The Poverty of Anti-realism

Critical Perspectives on Postmodernist Philosophy of History

Edited by
Tor Egil Førland and Branko Mitrović

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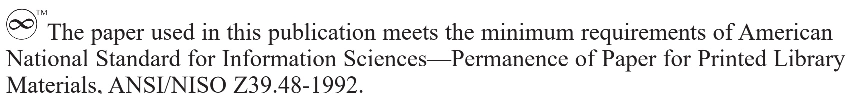
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Introduction

Being Realist about History

Tor Egil Førland and Branko Mitrović

ANTI-REALISM

For decades postmodernist philosophers of history have insisted that the past can never be known to us. Whether they agree or not with founding editor of *Rethinking History* Alun Munslow that denying the existence of past reality would be "stupid and dangerous,"[1] they have asserted, for a variety of reasons, that attempts to present it historiographically are doomed to fail. In their view historiography can never provide true accounts of the past. This unremitting skepticism is what we denote anti-realism. This includes variations of the view that historians' beliefs cannot be true on the basis of correspondence to a stable past that is independent of these beliefs—that the past described in historical accounts is constructed by historians. Anti-realists regard the past as either beyond reach, fluid, or impossible to depict by the means available to historians because narrative historiography forms the past in a mold alien to that past. Another line of anti-realist thinking argues that the colligatory terms used in synthetic descriptions of past events, such as "the Renaissance" or "the French Revolution," have no counterparts in the past independent of these conceptualizations. We contend that such anti-realist views are impediments to comprehending the past, and that their dispersion therefore is detrimental to historians' attempts to attain knowledge of past events. Fortunately, postmodern anti-realism is unable to sustain its dire view of the truth-tracking ambitions of historians. This volume is intended to show the poverty of anti-realist philosophy of history, attacking its philosophical foundations and laying bare its political implications.

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Anti-realism in various guises has been around since antiquity. Arrian in his *Anabasis* attributed anti-realist views to the historian Callisthenes.[2] The etiology of contemporary anti-realist philosophy of history leads back to the anti-foundational and poststructural ways of thinking that from the late 1960s increasingly gained sway in parts of the humanities and the "soft" social sciences. Tracing that development would require a different book. Instead, we turn our efforts to pushing it back. The contributions in this volume discuss several aspects of anti-realist philosophy of history: some criticize its philosophical claims, while others trace its history or focus on its political implications. A common thread is the conviction that anti-realism, despite laudable observations and analyses by some of its propagators, is deficient in critical ways.

Fortunately, the vast majority of philosophers and historians seem to agree with us. Most philosophers simply ignore contemporary philosophy of history altogether. "Philosophers and philosophers of history sometimes operate in two disconnected worlds," Chiel van den Akker lamented after taking over as editor-in-chief of the *Journal of the Philosophy of History* in 2022.[3] We submit that the main explanation is that postmodernist philosophy of history is based on presumptions and ideas that their philosophy colleagues have never subscribed to, such as poststructuralist, deconstructionist linguistic theory; an underlying idealist metaphysics; long-discarded notions of theory-dependent perception; and a fixation on narrative to the detriment of all other aspects of the historical métier such as explanation, causation, hermeneutics, the weighing and use of evidence, or evaluation of theories. Admittedly, writing narratives is an important part of what historians do, and from a distance it appears as the most manifest aspect of the craft. Hayden White based his vastly influential *Metahistory* (1973) as well as his subsequent career on this misleading observation, disregarding that such narratives belong only to the "superstructure" of historians' work: a fact that he as a practicing historian must have been well aware of. (Another fact that also drowned in the deluge of narrative theory of history is that in addition to narratives, historians use other forms to present their work, such as extended arguments and analyses.[4]) The superstructure notion is due to the prominent anti-realist Leon Goldstein, who, publishing his *Historical Knowledge* only a few years after *Metahistory*, noticed that what he denoted the "infrastructure," namely historians' attempts to come to grip with the evidence, is both more time-consuming and more important than their crafting a narrative.[5]

Like philosophers, historians by and large have also left anti-realism by the wayside, although at least the majority are much more alert to philosophy of history than are most philosophers. Hayden White is a household name among contemporary academic historians, and his tropological notions have circulated widely in the discipline. But his narrative theories have hardly changed

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the historical craft. Moreover, White, a historian by training, is the exception and as such no indication of practicing historians' awareness of philosophers of history. One can surely be a fully functionable academic historian today (at least outside the Netherlands) without having any idea of the writings of that other leading narrative philosopher of history for the last generation, Frank Ankersmit. Aware of no survey among historians on this question, we assert that the lack of impact is due to historians' firm belief—attested to also by *History and Theory* editor-in-chief Ethan Kleinberg—that their accounts do in fact detail the events and societies of the past.[6] Surely the vast majority would never claim that they depict the whole past—not even within the topic and time period on which they focus—or nothing but the past: academic historians today are aware of the limitations the sources bring, the subjectivity of their own background and perspective, and the literary character of their narrative or other discourse. Admittedly, some historians, mainly in the introductory parts of their work, pay lip service to anti-realist tenets. But once they set about doing their job, referring to earlier writings on the subject and discussing the evidence they use for their own accounts, anti-realism is placed where it in our view belongs: on the shelf to be forgotten.

The upshot is that mainstream—that is, more or less anti-realist—philosophers of history today operate in a milieu of their own, separate from other philosophers and practicing historians alike. The reason is twofold: postmodernist philosophers of history have gotten their philosophy wrong, and their theoretical writings are irrelevant to practicing historians. So our mission is to save the philosophy of history from itself, or more precisely, from the misguided notions that currently dominate the discipline.

WEAK ANTI-REALISM: BEWARE OF STRAW MEN

Some versions of anti-realism are quite harmless. Theorists adhering to what we term *weak anti-realism* merely fight straw men whom they sometimes label naïve realists. It seems the first to use this label, applying it to "historical students who believe that by their researches they can discover the past *wie es eigentlich geschehen ist* [sic]," was R. G. Collingwood in his 1926 Lectures on the Philosophy of History.[7] Since naïve realism is seldom defined and naïve realists tend to go unnamed, the function of the epithet is primarily to make those who employ it appear to occupy a position of reason against unidentified opponents.[8] Hoping to engender a discussion about real positions and not about straw men, we shall begin by making clear what is not entailed by our conception of realism in historiography. The positive side of realism will follow.

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First, historical realism does not claim that historians have access to the past by some kind of direct experience of it. The past, whatever its ontological status, is gone and has left the present nothing but remains. What is often overlooked is that this elusiveness is not peculiar to the more or less distant past but occurs the moment things (widely conceived) move from present to past tense. This book is a residue of past thinking and writing. Yet we assert that the introduction you are reading at present—whether in the printed book or the electronic version—is evidence that Tor Egil Førland and Branko Mitrović in 2023 edited a volume criticizing anti-realist philosophy of history. We further assert that despite the undisputed inability of anyone, including ourselves, to access this past activity, no one in their sound mind would for a minute think of disputing this fact on philosophical (or other) grounds. Admittedly, the majority of historical inferences are backed by less solid evidence than is our editorship. But the epistemological principle is the same. At issue is the epistemological status of remains when they are used as evidence in historians' accounts or analyses of the past. And our claim is that when the evidence is good enough and handled in accordance with sound historical methodology, there is every reason to assume and little reason to doubt that the accounts created (or constructed if you like) in this way correspond to the past. For their work, historians do not require direct access to the past any more than geologists need access to the center of the earth or astronomers to distant stars. Like these sciences, historical research is done by studying causal effects of inaccessible objects of study. The effects studied by historians are remains of the past that are employed as evidence.

Second, historical realism does not claim that historians can grasp the past in the same way as our objects of study did. Contemporary scholars are blessed (or from a super-realist perspective: cursed) with the benefit of hindsight as well as with improved vision in many respects, including other perspectives than those of our agents of the past. We cannot unsee what we have seen and unlearn what we have learned. We agree with F. W. Maitland's observation, quoted approvingly by David Lowenthal and Keith Jenkins, "We are modern and our words and thoughts can not but be modern . . . it is too late for us to be early English."[9] Moreover, as Jenkins and Lowenthal also observe, much of the past is lost to us—in fact all but fragments. Again, this is not unique to historians: astronomers and geologists have likewise no chance of getting acquainted with more than a fragment of their objects of study. In some rich archives, fortunate historians can immerse themselves in documents and other remnants from the past and thereby gain an unprecedented overview of events and relationships of that past. But we can never immerse ourselves in that past itself. The historian's task is not to go native but to establish, on the basis of the evidence, what happened and to understand how and why.

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Third, historians cannot discard their own background, opinions, and worldview. These factors surely influence the accounts presented by historians. Realism should not be confused with neutral objectivism. Realists need not deny that when historians ask their research questions and select and present their evidence, they do so not only in accordance with their training but also under the influence of their geographical and cultural background—as does any scholar or scientist. Of course, their theories are shaped not only by the evidence—the data—but also by their assumptions of how the world works and how best to comprehend this world. Yet none of this makes knowledge of the past inaccessible to historians.

Fourth, historians' mode of presentation—their arguments, their analyses, and their narratives—and the impression left on their audience are influenced by presentational forms such as dissertational and literary styles, tropes, and so forth. The evidence needs contextualization and often explanation and cannot speak for itself in isolation. And even if it could, every written source, just as every historical account, is a vessel for linguistic meaning that comes on top of (or lies beneath) what Behan McCullagh calls the basic meaning of the text.[10] Realists need not deny the power of the linguistic or literary form inherent in the evidence and in their own accounts. Like all good historians, they should be conscious of them and aware of their effects on readers: the potential for signifying. But this potential does not incapacitate historiography's ability to present accurate accounts of the past: to capture the past, to use the phrase David Weberman suggests in chapter 6.

Fifth, historians' accounts and analyses of the past are replete with concepts and ideas that were unthinkable or at least unthought at the time the events unfolded. Indeed, every narrative sentence in Danto's meaning of this concept provides the historian with a vocabulary (or at least with knowledge) unavailable to the agents. Realists live happily with this, as they do with the observation that historians slice up or conceive (we might even say construct) events and make connections—and surely miss other connections—in ways that differ from how events were conceived and evaluated at the time they unfolded. Historians write not for the past—how alien such historiography would appear!—but for the present. And sometimes, with good fortune, they write for the not-so-distant future as well.

REALIST HISTORY: THE POSITIVE SIDE

Having discarded the notions that historical realism must entertain the ideas discussed above, we can turn to the positive side of the realist coin. At the heart of historical realism lies the basic confidence that the past has existed,

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in addition to a couple of other convictions. We briefly outline the most significant ones below.

First, the past is unchangeable—how could it be otherwise when it is gone? But our conceptions, descriptions, and interpretations of it can and will vary. Jenkins says the "epistemological fragility" of historical research and writing leads to "multifarious" accounts.[11] Perhaps unwittingly, he sides with the realists by formulating a credo almost Orwellian in its tenor, namely "one past—many histories."[12] That it must be so is easily seen by heeding Ian Verstegen's suggestion in chapter 7 of employing Roy Bhaskar's two-domains dichotomy. On the one hand, there is the intransitive object of study: the immalleable past. On the other, there is our transitive knowledge of it, a knowledge that is subject to change, improvement, new perspectives, descriptions, and interpretations, and also, hopefully, an increasing depth of comprehension.

That historians indeed are able to present true accounts of the past by assessing the available evidence is the second element of historical realism. Admittedly, not all accounts presented by historians have stood up to critical scrutiny by colleagues and posterity. Methodological flaws, slanted perspectives, untrammeled ideology, and all kinds of biases sometimes destroy the veracity or accuracy of historical work. The history of historiography is a road full of car wrecks and abandoned vehicles, some of them revered and influential in their time. But this is no argument against historical realism, quite the contrary: realism is the basis for judging the truth and accuracy of factual claims in historiography.

Let us probe a little deeper into the epistemological limits and possibilities of historical research. Compared with the ability of some (not all) scientists to run experiments and the ability of some (not all) social scientists to conduct surveys to create new data, historians' inability to produce new evidence by replicating the past gives them an epistemological disadvantage. Like astronomers or geologists, historians are stuck with the residues left by the past and cannot combine creativity and funding to produce new evidence (though they sometimes discover unknown sources or utilize old ones in innovative ways). Clearly this introduces uncertainty into all inferences about the past, including instances such as our knowledge about who were our grandparents or what we had for dinner last Sunday. Knowledge about the past is never absolutely certain. Historical realists are reconciled with this.

