From Truth to Warranted Assertion

The challenge in the remaining chapters is to outline a comprehensive theory of evaluation of books in historiography. However, before a positive theory can be laid out there is still more groundwork to be done and many problems need to be solved. I ended the last chapter by saying that a text is the main cognitive unit in historiography. It is therefore necessary to spell out how texts can be evaluated. It should be clear that I am talking about their cognitive evaluation, that is, the evaluation of historiographical texts as products of knowledge (cognition), and not, for example, with regard to their aesthetic qualities.

Now, the notion of a ‘cognitive unit’ is admittedly rather vague. It has been made clear that I do not regard a historiographical text as one whole. Instead, I suggested that they can be perceived as manifestations of reasoning and decomposable arguments for historiographical theses. A historiographical argument can be divided into the meaning component of a historiographical thesis and the parts that play an evidential role for that specific thesis. Both components are naturally cognitively important, but the distinction means that it is the theses defended in the works of history that matter most. An even more important consequence is that the reasoning (argumentation) component and the conclusion (thesis) component of a historiographical argument assume different epistemological roles, as a consequence of which different epistemic standards apply to them: one should not inquire whether a historiographical argument can be true since arguments are not expected to be true and false but are, rather, judged according to their form. In logic and the theory of argumentation it is asked whether arguments are valid or invalid, sound or unsound, etc. In the case of historiography, these requirements must be relaxed, but the focus should nevertheless be on the success of historiographical arguments as forms of reasoning.
The actual problem with regard to truth-functionality is the question of whether historiographical theses, the conclusions of historiographical argumentation, can be true. If not, why not? This provides us with the first two specific questions to tackle in this chapter. What does the truth of a statement require? And do historiographical theses possess the required qualities? My focus is on the correspondence theory of truth and the theory of truth-makers. After considering these questions, I introduce the notion of epistemic authority. At the end of the chapter, I explain what warranted assertion means. It is my view that successful historiographical theses amount to warranted assertions. The emphasis in this chapter is on the history of philosophy and specifically on what philosophers in the pragmatist tradition have said on these topics.

The correspondence theory of truth and truth-makers

The correspondence theory of truth is arguably the most venerable and oldest theory of truth. By some accounts it goes back all the way to the roots of Western Philosophy, to Aristotle and Plato. Most epistemologists, such as Nicholas Rescher (who nevertheless develops a coherence theory of truth as a ‘criteriological theory’) (Rescher 1973, 9), for example, agree that it is also the most intuitive theory for expressing the meaning of truth. David Armstrong writes that ‘it is entirely natural to think that a proposition is true or false according as it corresponds or fails to correspond to an independent reality’ (1997, 128). Further, Mandelbaum thinks that the correspondence theory is presupposed by all works of history (1938, 184).

We can understand the correspondence theory of truth as saying that a proposition or a statement is true if and only if the state of affairs stated prevail; in this way a true proposition or the statement corresponds to ‘facts’. When I say that the statement ‘there is a cup on the table’ is true, it requires that there is indeed a cup on the table. But what does ‘correspondence’ mean more specifically in the correspondence theory of truth? Without going into all metaphysical intricacies, ‘correspondence’ could in general be understood as the intuitive idea that some factual elements in the world correspond to true propositions and thus make them true. In this sense, the correspondence theory seems naturally connected to the truth-maker and truth-bearer theory. Armstrong has suggested that ‘the correspondence theory tells us that, since truths require a truth-maker, there is something in the world that corresponds to a true proposition. The correspondent and the truth-makers are the same thing’ (1997, 128). He also claims that ‘anybody who is attracted