that taking seriously the psychological dimension of narrative sense making, in the way I described in the previous section, requires the narrator to understand the agent's psychology through an act of *Einfühlung*, an act of empathy. And you may think,



with e.g. Karsten Stueber,<sup>17</sup> that this can be accomplished through a simulative process.

I will not, in what follows, be concerned with making sense of historical events that can be accounted for in terms of the doings of individuals. Rather, I will be concerned with social events that, though intentional in the loose sense I described at the beginning of this paper, are not brought about by one individual agent, or tightly defined set of such agents. What I have in mind here are complex social events: events that, though they supervene on sets of individual actions, cannot be reductively accounted for in terms of sets of such actions. About events of this kind, it is a pressing question whether the narrative, psychological constructivism I sketched earlier is a suitable methodology. You may think that the historian, when considering complex social events, is not in a position to build on action experience, since this experience would have to be of a somehow collective nature and since you may doubt that there are such collective experiences. You may think that historical sense making, as far as complex events are concerned, simply has no psychological dimension. Or, at best, that the historian's role is to consider a number of individual psychological narratives of one and the same event – narratives which may be quite starkly distinct – in his efforts at arriving at a unified view, and explanation, of what happened. The synthesis, the contextualization, occurs then only in the historian's interpretation of what happened. In the case of a complex social event, so you might think, there is no unified phenomenology, akin to that of the agent in individual action. A number of agents (and often a very great number at that) will be involved who cannot be said to all undergo, and remember, the same unified experience. After all, the war stories of an English academic deciphering German code at Bletchley Park will be very different from those of an American pilot flying a plane over Omaha Beach. To claim that they shared an experience which the historian could integrate into a unified collective phenomenology of the Second World War would be a stretch at best. Joint experience, you may think, is limited to undertakings that involve actual bodily co-operation (see Axel

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<sup>17</sup>) K. Stueber, *Rediscovering Empathy: Agency, Folk Psychology, and the Human Sciences*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press 2006.

Seemann,<sup>18</sup> Elisabeth Pacherie),<sup>19</sup> and the participants in complex social events are just not typically co-operating in this way.

### B. *Joint Agency and Collective Memory*

There are exceptions, of course. Some complex historical events seem very strongly defined in terms of a collective experience shared by lots of participants. Examples include the march through the Brandenburg Gate that played a key role in the subsequent collapse of the GDR, or the storm of the Bastille that initiated the French Revolution. These are mass events which come with a joint phenomenology; and the historian will have to draw on accounts that spell out what it was like for *us* (marchers through the Gate and participants in the storm of the Bastille) in his attempt to explain what happened. Just as my dislike of my friend contributes to an explanation of my awful behaviour, and as Briony's interpretation of the scene she witnessed at the fountain plays a crucial role in explaining why she lied, so the collective elation, the sense of being in this together, that dominated the experience of the November events in Berlin is vital for understanding the fall of the GDR. In these cases, phenomenology really does explain.

But not every complex social event is characterised by a joint phenomenology in the way these examples are. I rather doubt whether there are complex social events whose participants do not enjoy a collective experience at all. Yet the scope of the joint experience will usually be restricted to only a small subset of those involved in the bigger event. It seems a safe bet to suppose that many participants in WWII will have undergone experiences that were joint in some sense. One imagines, for instance, that the allied troops enjoyed an experience of that kind when Rommel's troops retreated at El Alamein. But the joint experience really is only of that battle and not the war, and a historically adequate understanding of the latter will hinge only to a very limited degree on the interpretation of this or any other small-scale joint experience. They are just not representative of the larger event, which curtails their explanatory relevance.

<sup>18</sup> A. Seemann, "Joint Agency: Intersubjectivity, Sense of Control, and the Feeling of Trust", *Inquiry* 52 (2) (2009), 500–515.

<sup>19</sup> E. Pacherie, "The Phenomenology of Joint Action: Self-Agency vs. Joint-Agency", in: A. Seemann (ed.), *Joint Attention: New Developments* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press 2011).