This admission may seem to put us in line with the anti-realist view we criticized above, namely, that the past can never be known to us. What is then the difference between realism and anti-realism: Are we merely postulating a distinction without difference? The answer to this dilemma is that from the realist point of view, propositions about the past can be true or false on the basis of correspondence to the past, independently of historians, historians' work and beliefs, and the justification they have for their beliefs about the

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past. Contrary to this view, anti-realists typically deny that propositions about the past can be true or false on the basis of correspondence to the past, or to a past that is conceived as having happened independently of the historian. (Some anti-realists allow that propositions about the past can be true when it comes to simple events, but not when it comes to clusters of events such as "the Renaissance.") Skepticism that realists admit as valid, however, pertains to the justifications that historians can provide for their claims about the past. In this account, a historian may have a belief about the past that is true on the basis of correspondence to the past. The historian may also have sufficient justification for this belief, but he or she can never be absolutely certain that this justification is sufficient. For instance, it is sometimes difficult to be sure that new evidence may not emerge from some archive and refute the belief. Skepticism of this kind is not only unavoidable, but often healthy. A traditional definition of knowledge says that knowledge is justified true belief, and the realist position would be that historians can have true and justified beliefs about the past, but they can never be sure about the absolute adequacy of their justifications of these beliefs. As McCullagh puts it, "instead of saying that their well-supported conclusions about the world are simply true, historians should say that they are probably true, relative to the available evidence and to their culture at the time."[13]

The kind of skepticism that realists can (and should!) comfortably endorse thus states that historians can have knowledge about the past but that they can never be sure whether the evidence they have for that knowledge is adequate. If we understand knowledge as justified true belief, we can say that historians can know what happened in the past, but they can never be *absolutely* sure that they know it. Clearly, the same applies pretty much to all human intellectual endeavors—no knowledge is absolutely resistant to skepticism. In order to estimate threats of such skepticism, it is prudent to consider what is necessary in order to doubt typical historical facts. For instance, it is extremely well documented that Germany invaded Yugoslavia on April 6, 1941. A skeptic doubting the reality of this invasion would have to provide an exceptionally comprehensive explanation of how this overwhelming evidence came about—an explanation that might for example involve a transnational, multigenerational conspiracy (but by whom, and why?) whereby countless documents, testimonies, physical traces, and so forth were forged and maintained for decades without anyone catching on. What kind of new evidence could ever prove such a proposition? Skepticism has to be credible too, and in the case of much of historical knowledge it is hard to see what a credible skeptical position could be.

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STRONG ANTI-REALISM: THE ABSOLUTIST FALLACY

The craving for absolute certainty is the point at which anti-realists misconceive things. "All history is fictional, in the sense that it is a literary (rhetorical, aesthetic) construction based on evidence that is itself of *inevitably* questionable reliability," maintains Beverley Southgate, concluding that we can "never re-present that past (as history) in any way of which it makes sense to talk of 'truth' or 'certainty,' or in any way that is finally and irrefutably distinct from fiction."[14] Our skepticism is less total than that of Southgate: certainly some evidence is unreliable, but this does not mean that all evidence is unreliable. We may not know the reliability of some piece of evidence, but we seek to critically confirm it with other evidence. This procedure is the same as in other fields of empirical research. And even if we, for the sake of argument, were to grant that all evidence is in principle more or less uncertain, it would not make accounts that are built on evidence epistemologically equal to accounts that do not (or at least do not have to) adhere to evidential limitations, that is, fiction. Science does not deal in absolutes, so why should history? It makes no sense to deny the reliability of historical knowledge on the basis of much stronger criteria than those applied in other fields. And if such strict criteria were applied, it would lead to massive skeptical rejection of more or less all knowledge claims that are based on empirical evidence.

Southgate exemplifies the absolutist fallacy that has led otherwise perceptive philosophers of history astray. Leon Goldstein ought to be lauded for underlining that the overwhelming part of historians' métier is what he termed the "infrastructure": the tedious work to master the historical context and study the remains of the past in order to understand how they can be used as evidence for historical accounts. Goldstein saw this as far more important than the "superstructure" of narrative as well as non-narrative texts. He nevertheless focused so intensely on the epistemic unavailability of what he called "the real past" that he insisted "it is simply irrelevant to the practice of history and has no role to play in the determination of historical truth or falsity."[15] In Goldstein's self-proclaimed anti-realist view, what matters for adjudicating truth content is only historians' accounts of what he termed "the historical past." This phrase, which in ordinary language would be a pleonasm, is how Goldstein denotes the past as recounted in works of historiography and thus "constituted by the work of historians."[16] But of course the (real) past is absolutely critical to historians' accounts—which they profess are of the real past—since the evidence by which historians constitute what Goldstein denotes the historical past emanates from the real past. And the historians' inferences from the remains of the past—which they use as evidence—to their notions of what this past looked like, are as legitimate and can be as

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revealing of the real past as any everyday inference to the past, such as when a doctor takes remains of toxic fungi in a patient's stomach as evidence of the content of what might have been the patient's last meal without medical treatment on the basis of that inference.

A few words about construction of the past. Of course, historians cannot *re*construct the past: it is lost and gone forever. What they can do is recount what a segment of the past was like. There will of course be an unbridgeable gulf between the past—which belongs to the realm of happenings, events, and actions—and the words, drawings, films, three-dimensional models, or whatever historians employ to create an image of that past. But in this respect, historians are in the same boat as any scientist or indeed any person who attempts to paint (metaphorically or on a canvas) a picture of reality. If history collapses for this reason, it takes all other empirical disciplines, indeed almost all communication, with it in the fall. And the developmental success of humanity is strong evidence for the cognitive effectiveness of words and other devices we use for communication.

Which segment of the past historians depict is determined by their interests and the available data, whether archival or other. The resulting accounts are constructed or constituted by the historians and never spring to life by themselves, no matter how close to the sources the narrative lies. No historical realist in his or her sound mind would dispute this. They would insist, however, that the fact that the accounts are constructed by historians is irrelevant to the question of whether these accounts are veridical of the past. If the past corresponded saliently to the historical description, then historical realism is vindicated. And if the remains of that past in the form of historical evidence strongly suggest such correspondence, we are entitled to take it for granted. Moreover, since the description is written for a contemporary readership, it can—and should—of course use notions tailored to their comprehension and does not have to restrict itself to the idiom of the objects of study.

Southgate and Goldstein are, in different but related ways, examples of what we term *strong anti-realism*. This is the anti-realism that asserts that historians are unable to tell what happened in the past (or worse: the pasts). Reasons vary, from the inaccessibility of bygone eras to the incongruity of past events with the means that are at the historians' disposal for recounting them. A related but somewhat diluted version of anti-realism claims that there are so many ways to recount what happened in the past that there is no way of privileging one or some of them by saying these are more veridical or accurate than others. And indeed, sometimes neither the available evidence nor other cognitive criteria for evaluating competing theories suffice to rank historical accounts. But we must again avoid the absolutist fallacy. As Aviezer Tucker points out, historians do reach uncoerced historiographical consensus on which accounts are superior and which are inferior with regard to accuracy

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as well as scope, consistency, simplicity, and other cognitive virtues, and we can be as certain of these findings as we can of everyday facts.[17] Our quarrel with the strong anti-realists is not about degrees. We object to their claim that historians can *never* give accurate accounts of the past, or never judge the accuracy of historical accounts. Once anti-realists concede that historians can do so—even if they claim that the goal is achieved only in a minority of cases—they are no longer strong anti-realists. The mission of this book would then be completed and we could go on to discuss issues of real interest to historians, such as which criteria the evidence must fulfill before being used as a foundation for historical accounts.

Speech acts or acts of writing are actions. If strong anti-realists mean what they say when they refuse to grant historiography the ability to provide true accounts of the past (and consequently refuse to grant scholars the ability to decide whether historical accounts are successful in this respect), consistency demands that they cannot claim that their accounts of the existing literature, which comprises written evidence of the authors' past thinking, correspond to past historians' work and historiographical activity that happened in the past. For this reason alone, strong anti-realism is a non-starter. Anti-realists present past acts of writing apparently without realizing that their truth claims about past historiography implicit in their own writing amount to a massive performative contradiction. Realism is a prerequisite for anyone attempting to discuss works written in the past. Strong anti-realists undermine their own credibility by insisting on a line of reasoning that entails that their accounts of existing literature cannot correspond to intellectual and historiographical activity that happened in the past. The creation of all works of history and every other piece of literature is already in the past.

INSTITUTIONAL ENTRENCHMENT

The chapters in this book repeatedly show that logical consistency presents a significant challenge for contemporary philosophers of history. The logical problems of strong anti-realism are so obvious that one is entitled to wonder whether we have emulated our opponents and created an anti-realist straw man in order to have an easy target. The ensuing chapters will show that such tricks are sadly superfluous, as will perusal of classic anti-realist philosophy of history tracts such as Jenkins' *Rethinking History*, Munslow's *Deconstructing History*, or more recent publications such as Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen's *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography* or Paul Roth's *The Philosophical Structure of Historical Explanation*.[18] There is much of value in these books. But they all go overboard in their distaste of historical realism.

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Our criticism of postmodernist philosophy of history prompts the question of why, if strong anti-realism has such a poor foundation, it has managed to get such a dominant position within the field. The full answer must await a historical study (which of course must be realist or else it will be unable to say anything about this aspect of the past). We submit that to some degree it can be explained institutionally, by the role of leading journals in setting the tone and agenda and determining whose voices will be transmitted most loudly and who will hardly be heard at all.

Publication within philosophy of history is completely dominated by three journals, a number that indicates the limited size of the field. They are, in order of appearance, *History and Theory* (Wesley, 1960–), *Rethinking History* (Taylor & Francis, 1997–), and *Journal of the Philosophy of History* (Brill, 2007–). Since there are no other significant outlets for articles on the theory or philosophy of history, the editors of these journals by and large decide what is salient within the field. The fact that prominent postmodernists Alun Munslow and Frank Ankersmit were founding editors of, respectively, *Rethinking History* and *Journal of the Philosophy of History* indicates the position of these two fairly new journals. Currently all three journals have editors-in-chief (Ethan Kleinberg, Kalle Pihlainen, and Chiel van den Akker) squarely placed in the anti-realist camp, as are most (but not all) members of their editorial boards. Ankersmit sits on the editorial board of all three of them, as do Alan Megill and Jonathan Gorman.

Our focus on the philosophical positions of the editors of the main venues for articles on philosophy of history is not due to us being rejected and disgruntled. Quite the opposite: The two editors of this book have had numerous philosophy of history articles published in the journals of our choice and are living proof that you need not be a postmodernist philosopher of history to find an outlet for your articles. Moreover, all three journals have published articles by one or more of the contributors to the present book, proving that their publication policy is not decided by adherence to an anti-realist approach. But if the philosophical convictions of the editors and members of editorial boards had nothing to say for which articles they find worthy of publication, and which books they choose to promote by requesting reviews or creating forums for discussing them, it would be an instance of so strong objectivity as to undermine a major thesis of postmodern thinking, namely, that evaluations of quality are influenced by the evaluators' beliefs and opinions. Indeed, this conviction is shared by almost all scholars in the humanities today. We are no exception, although we do believe that scholars, including journal editors, are in no way completely in the thrall of their own persuasions, and that they heed cognitive values even if it means publishing articles whose approach or conclusions they do not share. If our book is fairly reviewed by the journals discussed here, it would be a strong counterargument to our suggestion that

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the dominance of anti-realist philosophy of history is partly due to the gatekeeping and agenda-setting role of journal editors. If it is ignored, the attempt to keep the critical perspectives submitted here off the radar would illustrate how hard it is for dissenting, realist voices to be heard.

ABOUT THE ARTICLES

Part I: Philosophical Contexts

The two articles in the first part of this collection are intended to place the debate about historiographical anti-realism in wider intellectual contexts and consider parallel theoretical debates in other fields to which arguments about historical anti-realism relate. Chapter 1, Adam Timmins's "Idealism in Historical Theory 1970–2020," places the advocacy of historical anti-realism and wider postmodernist theories that support it in the context of philosophical idealism. Similarities between postmodernist theorizing and idealist philosophies well known from the history of philosophy are often obvious, and various authors have made such parallels in the past. Such similarities have rarely been explored, however, and especially not in the case of postmodernist anti-realism in the philosophy of history. Timmins bases his analysis on well-established definitions of idealism and proceeds to analyze the idealist assumptions of four central types of anti-realist perspectives on history: first, Hayden White's view that formal properties of historical texts preclude faithful representations of what happened in the past; second, the poststructuralist view that words never establish reference to the world, which has direct anti-realist implications for historiography; third, the postmodernist view that it is impossible to elicit meanings from documents; and fourth, the irrealist view that the properties that the past can have are those that we ascribe to it. Timmins's analyses show that all these views fit under the standard understanding of idealism. The merit of his paper is thus that it demonstrates how idealist assumptions underwrite and pervade postmodernist and especially anti-realist perspectives on history. By doing this, Timmins shows that these positions do not introduce new and groundbreaking perspectives on historiography—rather, they are ultimately but variations of old and well-known idealist philosophies.

Chapter 2, Veli Virmajoki's "A Deceiving Resemblance: Realism Debates in Philosophy of Science and Philosophy of Historiography," analyzes the difference between conceptions of anti-realism in the philosophy of science and the philosophy of historiography. Virmajoki argues that these differences are significant and that the comparison reveals the poor quality of arguments in favor of anti-realism presented in the philosophy of historiography. These

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arguments are either too narrow or too general, he contends, and typically imply an anti-realist position in relation to all forms of knowledge. The important problem of much of anti-realist advocacy is thus that it actually says very little about anything specific to historiography, and it has much wider implications. The arguments typically stated in favor of anti-realism, Virmajoki points out, fail to be specific about historiography, and someone who is inclined to the realist worldview will hardly be convinced by them. At the same time, if these arguments are directed toward specific aspects of historiography, it becomes hard to derive anti-realism about historiography in general from them. Virmajoki's comparison of anti-realism in the philosophy of historiography with that in the philosophy of science thus concludes that any resemblance is deceiving. Because they are poor and unconvincing, arguments in favor of historiographical anti-realism fail to improve our understanding of historiographical practices, contrary to what anti-realism does in the philosophy of science.

