

## Counterfactuals in Historical Narratives

A long-standing methodological debate concerns whether (good) history needs to involve counterfactuals. My contribution to this debate is twofold. First, I survey some of the reasons given in favor of thinking that counterfactuals are necessary for (good) historical narratives, and find that such reasons are not compelling. ‘

Secondly, I offer a diagnosis of what the debate is: each side of the debate relies on a plausible intuition, but the two sides construe counterfactuals differently, so the debate equivocates. For friends of counterfactuals, these are devices without which our everyday speaking and thinking would be severely impoverished. Those who think historical discourse can (in principle) be purged of counterfactuals must be construing them differently, as an appeal to circumstances that never actually occurred; and it is sensible to think that appeal to what didn't happen can't clarify what did happen.

What seems to be required is a notion of counterfactuals that those concerned with ontological implications could tame. I argue that such a notion exists, deflating the metaphysical debate surrounding the use of counterfactuals in historical narratives. To this end, I use the notion of multiple timescales, familiar from both cognitive science (in how infant cognition develops) and the foundations of physics (different irreversible processes developing at different paces). The notion of a timescale is, however, common currency in historiography as well, e.g. in Fustel de Coulanges' work on the ancient city.

I propose we think of counterfactuals as devices that covertly anchor discourse to a timescale (much as tense overtly does in Discourse Representation Theory) or, more often, switch discourse from one timescale to another. If so, anything ontologically problematic with counterfactuals could be construed as boiling down to the ontology of time (which I remain neutral about). I emphasize, however, that this is only one way to construe the use of counterfactuals in historical narratives, and some uses may deliberately not be ontologically innocent. My aim is only to offer a way out to the actualist who recognizes the expressive richness that would be lost by avoiding rife use of counterfactuals.