What follows from this observation? I already mentioned one possible conclusion. You may suppose that the historian's task cannot, in the case of complex social events, involve the integration of a phenomenological perspective into a larger context. In order for this to be possible, there would have to be a psychological life that is somehow representative of the event, and you might think that in many instances there just is no such life. In her efforts to make sense of past complex social events, the historian may still take seriously individual stories; but the resulting explanation won't be of a fundamentally psychological kind. Along these lines, the task of the historian is quite distinct in the two different kinds of historical events between which I distinguished in the previous section.

I am not convinced. There are, of course, a number of crucial typological differences between, say, the fall of the GDR and the Second World War. But the idea that some complex social events come with a collective phenomenology while others don't does not seem to divide historical phenomena at their joints; or, at any rate, it is a distinction that can be applied only with difficulty. Who is to say whether there was a unified collective phenomenology to the Battle of Trafalgar? A much more obvious, and practically applicable, taxonomical criterion is supplied by the consideration that historical events can differ tremendously in temporal duration and spatial extension. The fall of the GDR was over in a matter of a few months and played out mostly in Berlin and a few other East German cities, while the Second World War dragged on for almost six years and eventually involved the better part of the globe. This fact surely must matter to the historian. In a short and local event, particularly if it is as peaceful as the 1989 revolution, there won't be a massive turnover of participants, and for that reason alone the experience of its participants will be comparatively homogeneous. The psychological mode of explanation, I suggest, is available to the historian even in drawn-out social events; but she will have to contend with a far greater divergence in the content of the stories that are being told about it. This certainly adds an additional layer of complexity to her task. But it doesn't force her to give up on the attempt to explain what happened by drawing on the participants' experiences.

I said that the role of narrative into historical sense making was twofold. Its role is, first, to provide explanations of what happened by integrating a description of the event in its larger psychological and social context. Secondly, narratives serve as externalised memories – as publicly accessible

containers of what happened. And implicit in this thought, I suggested, is the consideration that explanations of one and the same event shift over time, depending on narrative development. This idea is at the core of what I called, with McEwan, ‘psychological realism’. Now if the phenomenal dimension of a historical event is retained in narratives, and if these narratives change over time, then of course their experiential content changes. And one way in which this may happen is that the joint phenomenology of complex social over time may be retrospectively altered in scope, through developments of subsequent narrative accounts of what happened, so as to include sets of agents who initially were not mutually aware of sharing an experience.

One way of seeing this is to think about the way in which participants in some complex social event can create a collective entity that is in some sense experientially based *in the absence of shared actual experiences*. Consider the case of war veterans. They often make use of the first person plural when talking about the complex event they participated in, and they do so in emphatic, emotionally laden ways (see Margaret Gilbert<sup>20</sup> for a relevant account of this use of the first person plural). They mean to do more than just to refer to a set of persons, of whom they are one, who all participated in a particular kind of activity. They do seem to refer to a group whose members share something important – something of subjective, experiential significance. What is being shared cannot be the experience of actually having been jointly involved, on a battle field or a commando headquarters or wherever else, since there was, in fact, no such joint involvement. So the question arises what it is they have in common.

The classic answer to this question turns on the notion of collective intentionality (see John Searle,<sup>21</sup> Michael Bratman,<sup>22</sup> for relevant positions). You may think that what constitutes the group awareness of a great number of war veterans is their remembrance of a past shared intention to fight the inimical troops, for instance. But the trouble with the attempt to spell out what makes an event collective in terms of shared action intentions, or the remembrance thereof, is that you simply cannot assume that

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<sup>20</sup> M. Gilbert, “Walking Together”, in: M. Gilbert, *Living Together: Rationality, Sociality, and Obligation* (London: Rowman & Littlefield 1996, 177–194).

<sup>21</sup> Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*.

<sup>22</sup> M. Bratman, “Shared Cooperative Activity”, *Philosophical Review* 101 (2) (1992), 327–341.

all participants in a large-scale social event did in fact entertain the same (collective) intention.<sup>23</sup> You may have participated in the war effort for all sorts of different reasons – fighting the inimical troops is one possible motive, but there are a variety of others. You may just have been drafted; you may have joined the army to further your career, or you may have been a mercenary. You may have joined to see the world, you may have run away from problems at home: the list goes on. A great variety of different intentions and motives for fighting in the war are compatible with its participants' inclusion in a collective memory.