Part II: Critiques

The second part of the book consists of four chapters that analyze various aspects of anti-realism and responses to it. Chapter 3, Branko Mitrović's "Historical Accuracy and Historians' Objectivity," discusses three common misconceptions about the realist understanding of the past. Historical realism is commonly associated with Leopold von Ranke's claim that historians should describe the past as it actually was. Mitrović compares this view with Aristotle's more simple and straightforward claim that historians describe things that happened. The difference introduced by the term "actually" is significant, and it brings Ranke's view in correlation with two other claims that are often associated with the realist position: that historians provide complete accounts of the past and that they select and approach their material with absolute objectivity. These views are then typically used in order to dismiss historical realism and argue that it cannot be taken to describe what historians do because it imposes unrealistic expectations on their work. As Mitrović sees it, however, all three expectations are incompatible with realist approaches to historiography and with realist perspectives on the past—Aristotle's understanding of what historians do is philosophically much sounder than Ranke's. The past was the way it was; it makes no sense to separate some of its aspects and claim that they are the actual nature of past events, what actually happened. In Mitrović's account, historians strive to answer specific questions that interest them, while their readers seek responses to their own questions when they read historical works. The expectations to provide a complete account of the past, and with absolute objectivity, simply make no sense once we take into account that the aim of historical works is to answer historical

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questions. Consequently, the criticism that attributes such expectations to historical realism, and then dismisses historical realism as an unrealistic project, simply misses the point and targets a straw man.

In chapter 4, "Historiography beyond Partisanship: Establishing Facts and Evaluating Theories," Tor Egil Førland challenges two central beliefs of the current *doxa* of mainstream philosophy of history. The first is the notion of the theory-dependence of facts, which asserts that facts are so intimately connected with the theory they form building blocks within, and so dependent on this theory for their meaning, that factual claims that could undermine this theory are denied or dismissed; since facts salient to the theory, but potentially destructive to it, cannot be established, empirical findings are in the thrall of theory. Recounting how it was recently established that the remains of a Viking warrior in Birka, Sweden, were in fact female, Førland shows that facts in history and archaeology function independently and may topple or at least threaten a dominant theory: in this case the idea of the Viking warrior elite as the exclusive domain of men. The second belief challenged by Førland is the idea that since every set of facts leaves room for several competing theories (an assertion there seems to be general agreement about), and since narrativity has undermined traditional objectivity, historians' choice of theory or narrative is decided by their ideological preferences, and that accordingly they should be regarded as "partisans of a political cause," as Anton Froeyman puts it. Førland argues that this view ignores the disciplinary role of cognitive values or virtues that historians as well as other scientists and scholars accept. Comparing the enumeration and discussion of such values by philosophers of science such as Thomas Kuhn and W. V. O. Quine as well as philosophers of history from Behan McCullagh to Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, Førland presents a bundle of more or less identical criteria, comprising accuracy, power, scope, consistency, fertility, simplicity, and refutability. These criteria guide scientists and historians alike in their evaluation of theories, whether these theories are clad in narratives or not.

Chapter 5, Adam Timmins's "Irrealism and Historical Theory: A Users Guide," presents a comprehensive critique of irrealist perspectives on historiography as formulated by Paul Roth, starting from wider irrealist metaphysics originally advocated by Nelson Goodman. Irrealism is the idea that no single, neutral reality underlies descriptions of what the world is like or theories about the way it works. It is supposed to differ from realism and relativism, which both postulate representations as distinct from objects, while irrealism denies that such a distinction exists. Goodman therefore argued that in the case of conflicting truth claims, one should say that they are all true, but in different worlds. He was thus talking about worldmaking and, by analogy, one could say that in Roth's view historians practice pastmaking. Different and mutually contradictory claims about the past are then true about different

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pasts. Consequently, the important problem is that it is not clear how a historical account could be wrong at all. At the same time, Timmins points out, Roth fails to provide an account of the ontology of events—at most he tells us that they exist only under a description. (The problems of this view are further analyzed in chapter 9 of this volume, introduced below.) Ultimately, like other variations of postmodernist anti-realism, irrealism in Timmins's account turns out to be a variation of idealism. Goodman actually denied his association with idealism, but it is hard to see how this denial would be credible considering that worlds in his account are created by mental activities. In the case of Roth's views of the past, idealist assumptions are openly stated, since he does not believe that past events exist independently of their descriptions, that are available to or produced by the historian at the moment of writing.

In chapter 6, "Saving Historical Reality (Even If We Construct It)," David Weberman discusses the objections of Louis Mink, Paul Roth, and Chiel van den Akker to realism. He concludes that despite the nonfixity and underdetermination of the past as we can know it, as well as our unavoidable perspectivity, we can have knowledge of past reality. This knowledge is not only true in a correspondence way but also objective once you fix the position—temporal, spatial, and conceptual—from which the past is seen. As such it can be confirmed or disconfirmed by others. Such testing is inapplicable in regard to colligatory concepts such as the Renaissance, since these are not truth-conditional but act like a "lens" that unifies first-order data and generates further description and narration. Yet Weberman observes that "many historical conclusions . . . are less like lenses and more like propositions" that can be either confirmed or disconfirmed. Despite these unabashedly realist conclusions, Weberman hesitates to come out squarely on the side of historical realism. The main reason is that changes in what he terms relational properties—that is, when subsequent events provide past agents or entities with properties they did not have before—cause him to view the past as "dynamic." Weberman insists that such changes are not merely descriptive but amount to changes in non-physical, emergent aspects of the past. His depiction of a changing past sets him apart not only from our definition of realism, as discussed above, but also from the express views of several of the other authors in this volume. Weberman also has another commitment that sits uneasily with realism, namely to what he denotes "strong pluralism." He sees some historical accounts as "non-co-tenable." Not only is the past multiply describable ("weak pluralism"), but it is so in ways that prevent envisaging more than one depiction at a time, like the duck/rabbit drawing that allows either interpretation, but not simultaneously. Reminiscent of Kuhn's suggestive incommensurability-as-intranslatability way of explaining

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the rivalry between different scientific paradigms,[19] non-co-tenability would seem to require further analysis before being accepted by most realists.

Part III: Political Implications

The third section explores the political implications of the debate about anti-realism. There exists a tendency to associate relativist and anti-realist positions in various fields of the humanities with left-wing and progressive political positions. All three chapters in this section challenge this view and present arguments to doubt this association. The idea that relativism and anti-realism can contribute to the struggle against oppression is certainly curious, since that struggle fundamentally depends on the identification of sources of oppression. Such identification is incompatible with relativism, let alone with denials of our ability to ascertain that oppression happened, as historical anti-realism typically entails.

Chapter 7, Ian Verstegen's "Is Historical Anti-realism (Ever) Politically Progressive?," presents the history and analyzes the motivation behind the identification of relativism and anti-realism with progressive and left-wing politics. One may be inclined to associate relativist theorizing with Marxism because of Marxist techniques that attribute false consciousness to others. Verstegen argues that the origins of relativism and anti-realism in U.S. academia are rather connected to classical liberalism ("liberalism" understood here in the traditional meaning of the term, in the sense of rights of individuals, promotion of free trade, and so on) and a reaction to the horrors of Hitler's and Stalin's era. In the years that immediately followed the Second World War, prewar relativists such as Carl Becker and Charles Beard were often criticized for their views. Relativism came back three decades later, however, through the redirection of interests from historical beliefs to historical works understood as literary texts. The increased influence of French poststructuralists coincided with the erosion of traditional Marxism and the decline of commitments to utopian goals of socialism. The assumption of the a-referentiality of texts led to the loss of the distinction between political left and right, Verstegen argues. All this resulted in a situation in which, he points out,

> Ideas were exchanged within a closed system of exchange, the university. Historians had thus accepted the logic of neoliberalism where politics could be promoted by ideas, not action outside the classroom. Relativism or anti-realism was just the result of the politicization of epistemology within a shrunken horizon of activity of politics; as belief was the primary vehicle to effect change, the only way to do it was through disavowal of affirmation, hence anti-realism.

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Verstegen concludes his paper with an exhortation to historical realism, which alone can enable us to judge historical narratives "on their merits and ask secondarily whether that viewpoint is profound, liberating or has any prospect of leading us to a better society."

Tor Egil Førland's second paper, "Postmodern Frankenstein; or, the Alternative Facts Monster," is chapter 8. Førland uses the monster created by Mary Shelley's fictional scientist Frankenstein as a metaphor for the postmodernist discourse gone awry when it was appropriated by U.S. President Donald Trump and his associates and used for their right-wing, populist purposes. The phrase "alternative facts" that was coined by the president's spokespersons after his inauguration in 2017—and ridiculed by the press—indicated the degree to which the worldview of Trump and his followers had diverged from mainstream USA, including the overwhelming part of left-leaning academia. Both this notion and the rest of the so-called post-truth discourse were but the inversion—or perhaps perversion—of the insistence by anti-positivists and postmodernists that objectivity and truth are illusions. The anti-positivist and postmodernist campaign to link a statement's truth-value to the statement's originator was taken over in a similar manner. When Trump and his circle turned the postmodernist discourse against the values the academic left believed in, the latter's reaction was one of consternation. But it was also to flock to the only possible defense against relativism run amok, namely, an insistence on truth (as correspondence), objectivity, reality, and so forth: concepts consistently devalued since the 1960s. This illustrates a theme that props up throughout this book, namely that anti-realists are unable to live as they preach because their pronunciations cannot stand up to critical scrutiny. Realizing the mayhem wreaked by his monstrous, modernist creature, Frankenstein regretted his deed and tried (in vain) to hunt it down and prevent it from doing further harm. It remains to be seen whether postmodernist Frankensteins will repent and attempt to reign in their discursive monster.

Branko Mitrović's second contribution to this volume, "Arguments, Partisanship, and Politics: Is Anti-realism in the Philosophy of History a Right-wing Ideology" in chapter 9, analyzes the reasons for the poor reception of the anti-realist philosophy of history among historians and other scholars in the humanities. In Mitrović's view, these reasons can be divided into three groups. First, anti-realist arguments are simply unconvincing—a point that has also been emphasized in some other papers in this volume. In order to illustrate the problem, Mitrović analyzes several clusters of such arguments and their absurd and improbable implications—for instance, the view that colligatory concepts do not refer or that events exist only under a description. Second, the advocates of anti-realism are highly partisan. However poor the arguments in favor of anti-realism may be, they are repeated *ad*

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nauseam in the literature, and if they are refuted or criticized for their absurd implications, these refutations or criticisms are rarely responded to. Instead, if opposing views are addressed at all, this is often combined with insulting dismissals: the standard qualification that anti-realists use when they deign to admit the existence of opposing views is "naïve realism," but more insulting dismissals can be found in the literature too. Obviously, such behavior can hardly convince non-believers of the validity of the anti-realists' cause. Third, Mitrović argues that historical anti-realism often has political implications that many academics, who tend to be left-wing, are likely to reject. If the past as we know it is merely historians' constructs, then it becomes pointless to discuss how or seek to amend the wrongs that various groups suffered in the past. Past oppression and suffering become mere intellectual constructs of academic historians. If colligatory concepts such as "the Renaissance" do not refer to anything and have no counterpart in the past, then this applies to other colligatory concepts as well, such as "global warming" or "coronavirus pandemic"—and consequently there is no need or use to do anything about them. It is therefore no wonder that historical anti-realism has had so little following outside the philosophy of history.

Given the arguments presented in this volume, it is indeed surprising that the anti-realist viewpoints could have managed to attract a significant following in the philosophy of history. Although the co-editors of this book find little of value in postmodernist anti-realism, we find much to discuss. We sincerely hope the present volume will instigate a useful debate about its content—and that, ultimately, it will expedite its demise.

NOTES

1. Munslow, "History, Skepticism and the Past," 483.
2. Arrian, *Anabasis of Alexander*, 4.10.1.
3. Van den Akker, "Welcome Note from the Editor-in-Chief," 132.
4. Kuukkanen, *Post-narrativist Philosophy of Historiography*, 87–88, 91–92, 96, 172.
5. Goldstein, *Historical Knowing*, 140–42.
6. Kleinberg and Paul, "Are Historians Ontological Realists?" Paul argues that the ontological beliefs of historians are less consistently realist.
7. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 394–95.
8. In order to make this point, one of the editors of this book recently self-identified as a naïve realist, claiming the company of Aristotle. See Mitrović, "A Naïve Realist's Rumination."
9. Jenkins, *Re-thinking History*, 12; Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, 216.
10. McCullagh, *The Truth of History*, 135.
11. Jenkins, *Re-thinking History*, 11.

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12. Ibid.

13. McCullagh, *The Truth of History*, 42–43. See similarly Tucker, *Our Knowledge of the Past*, 258.

14. Southgate, *History Meets Fiction*, 195.

15. Goldstein, *The What and the Why of History*, 214. See also Goldstein, *Historical Knowing*, 38 and passim.

16. Goldstein, *The What and the Why of History*, 214.

17. Tucker, *Our Knowledge of the Past*, 39–45, 257; for cognitive virtues, see Førland, "Historiography beyond Partisanship," ch. 4 of this volume.

18. Jenkins, *Rethinking History*; Munslow, *Deconstructing History*; Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*; Roth, *The Philosophical Structure of Historical Explanation*.

19. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*; Kuhn, *The Road Since "Structure,"* chs. 2, 4, and 11. For a condensation, see Førland, *Values, Objectivity, and Explanation*, 163.

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PART I

Philosophical Contexts

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Chapter 1

Idealism in Historical Theory 1970–2020

Adam Timmins

This chapter examines the various idealist construals of the results of historical research and writing over the past fifty years or so, which in practice cover a sizable chunk of works in the field. Although I will occasionally refer to works published prior to 1970, the 1970s are as good a jumping-off point as any to begin to track many of the themes that are still with us in historical theory. Such an account will necessarily be somewhat broad-brushed—but as long as we are aware that certain rough edges are being smoothed for the purposes of an overview, we can live with it.

A word on terminology at the outset. Many authors cited in this piece would and will undoubtedly balk at being referred to as idealist. Some have explicitly denied the charge,[1] while others subscribe to what I will refer to as "fig-leaf rationality";[2] still others will argue that it is the wrong descriptive term—"strong constructivist" is a particular favorite these days. In his essay "Truth and Fact in History Reconsidered," W. H. Walsh states that if you oppose historical realism, you must be a supporter of historical idealism.[3] This is, I think, spot on, and as we will see in the next section, there are many parallels between historiographical idealism and idealism in general. This does not mean that historiographical idealism cannot take more than one form: for example, the works of both Leon Goldstein and Frank Ankersmit contain strong idealist tendencies, even though both would strongly deny that they were idealists (and indeed, Ankersmit has strongly repudiated the idealism of Goldstein!).[4] The broad brushstrokes though, I argue here, get it right—when it comes to historical theory, if you are opposed to realism, then you are a *de facto* idealist. Hence, I will designate all of the views assessed

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in this chapter as falling under the umbrella of idealism, self-identifications with "strong constructivism" and "irrealism" notwithstanding.

A word or two about the period covered in this piece. Post-1970 developments in historical theory tend to be lumped together under umbrella terms such as "narrativism"; but while there was undoubtedly a "linguistic turn in historical theory" in the final three decades of the twentieth century, narrativism is too coarse-grained a term. Granted, it is not the easiest task to untangle the various interwoven strands that make up the linguistic turn in historical theory in the closing decades of the twentieth century, but nonetheless the distinctions are there: for example, while Hayden White and Louis Mink both argued that in effect, the form of the historical text necessarily distorted any attempt to represent the events of the past, they took very different routes to the conclusion—with White's Northrop Frye-inspired structuralism differing very much from Mink's "narrative as cognitive instrument" approach. Then there is the work of postmodernist historical theorists who lump both structuralism, poststructuralism, and the work of White together to form a homogenous mass of relativism, overlooking the distinctions and nuances between the three. To try and untangle these various threads in a single essay is a bit like to trying nail jelly to the wall (and is arguably just as rewarding). In what follows, I have focused on what I consider to be the main themes of historiographical idealism. The piece is not intended to be a definitive historiographical survey as such: rather it is intended to sketch out, in broad outline, the main progenitors of historiographical idealism and their reasons for doing so.

REALISM AND IDEALISM

To begin with, let us define our key terms in a little bit more detail: not only is this good housekeeping, it takes on a particular importance in historical theory, which sorely lacks a workable definition of realism.[5] It is a hallmark of many current idealist accounts of historiography to refer to historians and/or historical theorists holding a "naïve realist" view. This is problematic for at least two reasons. First, one can be a realist without being a "naïve" realist—the prefix is undoubtedly meant in a pejorative sense as opposed to be used as a term of the art (i.e., as being taken from the idea of naïve realism in the philosophy of perception). Secondly, the version of "naïve realism" that realists are supposed to hold to—that historical works are intended to perfectly reproduce or represent the past—is one that certainly might have had some currency in and around 1900, but no serious academic historian would ever dream of endorsing such a reading of realism in the early decades of the

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twenty-first century. Nonetheless, one regularly sees this Aunt Sally trotted out in numerous articles on historical theory.[6]

There are arguably as many realisms as there are subject areas, and any attempt to coin a definition of realism that satisfies everyone would surely end up as being so jejune as to be virtually worthless. To be a realist within a given subject domain can take different forms. Furthermore, to nail down precisely what it is to be a realist is no easy task: Theodore Sider has spoken of many (including himself) holding to a kind of "knee-jerk realism," which is a "vague picture rather than a precise thesis."[7] Nonetheless, there are arguably three key ingredients to any kind of realism, and certainly to historiographical realism, as I shall term it: the first is *existence*, the second *independence*, and the third *accessibility*.

In his recent *Stanford Encyclopedia* entry, Alexander Miller argues that existence and independence are two aspects of a generic definition of realism. When we look at the everyday macroscopic objects of the world, we want to be able to say that tables, rocks, the moon (etc.) and their properties exist, and also that these objects are independent of us. Thus, a generic definition of realism would run along the lines of:

> *a*, *b*, and *c* and so on exist, and the fact that they exist and have properties such as *F-ness*, *G-ness*, and *H-ness* is (apart from mundane empirical dependencies of the sort sometimes encountered in everyday life) independent of anyone's beliefs, linguistic practices, conceptual schemes, and so on.[8]

To this I would add the third property of *accessibility*: that not only are there objects and properties that exist independently of us, but that we can gain accurate knowledge of at least some of these.[9] This is what Crispin Wright calls the "presumptuous" aspect of realism: that we are "in favorable circumstances, capable of conceiving the world aright, and, often, of knowing the truth about it."[10]

Let us then look at the various underpinnings of historiographical realism, beginning with what we may call the metaphysical aspects: independence and existence. To deny the existence of a past would presumably take the form of denying that there was a past; a move that not even the most committed postmodernist was inclined to make. Therefore, the lion's share of those who incline toward historiographical idealism base their arguments around the purportedly problematic accessibility of the past—I will come back to these shortly. At this juncture though, I will offer the following tentative definition of historiographical realism: a realist about historiography believes that a) the past can significantly constrain the accuracy of what we write about it, and b) that historical accounts are, to varying degrees, successful in providing knowledge and understanding of the past—to paraphrase Wright, when

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the circumstances are favorable, we are capable of knowing the truth about various episodes in the past.

Our conception of historiographical realism is a modest one, claiming no more than that for a sizeable portion of our historical work, we are justified in thinking we are getting things right. Notice what is *not* being claimed here; to be a realist about historiography does not involve claiming that historical accounts are supposed to be replicas or representations of the past, nor does it involve claiming that historical facts fall ready-made into the historian's lap from the archives—as I have noted elsewhere, the realist can quite happily accept some of the central tenets of the (naïve?) constructivist view of historical theory and method.[11] What ultimately seems to separate the realist and the constructivist is that the latter wants to claim that, to all intents and purposes, historical accounts do not really reflect anything that occurred in the past, but rather *create* that past as a function of the present. By contrast, the realist argues that when circumstances are favorable, historians can be and are successful in recapturing what took place in the past.

What are we to class as idealism? Just as there are various forms of realisms, idealism also comes in various shapes and sizes. Berkeleyan idealism, for instance, held that there was no such thing as the physical world and that reality was entirely mental—call this "strong idealism." A slightly weaker conception—of which Kant is the exemplar—concedes the existence of something independent of the mind, but contends that our minds fashion our perception of this reality so strongly that "all claims to knowledge must be considered, in some sense, to be a form of self-knowledge."[12] Historiographical idealism, then, can be construed as the rejection of the notion that historical accounts provide knowledge and understanding of a past reality, and that instead, the past that historians write about is by and large constituted by themselves. As we will see, there are a variety of reasons for holding such a position: some take the ontological starting point that there is no "ready-made" past for us to discover to begin with, while others argue the epistemological challenges to recovering historical knowledge are so great as to be insurmountable.

Whereas the realist then, holds that there is a difference between the past and what the historian writes about it—and that the past constrains what the historian may write—the idealist wants to at best minimize the role that the past can play in historical research and writing and at worse eliminate it entirely: historians write not about the past but about present evidence, or write about a constituted past. A realist can quite happily concede to a weak form of constructivism, in the sense that historical knowledge and understanding don't simply fall into our laps—it requires considerable work in order to provide knowledge and understanding about the events and actions

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of the past. What the realist rejects, however, is the idea that said constructions are free-floating, as it were.

Moving on to the various idealist strands of historiographical thought in the past fifty years or so: let us take as our starting point the late twentieth-century focus (perhaps "obsession" is a better term) with the form of the historical text.

THE LINGUISTIC TURN AND THE FOCUS ON THE HISTORICAL TEXT

Reviewing a work of Frank Ankersmit's in the late 1990s, Jonathan Gorman entitled his piece "Philosophical Fascination with Whole Historical Texts."[13] The title was most apposite, reflecting as it did what can broadly be construed as a "linguistic" turn in historical theory: from the 1970s onwards, the epistemology of historical research largely fell out of historical theory, as a series of writers, inspired by various developments in literary theory, attempted to apply the insights of these to works of history; for after all, works of history were texts too, and thus the insights obtained elsewhere were surely equally applicable in historical theory.

Any examination of the linguistic turn in the closing decades of the twentieth century must inevitably begin with the work of Hayden White. The thrust of White's work, so far as the historical text is concerned, essentially revolves around the idea that the historical text necessarily distorts its contents by employing devices that have no counterpart in the world and thus the past: and that as a result, such texts cannot be said to faithfully represent the past. For White, a key starting point was the fact that historical inquiry was fundamentally different from that of the physical sciences: which was something that analytical philosophers of history had overlooked. On the latter view, since historical narratives referred to "real" rather than "imaginary" events, historians adopted the same kind of explanatory strategies as the physical sciences did. But this was problematic insofar as historians used "elements of figurations—tropes and figures of thought . . . without which the narrativization of real events, the transformation of a chronicle into a story, could never be effected."[14]

The inspiration for White's use of tropology was the work of Northrop Frye, in particular his *Anatomy of Criticism*. Frye's goal was to give literary criticism the discipline of an objective system; and as luck would have it, he discovered that literature *itself* formed such a system—specifically, if you examined the history of literature closely, you "could see that it worked by certain objective laws, and criticism could become systematic by formulating them."[15] Frye argued that at the root of all literature lay four narrative

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categories: comedy, romance, tragedy and irony. White took Frye's theory and ran with it: thus for White, there is a fundamental difference between a "narrative account" of real events and a literal account of the same events—for the former contains figurative elements that have no counterpart in the past.[16] There are no comedies, romances or tragedies in real life, and these come into being only as a result of our emplotting the facts in a certain way in historical accounts:

> The kind of interpretation typically produced by the historical discourse is that which endows what would otherwise remain only a chronologically ordered series of events with the formal coherency of the kind of plot structures met with in narrative fiction. This endowment of a chronicle of events with a plot structure, which I call the operation of emplotment, is carried out by discursive techniques that are more tropological than logical in nature.[17]

Concomitantly, the fact that the past does not constrain our choices of plot device means that the same set of historical facts can be emplotted in different ways—as White postulates, "there is no necessity, logical or natural, governing the decision to emplot a given sequence of events as a tragedy rather than as a comedy or romance."[18]

The upshot of all this was that, in White's view, whereas singular propositional statements about the past are unproblematic insofar as they can be said to pick out states of affairs and events that actually occurred in the past, as soon as we move to the level of the complex historical account we must give up on the idea that such accounts can mirror what actually occurred—for the formal linguistic devices that the historian has to use (and it is clear that White is an essentialist when it comes to this) necessarily preclude showing the past "as it really was." Hence, given the *form* that these accounts take—either by the emplotment of sets of events as comedies, tragedies, romances or satires (White) or narratives that have beginnings, middles and ends (Mink)—something is always added to those facts that is not intrinsic to the events themselves.

With Mink, we also get the idea that historical accounts are indecomposable, in the sense that the arguments and conclusions contained within them cannot be detached. This specifically historiographical form of holism reached its apotheosis in the work of Frank Ankersmit. Though Ankersmit's position has evolved over the years—from his early work which countenanced the notion of "narrative substances" to his more recent writings which make use of something of a non-standard notion of "representation"—underpinning these shifts has been a tendency to see historical accounts as reified, indecomposable entities akin to Leibnizian monads.[19] Space restrictions prevent us from tracing the various manifestations of this position in detail, but an

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example of one is permissible (and will suffice). In *Historical Representation*, Ankersmit argued that historical accounts are representations, and that as such the distinction between subject and predicate—which for Ankersmit is paradigmatic of description—cannot be made in historical representations:

> If we look at a painting or a photograph we cannot distinguish between components that refer and those that attribute. And this is what we would expect, since representations and what they represent are ontologically equivalent. For since the distinction, obviously, makes no sense for the represented thing, this must be true of the thing representing it as well . . . It follows that the whole technical apparatus developed by epistemologists over the centuries (and by contemporary philosophy of science) cannot be of any use to us when we are dealing with representation—and with the question of what may make one representation better than another.[20]

As Ankersmit glosses this, "a historical representation is a thing made of language."[21]

How does all of this fall into the camp of idealism? In essence, the argument is that the formal properties of historical text preclude any attempts to represent what happened in the past faithfully, for the literary strategies that historians use—such as tropes, beginnings-middles-ends, and so on—add something to the facts which is not to be found in the past itself. While we can have truths about the past at the level of the chronicle[22]—singular propositional statements about events and actions—as soon as we move beyond this, we are imposing a coherence and meaning upon the past from without. We are precluded by the very linguistic apparatus and strategies that we employ in putting together our historical accounts from giving a faithful account of the past we are putatively writing about. As White himself writes, "the argument of a historical discourse is ultimately a second-order fiction, a fiction of a fiction or a fiction of fiction making."[23]

SEMIOTICS, STRUCTURALISM AND POSTSTRUCTURALISM

It is important to note that the linguistic turn in historical theory has to be seen against the background of developments in twentieth-century literary theory and criticism in general; in particular, the developments of structuralism and poststructuralism respectively.