Since the appeal to collective intentions does not deliver a satisfactory answer to the question of what constitutes the sense of unity of a group such as the veterans of a war, the experiential alternative looks increasingly attractive. The obvious objection – that the veterans did not in fact share a joint experience – can be met, I think, by taking seriously what I called the 'psychological realism' of narrative sense making: the consideration that ultimately the explanation of what happened draws on narrative accounts of the participants' experience, and not on the experience itself. The experience of the participants in the war effort, I said, involved a strongly collective element, a sense of being in this together. And even though the actual experience was restricted to the participants in the event (the storm on the Bastille, the landing on Omaha Beach, the fall of the Berlin Wall), its scope is fluid in the stories that will, retrospectively, integrate the particular event in a larger context. If a pilot on D-Day were to reflect on the question of who was included in the scope of the joint experience, he may well conclude that it extended beyond those fellow soldiers who were actually perceptually present to him. He might think, for instance, that it included those in his vicinity – other pilots, say, whom he may never have met. And still later, thinking back, he might extend the scope even more: he might think of all those who fought the war on his side as within the scope of the joint experience.

That is the core consideration: the scope of collectivity experiences can be extended so as to include others who were not perceptually present to each other at the time the event took place. In his narrative account of what happened, an agent can retrospectively enlarge the scope of his experience.

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<sup>23</sup>) A. Seemann, "Why We Did It: An Anscombian Approach to Collective Action Explanation".

rience. The pilot who flew a plane over Omaha Beach may, looking back on his experience from a distance of several decades, and having arrived at a unified understanding of the war that wasn't available to him in June 1944, understand the collectivity scope of his experience as extending not just to those with whom he physically interacted, but come to see it, in the fullness of time, as being shared with all American pilots in the war, or even all Allied war veterans. This retrospective modification need not be a distortion of what happened. It may be a re-conceptualisation of experience. So there is, on occasion, a unified, collective phenomenological dimension for the historian to rely on in her attempt to make sense of complex historical events, even where these events play out over significant periods of time and in a great variety of distant locations.

It is important to see that this collective dimension of the experience is individuated after the fact; it need not, at the time of the event, have been experientially present to the participants. Just as my dislike of my friend is conceptualized as such only with hindsight, as I try to make sense of my dismal behaviour, so the understanding of a complex social event such as the war may become available to the American pilot only in retrospect. And just as the individuation of my mental state as a dislike can be integrated, narratively, into the larger context of the event so as to yield an explanation of my behaviour that wasn't available prior to that description of my mental state, so the understanding of the war as a jointly experienced event opens up ways of explaining what happened that did not exist prior to this understanding.

This is not to say, of course, that large-scale events such as WWII can be comprehensively accounted for in terms of a group of agents' collective phenomenology. No matter how liberally you interpret the idea that the scope of collectivity can be expanded retroactively, there are participants, or groups of participants, in WWII that have no collective phenomenology in common. Thus, the war experience of a German working in the concentration camps will have nothing to do with those of a British writer of code at Bletchley. Here the historian's task really is to integrate starkly diverging narratives into one comprehensive account of the event. Nevertheless, if the present line of thought is on the right track, collective phenomenology plays an important role for the historian's task. In the final section, I will introduce an example in order to illustrate my train of thought; but beforehand, I am going to expand on the metaphysical sketch

begun in the first part of the paper so as to illustrate how it applies to collective experiences and the narratives that build on them.

### C. *Metaphysical Underpinnings, Part II*

It follows from the relational-realist view I introduced earlier that joint experiences are to be characterised in terms of a relation between object of experience, perceiver (or, at any rate, subject of experience), and the other person. This means that the other person features directly in the jointly engaged subject's experience; it is what makes the experience 'shared'. Just as, on my account, the ontological objectivity of what there is does not entail independence of natural objects and actions or other events, neither does it entail the independence of other persons. Your experience of another person, and her mental life, is not appropriately conceived as a representation of that person. Your experience is rendered accurate (or not) by a reality to which you have access through your basic acquaintance with it. And just as you can enjoy such an acquaintance with the physical aspect of what there is, so you can be acquainted with other persons. Experiences which you may think of as in some way shared build on this kind of acquaintance.