Turning first to structuralism. While Saussure was by no means the first linguist to conceive of language as a system of signs, along with Pierce he may be credited as being one of the first linguists to mark semiotics out as

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an area of study in its own right. Saussure's lasting contribution to theoretical linguistics is largely taken to be his "conception of a language as a socially shared, psychologically real system of signs, each consisting of the arbitrary conjunction of an abstract concept and acoustic image."[24] Key for our purposes is the Saussurean claim that each signifier and signified consists of nothing but *difference* from every other signifier and signified in a given linguistic system: every "word or term or unit within the system is connected to an 'entourage' of other units, related to it either syntagmatically (the units that can come before or after it in an utterance) or associatively (the units with which it has something in common in form or meaning). The relationships of difference in these two domains generate the 'value' of the unit. Ultimately, then, no linguistic sign exists in isolation."[25] In other words, there is no one-to-one connection between words and the things or concepts they are meant to evoke: thus, language is diacritical: that is, "dependent on a structured economy of differences which allows a relatively small range of linguistic elements to signify a vast repertoire of negotiable meanings."[26]

We could do with an English precis of the above, so: Saussure argued that semantic content came not from the connections words have with the world, but rather, from the relations that words have with other words in a language; specifically, what differentiates a word from other words.[27] The meaning of "cat," therefore, is "not-dog," (and "not-bird," "not-mouse," etc.), the meaning of "white" is "not-black," (and "not-blue," "not-green," etc.), and so on. Word meaning comes from a series of binary oppositions manifested in the structure of the language as a whole. Moreover, if language is a self-contained system of self-contained signs, then meaning is internal to language: word meaning is not something "out there." Rather, it is a conceptual space defined and limited by the other words in the same language. The same is true of other units of language.

Ultimately then, the semiotics developed by Saussure and his successors in the field critiques the logocentric assumption that "concepts exist prior to and independently of their expression." Rather, the sign consists of the union of signifier and signified—and moreover, both of these constituent parts are purely relational entities, products of a system of differences. So, for example, when we speak of the concept "brown," we are referring not to a representation in the mind at the moment of utterance, but rather, a space in a complex network of differences. Put more bluntly, in this view of language, words do not refer to things, but to other words; language, rather than providing a means of expression for thoughts that already exist, in a sense constitutes them—we don't use language, but language in fact uses us.[28]

Although Saussure himself never used the term "structuralism," his work was ultimately the foundation that structuralism built itself on. In literary theory, the key tenet of structuralism was the belief that the individual units

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in any system gain meaning only in virtue of their relations to one another. What is notable about structuralist analysis in literary theory is that it brackets off the *content* of a story or poem and concentrates entirely on the *form*—as long as the structure of the relations between the units is preserved, the units themselves are irrelevant.[29] Thus, if the particular contents of a text are replaceable, "there is a sense in which one can say that the 'content' of [a] narrative is its structure. This is equivalent to claiming that the narrative is in a way about itself: its own internal relations, it's own sense-making."[30] Structuralism gained particular traction in Europe, where the New Critic's picture of a self-contained encounter between an innocent reader and an autonomous text was seen as a fantasy: "to read is always to read in relation to other texts, in relation to the codes that are the products of these texts and go to make up a culture."[31] Thus, European literary theory was more interested in the conditions that make the text possible; its goal was to "move through texts towards an understanding of the systems and semiotic processes which make them possible."[32]

In turn, structuralism was succeeded by poststructuralism or deconstruction. On Saussurean linguistics, although meaning was fixed by a word's relation to other signs, that meaning was ultimately stable (even though it was unconnected to the world) because the closed structure guaranteed it, which meant that it was possible to recover authorial intention.[33] In poststructuralist linguistics, however, meaning is inherently *unstable*; a view perhaps most closely identified with the work of Jacques Derrida. For Derrida, the issue with Western philosophy is that it has always been logocentric—that is, "committed to a belief in some ultimate 'word,' presence, essence, truth or reality which will act as the foundation of all our thought, language and experience."[34] But this was a fallacy, as captured by Derrida's notion of différance—words can never fully capture meaning, but can only be defined by reference to other words, which in turn themselves can only be defined by other words, and so on, whereby meaning is forever deferred through an endless chain of signifiers.

Thus, deconstruction was avowedly poststructuralist, in the sense that it rejected that there was any kind of structure undergirding a text; there was nothing "given" about a text. Whereas structuralism saw meaning as corresponding to "some deep-laid mental 'set' or pattern of response which determines the limits of intelligibility," deconstruction started by jettisoning this assumption.[35] Thus, in literary criticism, deconstruction was the "active antithesis of everything that criticism ought to be if one accepts traditional values and concepts"—specifically, that literary texts possess a meaning and that literary criticism sought a knowledge of that meaning.[36] Whereas in the structuralist view it was possible to recover the intentions of (for example) Shakespeare when he wrote *Julius Caesar*, in the poststructuralist view, the

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constant play of signifiers means that the agency and intentions of the author are lost, and then the meaning of a text really does become arbitrary—or at least, arbitrary in the sense of random. Language becomes little more than the play of words on the page, where words point to nothing outside of themselves, but to other words—hence, as Barthes put it, "the death of the author."

At this point the uninitiated reader might be wondering: What, exactly, do any of these developments in literary theory have to do with the epistemology of history? When we put it all together, we get (among other things):

- According to structuralist linguistics, words never reach out and capture things in the world (and by extension the past), but instead acquire their semantic content solely by virtue of their negational relationship to other words.
- Historical works are also seen as literary works, and thus subject to the kinds of conventions that govern the production and assessment of literature. Concomitantly, just as words in structuralist linguistics get their content via their relation to other words, so the content of works of history comes not from their relation to the past, but rather their relations to other historical works.
- Any attempt to elicit the "meaning" of past events and actions is inevitably doomed to fail, because meaning is always deferred.

As to how this translates in historiographical theory, we can do no worse than look to the work of Alun Munslow, who, in a number of works, set out what it was to be a "deconstructionist historian."[37] For Munslow, the starting point of any current reflections on historical practice must be that

> mainstream, professional, academic history can no longer do what it aspires to do . . . [which is] to provide epistemologically assured historical knowledge based on the philosophy of perception, disinterest and a kind of self-certified professionalism or on the basis of methodological practices exemplifying objectivity, even-handedness, truth at the end of inquiry and which can withstand varieties of deconstructionism and multi-skeptical critiques.[38]

On this postmodernist re-conception, history becomes "a mind-and-discourse dependent performative literary act"[39] that treats the past as "a text to be examined for its possibilities of meaning."[40] This is because modernist history, conceived of as an "empirical research method based upon the belief in some reasonably accurate correspondence between the past, its interpretation and its narrative representation is no longer a tenable conception of the task of the historian."[41] Reconstructing the past objectively on the basis of the evidence thus simply could not be undertaken, because "the process involved

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[in making sense of the evidence] is a literary one of interpretative narrative, rather than objective empiricism and theorising."[42]

WE ARE ALL POSTMODERNISTS NOW

Poststructuralism is closely linked with, though perhaps not entirely co-extensive with, postmodernism. The period in which historical theory began to focus almost exclusively on the text and its properties coincided with the rise of postmodernism: a term whose meaning is somewhat amorphous—the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* describes it as "a set of critical, strategic, and rhetorical practices employing concepts such as difference, repetition, the trace, the simulacrum, and hyperreality to destabilize other concepts such as presence, identity, historical progress, epistemic certainty, and the univocity of meaning."[43] A more palatable description of postmodernism might take as its starting point its self-professed contradistinction to modernism, where we define the latter as those values that were by and large a product of the Enlightenment—specifically, the emphasis on the rational powers of the individual and the capacity of said individuals to reason in a process to discover truth. Thus, postmodernism begins with the denial of these themes. As David Novitz summarizes it, philosophical postmodernism

> is critical of the idea that the truth is attainable, if by that is meant that it is possible to determine and so come to know how things really are, in and of themselves, by using our natural faculties. Since one cannot have unmediated access to things themselves, to brute facts, language is not constrained by an extra-linguistic world; rather 'the play of signs' creatively constructs what we mistakenly believe to be a world of brute reality.[44]

As we saw earlier, most anti-realist accounts of historical theory tend to subscribe to a fig-leaf rationality. The exception to the rule were some of the more extreme postmodernist historical theorists, who argued that since no work of history can ever correspond with what actually happened, we should cast off (to use White's phrase) the "burden of history"; in the words of Keith Jenkins (more on whom shortly), the fact that there was no method that would allow the past "to be truth-fully [sic] or objectively or fairly or scientifically represented as 'historical knowledge' at the level of the history text" was "brilliant news . . . for it is this failure which allows radical otherness to come, new imaginations to emerge."[45] The problem in Jenkins's view was that instead of using their positions to try and "change the world," historians adhered to academic values that left them little scope for addressing present issues of societal subjugation.[46]

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But according to Jenkins, we should not be surprised by this: for our current "technical, cybernetic, capitalist social formation with a vengeance"—but also, for that matter, any social formation—"inevitably attempts to reproduce itself in as stable a condition as possible so that all potentially destabilizing and thus dangerous excesses are rigorously excluded."[47] For this to occur, "one could not and cannot—just cannot—allow the past to be read 'anyway you like' by just anybody"; what is required "are proper, responsible, academic histories (historians) operating within acceptable limits."[48] Most academic historians may be slightly startled to learn they are partly responsible for all of society's ills; however, this is due to "the silent and hidden mechanisms of ideological power in our current social formations that simultaneously permit us to operate within such limits whilst hiding them from us: the complicity is all so beautifully innocent—ideologically speaking."[49] One of Jenkins's disciples espoused similar views: "The very act of organising historical data into a narrative not only constitutes an illusion of a truthful narrative, but in lending a spurious tidiness to the past can ultimately serve as a mechanism for the exercise of power in contemporary society."[50]

Here lurks the influence of Michel Foucault, for whom "knowledge, comprised as disciplines, become controlling entities in our lives as they suppress and allow, exclude and include that which is not and that which is permissible."[51] Our only door to any kind of experience is through "the primary medium of language as a signifying process normally constituted within a framework for the exercise of power, legitimacy and illegitimacy."[52] So far as historiography goes, this means that all history is "an ideological construct [that is] constantly being re-worked and re-ordered by all those who are variously affected by power relationships; because the dominated as well as the dominant also have their versions of the past to legitimate their practices, versions which have to be excluded as improper from any place on the agenda of the dominant discourse."[53]

Jacques Derrida has also argued that logocentrism sows the seeds of societal oppression. Specifically, the principle of noncontradiction that is at the heart of classical logic—and the oppositions that they set up—are

> already prejudicial. They are not and have never been neutral determinations of objective fact. They institute difference and this difference always makes a difference—socially, politically, ethically, ideologically. Conceptual oppositions, wherever and however they appear and are formulated, institute and organize unequal hierarchies that are determinations of value and exertions of power.[54]

To give an example: the mind-body distinction—or rather, the binary opposition between mind and body—has had devastating consequences. As Ray Gunkel notes, it

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> has permitted human beings to dismiss other animals as mindless automatons that can be used and abused without further consideration. It has been used to justify the global expansion of colonial empires and the domination of one group of people (white Europeans) over others (Africans, the Indigenous peoples of the Americas and Australia, etc.). And it has instituted an entire way of thinking that Nietzsche had called "despisers of the body," which currently finds expression in various forms of body shaming; the systemic marginalization of "other bodies" (i.e., women, people of color, individuals with physical disabilities, and transgender individuals); and the cyberpunk, techno-utopian ideology of escaping the "meat of the body" by way of direct neural interface to the computer matrix as well as actual research efforts at brain-computer interface (BCI), whole brain emulation, and mind upload.[55]

As a result, what was needed was the jettisoning of history as it was/is currently practiced: the rejection of "the hegemonic continuation of an ideologically positioned set of guild practices reified by their beneficiaries into tablets of stone."[56] In another work published a decade later, Jenkins was keen to emphasize that the "extreme" insights proffered by postmodernism could not be domesticated, and that to admit a degree of pluralism inherent in historiography simply wouldn't do—"nothing could be more ill-informed than professional historians who think they are 'postmodern' just because they accept multi-levelled perspectives." [57]

Fortunately (for Jenkins), we are now in a position where we can think of "letting history and ethics go, because postmodern thinking has provided all of the intellectual resources we now need to think in future-orientated, emancipatory and democratising ways."[58] Indeed, at the time of writing 1999's *Why History*?, Jenkins foresaw the transformation of the genres of academic history into "irrelevancy and morbidity," for postmodernism is "no modish blip which will go away if it is ignored. Rather, it is the deeply disturbing removal of those protective covers, those fictive shelters that modernist historians have constructed to help keep us away from the abyss of the interminable, interpretative, relativistic flux."[59]

Postmodernist historical theory, then, is buttressed by some of the semantic conclusions we canvassed in the previous section, but arguably seeks to go beyond them to posit what we might term a normative idealism. The instability induced by poststructuralist semiotics means that our efforts to elicit meaning from documents is hopelessly compromised; as the political and ethical choices the historian is required to make mean that even a weakened form of objectivity is unattainable. But for postmodernists, this is not a bad thing, but is in fact a good thing: for this points us toward a "responsible relativism": for as a result of our postmodern condition, there can be "no objectivity and no correspondence truth but only standpoint and relativism."[60] And in these circumstances, history should primarily be seen as "a task of

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aesthetic expression . . . an invented artwork."[61] This is then, a prescriptive as well as a descriptive form of idealism—that the issue is not just that history *is* mind and "discourse"-dependent, but recognizing this state of affairs is the first step towards making better histories, and indeed, a better world.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND METAPHYSICAL APPROACHES TO HISTORIOGRAPHICAL IDEALISM: GOLDSTEIN AND ROTH

Contrary to the impression that one might get from reading the relevant potted accounts of historical theory, the period from 1970 onward was not entirely dominated by an increasing fascination with the historical text. In particular, the strain of idealism that took as its starting point the putative *epistemological* inaccessibility of the past (as opposed to the *linguistic* inaccessibility posited by postmodernism) has been present in historical theory, namely, views that took as their starting points more mainstream Anglo-American analytic philosophy as opposed to the continental views favored by the postmodernists. Indeed, we might well term this the "respectable" form of historiographical idealism.

A strong motivation for idealism with regard to the work of historians has always been the putative current non-existence of the past that they write about. Whether the past (or for that matter, the future) currently exists is very much a live issue within the philosophy of time; it should be noted that we never really get any kind of detailed reasoning behind the presentism that most historiographical idealists tend to subscribe to, beyond a hand-waving reference to the fact that it is just obvious that the past doesn't now exist.[62] This is unfortunate, as such a commitment to presentism is doing some reasonably heavy philosophical lifting. Said presentism is usually accompanied by an equally unacknowledged commitment to an acquaintance theory of knowledge with a substantial relational component—that in order to gain accurate knowledge of the past, we must be able to stand in some kind of immediate relational acquaintance to it. The fact that we cannot perceptually access the past is taken to mean that any kind of realism about historiography goes over the side.

This line of thinking was resurrected in the 1970s and 1980s via the work of Leon Goldstein, and in recent years theorists have started to take an increasing interest in Goldstein's work.[63] In *Historical Knowing* (1976) Goldstein argued that "no examination of the actual character and procedures of historical study reveals a role for the real past to play, either in the formulation of historical hypotheses or in their confirmation."[64] The reason for this is that "what we come to believe about the human past can never be confirmed

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by observation—can never be known by acquaintance—and so can never be put to the test of observation, the method of confirmation which is virtually the only one explicitly recognized by science and philosophy."[65] Thus, for Goldstein, the criteria of factuality, truth, and reference that we find in other disciplines cannot be operative in the same way in the practice of history.

We should not overestimate the barrier to epistemic knowledge of the past that Goldstein believes our lack of perceptual access to that past constitutes; as Goldstein himself puts it, "we have no way of ever *really* determining whether some historian's description of some past event is *actually* a description of it."[66] Therefore "the function of historical research is to *constitute* the historical past" (my italics).[67] Given that in his view the real past has no role to play in historical practice, the charge of overlooking the distinction between facts and the description of facts (as Goldstein was charged with doing by Rolf Gruner) misses the point: "In history that distinction does not exist."[68] What the historian does when confronted with evidence is to "*construct* . . . a course of events which is supposed to make sense of what he has and knows" (my italics).[69]

Goldstein argues that so far as the problem of skepticism in historical theory is concerned, the boot is on the other foot: it is historical *realism* that leads to skepticism, because it presents the practice of history with an epistemological ideal that it cannot hope to realize.[70] The realist's goal is to "describe history as actuality, . . . the past as it was when present," but since a reflection upon the procedures of historical practice makes it clear that "the very idea of history as actuality, or the real past, cannot be made operative within the discipline of history," the skepticism is inevitable.[71] If realism entails the possibility of knowing something about the entities we are investigating—in other words, that we can have access to the past—then it is clearly ruled out in Goldstein's view, for such access is simply not available to us.

Goldstein complained on at least one occasion about being called an idealist;[72] yet it takes no great stretch of the imagination to see why his views should be thought of as such, given his talk of constituting the historical past, and in particular, the repeated assertion that the real past plays no part in the historian's work leads one to suspect the worst.[73] As Ankersmit once remarked, "We cannot fail to note and be amazed by the fact that this account of the practice of history effectively rules out the possibility of any experience that historians might have of their object of investigation, that is, of the past *itself*. Even in the most esoteric parts of contemporary theoretical physics such a state of affairs would be the cause of epistemological alarm."[74] And even Paul A. Roth, who is generally well-disposed to Goldstein's views, notes that

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> Goldstein's version of antirealism has its costs. If the activity of historical knowing constitutes the very objects of historical knowledge independently of perception, then Goldstein leaves unclear just how, on his account, any activity of historical knowing could fail to produce knowledge. Since Goldstein's anti-realist constitutes the past, how can there be any error in representation? There seems no way for a historian to go wrong.[75]

The mention of Roth gives us a neat segue to the notion of irrealism: whereas Goldstein argues that strong constructionism is entailed by the *epistemological* position that the historian can never have access to the events of the past, Roth's position of irrealism is motivated by the *metaphysical* position that there are no ready-made events for the historian to discover. The latter view is motivated by Nelson Goodman's development of the notion of "irrealism," which ultimately rejects the idea that representations are metaphysically distinct from objects, and that objects and properties and relations result from the process by which a thinker fits together a representation and an object. Thus, when we embark upon processes of categorization and description, we are engaged in what Goodman calls "worldmaking." As Goodman himself puts it:

> When I say that worlds are made, I mean it literally; and what I mean should be clear from what I have already said. Surely we make versions, and right versions make worlds. And however distinct worlds may be from right versions, making right versions is making worlds.[76]

So adopted for the purposes of historiography, we make a past in the same way we make a world. Just as nature does not dictate any single organizing scheme to us, neither is there a "ready-made" past to be discovered by the historian: "the notion of a fixed or immutable past requires that of essences and natural kinds, of grouping not made by humans"—but of course, given that Goodman rejects the notion of such essences, it follows that we make a past in the same way that we make the present.[77] And thus for Roth, once "the presumption of givenness with regard to evidence or of shared conceptual schemes goes, the 'shape of the past' and the 'shape of the present' receive their form under fundamentally similar holist constraints."[78]

If a key tenet of realism is the idea that entities exist and their nature is what it is (or in the case of the past, was) independently of how we happen to perceive it, or talk or think about it, then it is clear why irrealism falls into the category of idealism, for in this view, the world and the past have no properties independently of those we ascribe to them. To reject realism is to reject a "God's-eye view" of the world, and this is precisely what Roth does.[79] The realist wants to argue that the past has some form of structure independently of how we describe and conceptualize it; but for the irrealist, the past does not

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have such a structure, because the present does not. As I have written in this very volume on irrealism, I will take up no further space with it here.

CONCLUSION

Eoin Hand, a former manager of the Republic of Ireland football team, once said that "there are only two certainties in this life. People die, and football managers get the sack."[80] To this I would add a third conjunct: idealist accounts of the historical enterprise will always form a large portion of discussion of historical theory at any given time. Opposition to realism is, of course, by no means peculiar to historical theory; one only has to look at some of the debates in the philosophy of science over the past few decades. But history is generally seen as epistemologically problematic in a way that the physical sciences are not: there can be no historical equivalent of the Large Hadron Collider or the "No Miracles" argument to invoke against historiographical idealists. We cannot observe the events of the past; we cannot rerun them or experiment on them; we cannot even spray them.[81] This state of affairs has been like catnip for those who incline toward idealism in historical theory.[82]

Fortunately, the prevalence of idealism in historical theory has had little to no effect on history as it is practiced, a state of affairs that has frustrated and infuriated some.[83] Whether questions as to realism and idealism in historical theory can be completely disconnected from practice is another argument for another day (though I have my doubts). For now, though, we might further amend Hand's dictum: idealist accounts of the historical enterprise will always form a large portion of discussion of historical theory at any given time; and these will have little, if any, impact on historical practice.

NOTES

1. See for Goldstein, "History and the Primacy of Knowing," 42–43.

2. In particular, see the conclusion of Alun Munslow's *Deconstructing History*; also Keith Jenkins, *Refiguring History*, 2.

3. Walsh, "Truth and Fact in History Reconsidered," 66.

4. Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, 113–14.

5. I address the issue at greater length in Timmins, "Historical Realism."

6. See for instance, Zeleňák, "Two Versions of a Constructivist View of Historical Work."

7. Specifically, "according to the picture, the point of human inquiry—or a very large chunk of it anyway, a chunk that includes physics—is to conform itself to the

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world, rather than to make the world. The world is 'out there,' and our job is to wrap our minds around it." Sider, *Writing the Book of the World*, 18.

8. Miller, "Realism."

9. In his recent book on metaphysical realism, James Miller also cites the accessibility criterion. See Miller, *Metaphysical Realism and Anti-Realism*.

10. Wright, *Truth and Objectivity*, 2.

11. See Timmins, *Towards a Realist Philosophy of Historiography*, 10.

12. Guyer and Horstmann, "Idealism."

13. Gorman, "Philosophical Fascination with Whole Historical Texts."

14. White, *Content of the Form*, 48.

15. Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 79.

16. Ibid.

17. White, *Figural Realism*, 8.

18. Ibid., 9.

19. For the narrative substances phase, see Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic*; for historical representations, see Ankersmit, *Historical Representation* and *Meaning, Truth and Reference in Historical Representation*; for an explicit statement of the Leibnizian underpinnings, see Ankersmit and Tamm, "Leibnizian Philosophy of History."

20. Ankersmit, *Historical Representation*, 12.

21. Ibid., 13.

22. At some points White seems to imply that even historical facts are "theory-laden"; see for instance, *The Content of the Form*, 66.

23. Ibid., 9.

24. Joseph, "The Linguistic Sign," 59.

25. Ibid., 60–61.

26. Norris, *Deconstruction*, 25.

27. I thus christen this the "Arctic Monkeys" theory of meaning—"whatever you say I am, that's what I'm not."

28. In a similar vein to the previous footnote, I refer to this as the "tater farm" theory of language, based on a line of Abraham Simpsons'—"for many years I was a tater farmer: but the shameful truth is, the taters farmed me!"

29. Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 83.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid., 13.

32. Ibid.

33. This was one point where the New Critics part ways from structuralism; the locus classicus is Wimsatt and Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy."

34. Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 113.

35. Norris, *Deconstruction*, 3–4.

36. Ibid., xii.

37. It should be noted that as a "responsible relativist," Munslow does not claim that his arguments are "right," although he trusts that his "arguments will prove attractive and appealing." Munslow, *The Future of History*, ix.

38. Ibid., viii.

39. Munslow, *The New History*, 2.

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40. *Deconstructing* History, 18.
41. Ibid., 4. The phrasing here is slightly odd: correspondence is normally considered as a dyadic relation, not a triadic one. Munslow's general unfamiliarity with mainstream philosophy may account for this oddity.
42. Ibid., 11.
43. Gary Aylesworth, "Postmodernism."
44. Novitz, "Postmodernism," 214.
45. Jenkins, *Refiguring History*, 5.
46. Ibid., 16.
47. Ibid., 17.
48. Ibid., 18.
49. Ibid.
50. Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, 15, 34.
51. Ibid., 131.
52. Ibid., 129.
53. Ibid., 21.
54. Gunkel, *Deconstruction*, 118.
55. Ibid.
56. Jenkins, *Rethinking History*, xix.
57. Ibid., 15.
58. Jenkins, *Why History?*, 2.
59. Ibid., 12.
60. Munslow, *The Future of History*, 103.
61. Ibid., 221.
62. The irony here is that an appeal to common sense vis-à-vis realism is generally ruled out, but not so a "common sense" idealism.
63. See for instance, Roth, "The Pasts."
64. Goldstein, *Historical Knowing*, xix. This line of thought also crops up in some postmodernist thought: see for instance Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, 6 and 73.
65. Ibid., xii.
66. Ibid., 34. Italics in the original.
67. Ibid., xix.
68. Ibid., xxi.
69. Ibid.
70. Ibid., 60–61.
71. A similar argument is made by Meiland: see *Scepticism and Historical Knowledge*, 14.
72. "It seems to be suggested that I am worse off than that other 'constructionist,' R. G. Collingwood. . . . But why should I be saddled with views such as these?" Goldstein, "History and the Primacy of Knowing," 42–43.
73. In the preface to *Historical Knowing*, Goldstein makes a hand-waving referent to Husserl's notion of constitution; but Husserl's views are notoriously complex, and if one is to invoke it, one needs a fully worked-out argument.
74. Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, 114.
75. Roth, "The Pasts," 323.