I said that it wasn't only the individuation of particular objects of experience which depended upon an independent reality; it was also the connections between objects and events, causal as well as temporal, that did. This thought explains how it can be that we sometimes are in a position to ascribe, in retrospect, joint experiences to groups of people with whom we weren't actually physically engaged (as in the case of the war veterans). It isn't, necessarily, that the scope of a joint experience is defined by the engagement of a group of people who are perceptually present to each other; what the experience is about can be such that it allows for an *ex post facto* conceptualization which modifies the scope of that experience. As before, the adequacy of a joint memory does not merely depend on previous accounts of the remembered event, or on the experience of the event itself; it ultimately depends on both the independent reality with which you are acquainted and which renders adequate (or not) a narrative account of what happened, and on your biological and cultural practices.

This relational-realist way of thinking about joint experience opens up a way of accounting for the explanatory power of social phenomena. If you

take it that reference to such phenomena can be explanatorily helpful, you run the risk of being committed to ontological holism – the idea that social phenomena exist independently of their constituent individuals. But if you deny the viability of holism, perhaps because you think that social phenomena can be entirely accounted for by the behaviour of their constituent individuals, you run the risk of depriving social phenomena of their explanatory power (see Kincaid<sup>24</sup> for a good account).

This apparent dilemma has resulted in a huge body of literature. One of the most promising attempts to come to grips with it is Gilbert's<sup>25</sup> notion of a 'plural subject', which is constituted (roughly) by a number of individual agents interdependently and simultaneously pooling their wills in the joint pursuit of a joint goal, and which creates a number of rights and obligations for each of its members. Gilbert argues that plural subject theory can do justice to both the demands of ontological holism and individualism; the theory acknowledges that plural subjects are constituted by individuals while still leaving room for the consideration that they can have states of mind with explanatory power which are not reductively analyzable in terms of the mindsets of the individuals who form the plural subject. In an interesting paper, Tor Egil Forland<sup>26</sup> builds on Gilbert's account to suggest that plural subject theory allows to think of phenomena such as the 'Zeitgeist' of the 1960s as social emergents with real explanatory power (the joint commitment of the involved subjects gives rise to group beliefs) without having to accept that they are capable of holistic downward causation (the plural subject's existence is contingent on the individuals' joint commitment). I am not quite convinced that the notion of the *Zeitgeist* lends itself to a characterization in terms of a plural subject, as such subjects are united by some commitment to a shared goal or other intentional state, and it isn't obvious to me what such a goal or state could be for members of the *Zeitgeist* – it seems that it unites rather diffuse, and diverse, goals, beliefs, and other states of mind of its constituent subjects, not all of which are propositional and not all of which (if any) need be shared between these constituents. But my main worry is of a different

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<sup>24</sup> Kincaid, *Reduction, Explanation, and Individualism*.

<sup>25</sup> M. Gilbert, "Concerning 'Individualism' versus 'Holism'", in: M. Gilbert, *On Social Facts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1989, 427–436).

<sup>26</sup> T.E. Forland, "Mentality as a Social Emergent: Can the *Zeitgeist* Have Explanatory Power?", *History and Theory* 47 (2008), 44–56.