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76. Goodman, *Of Mind and Other Matters*, 2.
77. Roth, "The Pasts," 330.
78. Ibid., 336.
79. See Roth, *The Philosophical Structure of Historical Explanation*, 32–34.
80. Quoted in Shaw, *The Book of Football Quotations*, 322.
81. This is a nod to Ian Hacking's criteria for the existence of something—"if you can spray them, they exist." See Hacking, *Representing and Intervening*, 22–24.
82. The exception here is the French poststructuralists—their idealism sprang from a thorough dissatisfaction with the present, and subsequent need for theories that delegitimized authorities. Inevitably, the baby went out with the bathwater, and *all* authority came to be seen as suspect.
83. See Munslow, *The Future of History*, for a sustained exercise in frustration over the refusal of historians to adopt the postmodernist view wholesale.

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Chapter 2

A Deceiving Resemblance

Realism Debates in Philosophy of Science and Philosophy of Historiography

Veli Virmajoki

Realism is one of the most discussed issues in both philosophy of science and philosophy of historiography.[1] However, these two debates about realism have very little in common, strategically and positionally speaking. In this chapter, I explain the differences between the two debates and the resulting problems in the debate about realism in the philosophy of historiography.

To be more specific, I argue that there are fundamental differences between the debates when it comes to (i) the interpretation of what realism implies, (ii) sources of insights in the arguments, and (iii) the generality of the supposed consequences of the arguments. Together these differences create a situation where the strategies used in the debates differ, that is, the debates differ in what types of arguments are considered reasonable, adequate, and proportional with respect to the questions asked.

I argue that there are major shortcomings in several main arguments for anti-realism in historiography. I discuss the problematic details of the arguments and, more importantly, point out how the arguments are dead ends, strategically speaking. I point out that, in addition to the dubious details, the arguments are either too general or too narrow. In other words, the arguments either force us to take an anti-realistic position with respect to all knowledge, or they are targeted only to a specific aspect of historiography. The problem is that, when the arguments apply to all knowledge, the arguments (i) fail to tell anything specific about historiography, and (ii) are not convincing to anyone who has realistic inclinations in some areas of life, such as when they visit

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Chicago, Athens, or some other city for the first time and expect to find that the city is indeed there (and this group involves basically everyone). On the other hand, when the arguments are targeted only to a specific aspect of historiography, it becomes unclear (i) how that aspect is connected to other aspects of historiography, and (ii) why that one aspect should draw all historiography into the anti-realistic realm.

In what follows, I explain the nature of the scientific realism debate and the arguments for and against scientific realism. I then discuss arguments for anti-realism in historiography and criticize them. I compare the argumentative strategies in the two debates and show how little the arguments for anti-realism in historiography can achieve. I conclude by arguing that philosophy of historiography should provide conceptual tools that help to make sense of conceptual and epistemic issues in historiography. I point out that the realism debate in philosophy of historiography has hardly achieved such a clarificatory function.

I wish to point out that this chapter does not examine all possible metaphysical, semantical, and epistemological positions about historiography and their argumentative underpinnings in philosophy of historiography. I am not directly defending any realist theory on these issues. Rather, I criticize the argumentative strategies of anti-realist positions about historiography and their ability to contribute to philosophical clarity about historiography. Moreover, as I am far from convinced that some form of anti-realism should be the default position in philosophy of historiography, my arguments speak for realism as a stance that we can quite naturally endorse.

AN OUTLINE OF THE SCIENTIFIC REALISM DEBATE

In this section, I will provide an overall picture of the realism debate in philosophy of science and characterize its strategic nature.

Scientific realism can be characterized in three theses:

> *The Metaphysical Thesis*: The world has a definite and mind-independent structure.
>
> *The Semantic Thesis*: Scientific theories should be taken at face value. They are truth-conditioned descriptions of their intended domain, both observable and unobservable. Hence, they are capable of being true or false. The theoretical terms featuring in theories have putative factual reference. So, if scientific theories are true, the unobservable entities they posit populate the world.

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> *The Epistemic Thesis*: Mature and predictively successful scientific theories are well confirmed and approximately true of the world. So, the entities posited by them, or, at any rate, entities very similar to those posited, inhabit the world.[2]

The main line of the debate, as it currently stands, concerns the epistemic thesis. The issue is whether it is correct to accept scientific theories as approximately true descriptions of the mind-independent world. Now, it might seem, for an anti-realistically minded person, that too much concession has been given to scientific realism. However, there are good reasons to focus on the epistemic thesis.

First, if anti-realism that abandons either the metaphysical or semantic thesis is correct, then the epistemic thesis must be wrong. If the epistemic thesis is correct, then both the semantic and metaphysical theses are correct. Scientific realism can block anti-realism by defending the epistemic thesis—and it has done so, as we will see in the next section with respect to the No Miracles argument.

Second, and more importantly, if the epistemic thesis is wrong, then scientific realism fails. The failure of the epistemic thesis creates a feedback loop to the metaphysical and semantic thesis. If the epistemic thesis fails, we can either (i) admit that science is about the mind-independent world and refers to it, but the theories are not true, or (ii) abandon the semantic or metaphysical thesis and provide an alternative picture of semantics or metaphysics of science. All these positions are forms of anti-realism that differ with respect to their strengths. This means that anti-realists have good motivations to attack the epistemic thesis, as it opens the room to discuss what type of anti-realism should be accepted.

Everything comes down to the question of whether the arguments for the epistemic thesis are stronger than the arguments against it. As we will see, these arguments and their assessment are closely tied to the assessment of actual scientific work and the historical development of science. The arguments and their assessment are nuanced, and both the supporters and critics of scientific realism have put serious effort into using detailed historical arguments and abstract conceptual reasoning to make their case.

Now that we understand the nature of the scientific realism debate and its strategic nature, we turn to the arguments for and against realism. I discuss the main argumentative lines and explain how these lines have shaped how scientific realism is currently understood. In the rest of the chapter, I discuss themes and arguments in the realism debate in philosophy of historiography and point out how the themes and nuances of the scientific realism debate are lacking in the philosophy of historiography.

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ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST SCIENTIFIC REALISM

In philosophy of science, the most central argument for scientific realism is the so-called No Miracles argument (NMA):

> The positive argument for realism is that it is the only philosophy that doesn't make the success of science a miracle. That terms in mature scientific theories typically refer . . . , that the theories accepted in a mature science are typically approximately true, that the same term can refer to the same thing even when it occurs in different theories—these statements are viewed by the scientific realist not as necessary truths but as part of the only scientific explanation of the success of science, and hence as part of any adequate scientific description of science and its relation to its objects.[3]

NMA is an inference to the best explanation. In essence, it says that the best explanation of the success of mature scientific theories is that they are approximately true descriptions of the mind-independent world.

NMA is an intuitively compelling argument, and it captures the main motivation for accepting scientific realism. Of course, we cannot compare our theories with the world out there directly and see whether they are true, but the success of the theories seems to be enough to indicate that they "cut the world at its joints."

However, there are several ways to resist NMA. First, at the abstract level, it can be pointed out that theory choices are always underdetermined by the evidence. There are always mutually incompatible theories that are equally well supported by the evidence.[4] This indicates that it is not obvious whether the success should lead us to infer that the current best theories are approximately true.

The argument from underdetermination is usually ignored as a mere skeptical fantasy. It is not the case that, during any moment in the history of science, we have had several incompatible theories that have been equally successful. Rather, the problem has been to find even one successful theory. The argument from underdetermination does not, in itself, seem enough to shrug off the power of NMA.

A more substantial argument against NMA is so-called pessimistic induction. Laudan argues that there have been successful theories whose terms did not refer to anything that exists (according to our best current theories) and therefore were not true of the mind-independent world. An example of such a theory is the optical ether theory in nineteenth-century physics (see later in this chapter). Given these theories, we can infer that theories can be

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successful without being approximately true and that our successful theories might very well not be approximately true.[5]

A general line of argument that realists use to counter pessimistic induction is the strategy of *divide et impera*, that is, "divide and rule." In this strategy, realists identify the theoretical constituents of the past theories that were responsible for their success. It is then argued, case-by-case, that these constituents are preserved through theory-change in science. For example, Stathis Psillos argues that

> The parts of "luminiferous ether" theories [i.e., the general dynamics of the carrier of light-waves] which were taken by scientists to be well-supported by the evidence and to contribute to well-founded explanations of the phenomena were retained in subsequent theories. What became paradigmatically abandoned was a series of models which were used as heuristic devices [i.e., mechanical models] for the possible constitution of the carrier of light-waves.[6]

Currently, the debate surrounding scientific realism is characterized by arguments for and against the form and historical substance of arguments that are presented in the debate. To give some examples, there are debates about inference to the best explanation.[7] There are also debates about the formal quality of historical considerations (for example, do they involve issues such as base rate fallacies).[8] Moreover, there are historical investigations that attempt to attack either pessimistic induction or *divide et impera*. These historical investigations are quite nuanced, and they draw on several cases. For example, Peter Vickers has recently discussed Arnold Sommerfeld's derivation of the fine structure energy levels of hydrogen:

> Not only were his predictions good, he derived exactly the same formula that would later drop out of Dirac's 1928 treatment (something not possible using 1925 Schrödinger–Heisenberg quantum mechanics). And yet the most central elements of Sommerfeld's theory were not even approximately true.[9]

Despite this, it does not follow that the case can be used against scientific realism: "The realist has a story to tell vis-á-vis the discontinuities between the old and the new theory, leading to a realist defence based on sufficient continuity of relevant structure."[10] This illustrates how complicated the relationships between philosophical positions, arguments, and historiographical studies of the development of science are in the case of scientific realism.

Next, I will turn to the themes in the realism debate in philosophy of historiography and make some observations about it against the background of the scientific realism debate. I have chosen three arguments that draw on different types of considerations in order to show different general strategies that historiographical anti-realism uses. In order to construct an anti-realist

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position, one can build on (i) a supposedly unique epistemology of historiography, (ii) a supposedly unique ontology of the past, or (iii) claims about what the core of historiography is and how realism cannot be applied to the core.

HISTORICAL ANTI-REALISM—THE ARGUMENTS

It is remarkable that, in philosophy of historiography, the main lines of argumentation in the realism debate have been produced by those who oppose realism. However, it is unclear what type of realism they oppose. The arguments against realism are directed toward specific positions that the critics consider as being at the core of realism. There is not a common core in the argumentative strategies as there is in philosophy of science, where the anti-realist arguments are directed against the idea that our best theories are approximately true. As we will see, this also leads to a situation where the possible scopes of realism and anti-realism are much wider in philosophy of historiography. In many argumentative lines, the anti-realist interpretation is thought to apply to all claims about the past. Or when the distinction between claims that deserve a realist or anti-realist attitude is made, it is not applied to distinguish *between* different historiographical accounts on the basis of their virtues (as in the scientific realism debate, where the realist attitude is taken toward mature and successful theories). Rather, it is applied to types of claims *within* historiographical accounts. I argue that these argumentative steps are strategically strange and fail to convince those who have realistic inclinations.

Goldstein, Acquaintance, and Skepticism

In a classical work, Leon Goldstein attacks the idea that we can know the past by arguing that we cannot have direct evidence—based on acquaintance—about the past: "The historical past is not the real past: it is the product of intellect and can never be known by acquaintance."[11] According to Goldstein, realism involves the idea that we should compare historiographical results against the past and that this can be done by using perception as a method of confirmation:

> By historical realism I mean that point of view according to which the real past as it was when it was being lived is the touchstone against which to test for truth or falsity the products of historical constitution.[12]
>
> What we come to believe about the human past can never be confirmed by observation—can never be known by acquaintance—and so can never be put to

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> the test of observation, the method of confirmation which is virtually the only one explicitly recognized by science and philosophy.[13]
>
> Historical realism undercuts all of those distinctions among the realisms, simply because the objects of historical knowing are not given in the way in which natural objects present to perception are. The whole of the controversy among the adherents to the various forms of realism is rooted in the experiences we have of what is given to us perceptually, and it has no application to the analysis of what is given in some other way.[14]

There are three issues we should pay attention to.

First, in scientific realism, the claim is not that we can test theories against the way the world is in some direct manner. Testing a theory by observation has never meant that we could test a theory by becoming directly acquainted with its objects. Of course, we cannot compare our theories with the world directly. This leaves completely open the issue of whether there are reasons (such as NMA) to think that our theories capture the world. As Psillos puts it,

> To be sure, realists need to grant that their "epistemic optimism" that science has succeeded in tracking truth requires . . . epistemic luck: it's not a priori true that science has to be successful in truth-tracking. If science does succeed in truth-tracking, this is a contingent fact about the way the world is and the way scientific method and theories have managed to "latch onto" it.[15]

Goldstein himself notes that realism can lead to skepticism:

> Far from being the grounds for the solution to the problem of skepticism in history, it is historical realism which leads to it. . . . Since the goal of history [according to realists] must be to describe history as actuality and since reflections upon its procedures make clear that such a goal is not compatible with what it can do . . . the sad conclusion [that there is no historical knowledge] seems obvious.[16]

The argument is that if we assume that knowledge must be about the mind-independent world as it actually is/was, then there can be no knowledge as it is impossible to fulfill the high standards. However, these high standards are exactly what scientific realism endorses. What makes scientific realism so attractive is its commitment to the mind-independent world: If there is knowledge, then this knowledge is about that world. Of course, there is the "*presumptuous* claim . . . that although this world is independent of human cognitive activity, science succeeds in arriving at a more or less faithful representation of it, that is of knowing the truth."[17] The possibility of skepticism and the attempts to avoid it are exactly the issues that make scientific realism

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attractive and intellectually exciting. Solving skepticism by accepting it is not on the table.