kind. It besets all accounts who start from the assumption, as virtually everyone working on the subject does, that the distinction between holism and individualism is, in fact, corresponds to something real – that a meaningful distinction can be drawn between phenomena involving individual agents and their collective counterparts. Once you accept the distinction, you are immediately faced with the problem of how to reconcile the two – of how to explain that collective phenomena seem, on occasion, to be able to do explanatory work (consider e.g. macroeconomics), but do not force us to ascribe ontological independence to them. The best you can do, if working within such a paradigm, is some more or less uneasy compromise, of which the idea of a plural subject is an example. That it is a compromise becomes evident once you consider that the plural subject is constituted by an act of the participants' interdependent joining of wills in the pursuit of a shared goal. It is this act that is meant to constitute the plurality of the resulting subject. And it is this act that is meant to explain how the plural subject can hold a belief (or other state of mind) not enjoyed by any of the constituent subjects. In one of Gilbert's examples, you and I may, as the parents of little Johnny, jointly entertain the belief that he ought to go to bed by ten pm, even though I privately think he ought to be in bed by nine and you think he ought to be in bed by eleven. But because we are jointly committed to the parenting of Johnny, we as a plural subject entertain a belief that neither of us subscribes to independently.

If you, like me, believe in the occasional usefulness of Ockham's Razor, you may suspect that this phenomenon can be accounted for in a rather more straightforward way. You may think our agreement on Johnny's bedtime is not best thought of as the state of mind of a plural subject, but of you and me entering an old-fashioned *compromise*. We reluctantly agree on ten o'clock as the kid's bedtime because I can't convince you of my views, and you can't convince me of yours. We are two reasonable people trying to get on with a job we've got to carry out together: that's all. No-one thinks Johnny ought to go to bed by ten. We make ten his bedtime because it's halfway between our respective views about when the lights should go out for him. If this view is right, there is no plural subject here, and the fact that we send Johnny to bed by ten is not underpinned by a plural mental state with explanatory power. Of course this brief discussion does not constitute a full-fledged objection to Gilbert's influential and well-worked out views, but it may serve to illustrate the general point: on any view that accepts the dichotomy between holistic and individualistic ways

of accounting for social phenomena, it will be difficult to attribute explanatory power to social events without endowing them with ontological independence in a holistic sense.

The view I have sketched in this paper offers a different outlook. It resists acceptance of the distinction between individual-reductive and holistic accounts of social phenomena. That distinction, on the view recommended here, is a false alternative. What constitutes joint engagement is a particular kind of experience – an experience of acting, feeling, or otherwise ‘being in for it’ (if you want) with someone else. Such experiences are constituted by the other person’s featuring in them. And your direct acquaintance with the other person connects you with what there is in a way that makes this kind of experience available. On this relational-realist view, neither individuals nor collectives are ontologically independent. Neither individuals nor groups exist independently of anyone’s experience or thought, any more than Mount Everest or Mount Shasta do. What is so independent is reality which can give rise to experiences we may think of in individual or collective terms. But reality itself doesn’t come chopped up as objects, including persons, or collections thereof. That it may be experienced as so individuated is jointly due to the world and to our biological and cultural practices.

It follows that we are not forced to accept the supposed alternative between individualist and holistic accounts of social phenomena. In my view, the entire attempt to account for social events either reductively or holistically, or in terms of some middle ground, is misguided. Explanations of social events draw on experiences, perceptual and otherwise. If these experiences are joint (and remember that *ex post facto* modification is possible), then invoking collective terms in the effort to make sense of an event stand a chance of success. But that joint narratives do, on occasion, explain, tells us nothing about whether or not there are collective entities. It tells us something about the nature of reality with which we are acquainted, and which doesn’t know of collectives, individuals, mountains, or any other notions by means of which we may carve it up.

#### D. *An Illustration*

In order to keep the task of illustrating the kind of historical sense making I have in mind manageable within the confines of this paper, I will not elaborate on an event as long and near-global as WWII. Any explanatory

sketch I could attempt of an event whose complexity is as daunting as that of the Second World War would swiftly disintegrate into caricature. I am hence going to rely on the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9th, 1989, as an example of a brief and homogenous historical event that is nevertheless complex in my sense (and even so, I will have to crave the reader's indulgence for unavoidable over-simplification). That is, it is an event some of whose characteristics cannot be made sense of by looking at the actions of individuals. Nevertheless, it is an intentional event in that the historian (rather than, say the sociologist) could not exhaustively explain it without taking seriously its collective psychological dimension – a dimension whose scope, or so I suggested, is subject to *ex post facto* modification. Consider this brief eyewitness account of the night in question, written ten years later for Time Magazine:

After dark, Germans poured through the wall, the first still in their night-clothes, sleepwalkers into history. Ten thousand of them partied and hammered, or simply looked around dazed at the strange new world without the Thousand-Year Wall. The next night, the bulldozers began to move in and the opening became official. I watched it happen in the Bornholmer Strasse, a checkpoint in a suburb near my flat. It had the feel of a neighborhood party, with housebound grandmothers shouting down from the tenements, "Bring me a piece of the Wall up, son!" as if calling for an *apfelstrudel*, and separated families meeting again. When the first chunks of the Wall came flying out, one hit my eye and dislodged my contact lens. (That enabled a claim to my managing editor for "Lost contact lens, due to falling Berlin Wall.") Someone brought out glasses and vodka, with chunks of the Wall's concrete instead of ice in the drinks.<sup>27</sup>

This passage expresses poignantly what it was like to participate in (or even just be an eye-witness of) the fall of the wall. The sheer incredibility of what was going on, the amazing speed with which a structure that had held millions of people hostage was being dismantled (and with it the regime whose repressive power had made that structure possible), the collective elation that made the experience so powerful: all this is expressed in the above quote. But note that this narrative could only have been produced

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<sup>27</sup>) [http://205.188.238.181/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1902809\\_1902810\\_1905247-3,00.html#ixzz13CQC5Kpu](http://205.188.238.181/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1902809_1902810_1905247-3,00.html#ixzz13CQC5Kpu).

well after the fact: there would have been no way, ten years earlier, to ascribe the collective experience to ‘ten thousand Germans’. There would have been no way of referring to them as ‘sleepwalkers into history’. The people who hammered away at the wall could not know to what extent they were making history (and what turn that history would take). They did not know that they were participants in an event which, ten years on, would be remembered as an experience shared by all those pouring through the Brandenburg Gate, handing out and accepting bananas and chocolate, and chipping away at the wall. This description of the event is possible only with hindsight. It is an account of a collective experience whose massive scope – shared as it was between thousands of individuals – could be established only much later. It is a narrative that individuates a shared mental life retrospectively. This does not mean that it stipulates such a life where really there was none; it means that it frames a piece of narrated collective psychology differently than an earlier interpreter – writing, perhaps, a few months after the event – would have done.

The account makes available new explanations of what happened. It does so by integrating the event into its psychological and social context – by relating it to other eyewitness accounts of that same night, to the events that went before (such as the increasing porousness of the Austrian-Hungarian border, the protests that had been taking place in the GDR all summer long, and the announcement by the Berlin party chief Guenther Schabowski that visas for visits to the FRG would be immediately available), and to the consequences it yielded. The journalist’s account allows the historian to construct a new narrative of the events of 1989, and thus to establish new causal connections between the event and its psychological and social environment. This narrative takes experience seriously. The historian may trace the collective feeling of elation and relief back to the decades of oppression, and increasing lack of resources, that were finally being overcome, and he may explain the GDR’s speedy dismantling and its subsequent unification with the FRG by assigning an important role to the power of the shared experience.

Such explanation is, in a sense, perfectly general. The viability of the psychological explanation of why the GDR fell so quickly is dependent on an implicit appeal to law-like statements (such as, perhaps, the assertion that publicly expressed discontent with an oppressive regime, once it reaches critical mass, constitutes an existential threat to that regime) whose

validity is itself not context-dependent. But the extent to which the appeal to such statements can yield successful explanations depends entirely on how the events at issue, and the causal connections between them, are being individuated. In the psychological domain that is at issue here, the success of the explanation depends on the collectivity scope of the experience: you can convincingly argue that the power of the experience of November 9th, 1989 played a causal role in the GDR's speedy demise only if the collective element of that experience is understood as pertaining to 'ten thousands of Germans' who were not jointly involved in a literal, perceptual sense that night. On the account presented here, one important task of the historian thus is psychological. It is concerned with constructing psychological explanations of complex social events with a collective phenomenological dimension whose scope is subject to *ex post facto* interpretation. That historical explanations of this kind do, on occasion, succeed supports the idea that collective experience is a psychological, and historically relevant, reality.