Notice, also, that there are no positions in philosophy of science—as far as I know—where it is claimed that theories can only be accepted if they are tested "by acquaintance." For example, Bas van Fraassen, who defends constructive empiricism and not scientific realism, claims that we can accept a theory when we believe it is empirically adequate even though "empirical adequacy goes far beyond what we can know at any given time. (All the results of measurement are not in; they will never all be in; and in any case, we won't measure everything that can be measured.)"[18] Demanding confirmation by acquaintance does not lead to anything fruitful in the philosophy of any field, no matter how anti-realist one is.

Second, scientific realism is not built on "the experiences we have of what is given to us perceptually," nor does it make sense to say it "has no application to the analysis of what is given in some other way." In fact, scientific realism claims that, in many cases, we can have knowledge about the world that goes far beyond what is given in perceptual objects. Most interesting scientific theories are about entities far removed from perception. It is difficult to understand how the lack of direct perceptual access to the past should affect any realistic aspirations we may have. Surely, scientific realists are not realists because they think that the relevant objects are given in perception. Why would historiographical realism need such shaky grounds?

Third, if it was true that the past is out of our epistemic reach, this would not only have implications for the philosophy of historical realism but widespread ramifications for our system of knowledge in general. A scientist reading a paper about an experiment that was performed last year is forming, literally, an opinion about the past of a scientific group and the natural objects it studies through the paper. What should we judge about the epistemic predicament of the scientist? That she does not have access to the experiment or the objects because they are in the past? There is very little that is directly given to anyone in perception—or even indirectly, given how dependent we are on social structures of knowledge production—*right now*. Most of our knowledge is about things in the past. In fact, as long as knowledge depends on our causal relation to our environment, there is no knowledge if the past does not exist, as there would be no causal relations. Causes usually precede their effects. If Goldstein is correct, then there is very little we can ever know, even about the most obvious things such as whether there was a bed in the bedroom that I left five minutes ago. This is absurd.[19]

Of course, such widespread skepticism is not the point of Goldstein's arguments. However, here we can see an issue that rises repeatedly with respect to historiographical anti-realism: the arguments are too general, too destructive. When we are interested in historical realism, we are interested in whether,

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and *to what extent*, historians are able to tell the truth about the past. It does not help us in this respect if we are told that there are no distinctions between good and bad historical works or even between historiography, scientific articles, and my current assumptions about my closest environment—they are all equally untrue because they are all about the past, which is supposedly unknown in principle in any realistic way. Usually, we just know that we know many things about the world—if this is denied due to an anti-realist argument, no one will find anti-realism attractive—and we want to know what attitude we should take toward epistemic products of a specific type, such as scientific theories and historiographical accounts. Compare this to the argument from underdetermination against scientific realism. No one would claim that because our best theory (*T*) and theory (*T* + *an evil demon deceives you*) are empirically equivalent, we should abandon realism. The evil demon assumption would destroy all our knowledge, and it would no longer be meaningful to ask specific questions about the status of scientific knowledge. Or think about pessimistic induction: it is an argument against the link between truth and success in science, not an argument to destroy all scientific knowledge. The realism and anti-realism debates must be limited to concern the epistemic status of certain knowledge products, and the arguments should be proportional to questions that are asked. To put the issue the other way around: we are all realists with respect to many things, and if the only reason to abandon historiographical realism is the argumentation from Goldstein—the very argumentation that would lead us to abandon almost all realism—then we can remain realists about historiography as well. Take-it-or-leave-it arguments come at a great cost.

Fixity of the Past. Much Ado about Nothing?

In philosophy of historiography, there has been intensive discussion about the fixity of the past and whether we can, therefore, tell the past as it was, independently of us and independently of what happened later. If it is the case that the past is not fixed, this is bad news for realists. First, if the past is not mind-independent, then realism goes out of the window by definition. Second, even if the changes were mind-independent (whatever this could mean), this would go against the commonsensical spirit of realism in that we could never capture the past as it might change in the next moment (whatever that is supposed to mean). Surely, realism is motivated by the idea that the world is the way it is, that we can make approximately true statements about the way it is, and that these statements remain true. Some murky metaphysics of the past changing do not fit into this picture, no matter how mind-independent those changes are.

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But how could one argue that the past is not fixed? In his famous argument that has been influential in philosophy of historiography, Danto asks us to imagine an Ideal Chronicler:

> He knows whatever happens the moment it happens, even in other minds. And he is to have the gift of instantaneous transcription: everything that happens across the whole forward rim of the Past is set down by him, as it happens, the *way* it happens. The resultant running account I shall term the Ideal Chronicle.[20]

Roth argues that

> This thought experiment establishes that statements true of a particular time *t* cannot be comprehensively known at *t*, not even by someone capable of recording all that happens when it happens (the Ideal Chronicler). Danto's now canonical example is this: "The Thirty Years War began in 1618." This statement is true of what happens in 1618 but is not knowable in 1618, not even by an Ideal Chronicler. Danto calls these "narrative sentences," and they demonstrate that there will be truths about any time *t* not knowable at *t*; truths about time *t* continue to accumulate after *t*.[21]

This seems like bad news for realism. As I pointed out earlier, it is hard to imagine a realist position that could allow the past to change. In order to understand the argumentative move for anti-realism that the Ideal Chronicler experiment makes, we should ask what the thought experiment really indicates.

First, it is important to point out that the issue cannot be how we refer to some historical event or object. We can refer to events and objects even through false descriptions. For example, assume that someone believes that Einstein designed the atomic bomb (when it was, in fact, designed by American physicist Robert Oppenheimer). Given this, the phrase "The man who designed the atomic bomb" in the statement "The man who designed the atomic bomb worked in a patent office" refers to Einstein, but the description is not true of him. The way we refer to some event or object is independent of what is true of that event or object. Whether something is true or false about an event cannot be determined by how some cognitive agent is able to refer to that event.

Second, the Ideal Chronicler cannot write down anything that requires a cross-temporal relation (i.e., a relation that holds between events located at different times). Most notably, as Danto points out, "'is a cause of' would not be a predicate accessible to the Ideal Chronicler."[22] This is important because there exists a natural distinction between properties and relations.

Properties hold *of* things while relations hold *between* things; the relations are not relations *of* anything. Given that a cross-temporal relation holds

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between two events, it is not the case that the relation in question is a relation of the earlier event. Following the distinction, one could argue that the difference between us and the Ideal Chronicler is not that we know statements that are *true of an event* that the Ideal Chronicler does not know; the difference is that we know truths about cross-temporal relations that the Ideal Chronicler, by definition, is not allowed to capture. Truths about time *t* are not accumulating after *t*, but truths about the past (part of which *t* is) are. The truths that accumulate are truths about cross-temporal relations.

While the considerations above do not, of course, show that truths about the past are not accumulating as we move forward in time, it shows why there might be no mystery in the accumulation. If it is true about the past that a cross-temporal relation holds between C and E, this is true only if C and E both exist. Given this, Mink's observation that "the description of the past does not come closer and closer to an ideal chronicle but departs further and further from it as more descriptions become available,"[23] is a consequence of the natural assumption that historiography captures cross-temporal relations (unlike the Ideal Chronicler). Of course, the past could be said to change as we move forward in time because new things, including cross-temporal relations, come into existence, but this is not what is meant when the fixity of the past is questioned.

The fact alone that the Ideal Chronicler cannot know causal relations indicates that what the Ideal Chronicler can or cannot know has no bearing on whether we should be realists or not. We definitely are realists about causal relations in many domains of life, and we think they are part of the ontology of the world that can be known. Here, too, we encounter an argument in philosophy of historiography that is so strong that it would undermine our realism everywhere and does not tell anything unique about historiography. As indicated above, this type of strategy can hardly convince those who are realists at some domain of life, and it is hard to understand what philosophy of historiography can achieve with such strong arguments.

Recently, Paul Roth has made an argument for the metaphysical plurality of the pasts by arguing that it is a mistake to think that "there exists only a single past calling for explanation."[24] According to Roth,

> The sort of metaphysical picture I ultimately want to reject has it that events enter into processes by some natural historical dynamic inherent in the events and processes of which they are parts. . . . What needs to be rejected is the picture of a past that is simply there waiting for a historian to come along.[25]

Roth's argument is twofold. First, it is argued that "if the fixity of the past is a coherent notion, as it seems to be, then this implies that there could be an Ideal Chronicle."[26] However, Roth maintains there could not be an Ideal

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Chronicle because there are no ideal events to be recorded: "Without some description or other, there are no specific events; with an identifying description, we still do not know if the event is of the requisite ideal sort—that is, not primarily of our making."[27] Second, Roth relies on the Goodmanian consideration of Ian Hacking, who argues that nature does not dictate one organizing scheme and strengthens these considerations with Danto's argument that truths about some time *t* are not fixed at any point in time (see above). These considerations lead to the rejection of the metaphysical reality of the past. Irrealism follows. There are multiple pasts that we make up by imposing order on what we take to have happened.

There are two interrelated problems in this argumentative strategy. First, it is not clear, as already indicated, why metaphysical realism implies that an Ideal Chronicler is possible. As we have seen, the Ideal Chronicler is, despite the first impression, a rather limited cognitive agent as it does not have access to cross-temporal relations. Given that metaphysical realism is committed to the idea that what is true goes beyond what can be known, why would metaphysical realism commit to the idea that a seriously limited cognitive agent could know everything? On the other hand, if the argument is that even a "super-chronicler" who can view all points of time at once is not possible because it should use some conceptual scheme to identify different events to write an Ideal Chronicle, then the impossibility-of-an-Ideal-Chronicler argument is redundant and all the argumentative force is on the consideration about how conceptual schemes make up the world. In this case, one needs to assume anti-realist constructionism in order to argue against realism. The Ideal Chronicler thought experiment does not, alone, establish anything interesting about metaphysical realism and therefore historiographical realism.

Second, it is difficult to understand the relationship between realism in philosophy of science and realism in philosophy of historiography by following Roth. Even though Roth claims "to give this metaphysical assumption of the objective past the most plausible form that I can, and then show that the assumption is untenable,"[28] the "most plausible form" is one of Roth's own making, and in the book there is very little discussion about characterizations and arguments for metaphysical realism that the defenders of the position have given. Neither is there any discussion about the possible responses to the arguments concerning the metaphysical implications of conceptual schemes and theory-ladenness of empirical knowledge that Roth makes.[29]

This ponderous, argumentative bulldozing leaves us completely blind about how irrealism in historiography relates to realist and anti-realist positions in philosophy of science. For example, it would be interesting to know how recent developments in perspectival realism, which is an explicit attempt to find a middle ground between scientific realism and anti-realism,[30] relate to the conceptual space of irrealism. Even if Roth is correct and irrealism

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stands its ground, an opportunity to cash out the philosophical implications of the insights is lost. Without filling in the details and tracking down their relations to other philosophical positions, Roth makes claims like "What is the case for historical knowing as a type of constituting extends to all forms of knowledge. What counts as evidence, and for what it counts, turns out to be a product of practices of inquiry as informed by the use of predicates (past or present)."[31]

Again, if one is a realist about any domain of life—such as science—then it is difficult to understand how these extremely strong positions in philosophy of historiography could convince that person. Consider NMA: It seems that we should read successful scientific theories realistically because otherwise their success is hard to explain. Then comes the philosophy of historiography which says that every form of knowledge is on the same line when it comes to realistic reading and that there is no realistic reading in historiography. Should we abandon NMA? Without further guidance on how a strong constructive position, such as irrealism, is related to a wider scheme of philosophical positions and arguments, a person with realist inclinations and arguments such as NMA is hardly ready to take the ride out from realism. Realism in philosophy of science is still standing after many argumentative tests, and the issues raised by Roth do not affect it without further clarification. For example, theory-ladenness can be used as an argument *for* realism:

> This well-known abductive defence of realism starts from the fact that the heavily theory-laden scientific methodology is instrumentally reliable (i.e., it yields correct predictions and is empirically successful) and argues that the best explanation of this instrumental reliability is that the background theories (which inform and dictate the methods used by scientists) are approximately true.[32]

The scientific realism debate is surprisingly immune to the arguments for historiographical anti-realism. It is difficult to understand how arguments that do not work against realism in science should work in philosophy of historiography. Therefore, it is even more difficult to understand how the use of these arguments in philosophy of historiography could undermine realism in science as well. There is something missing in the argumentative strategy for anti-realism in philosophy of historiography, at least as long as it is supposed to establish anti-realism *tout court*.

Narratives and the "True Nature" of Historiography

The final line of argumentation that I shall consider is based on the idea that certain aspects of historiographical works are what historiography "really"

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is about and realism cannot be applied to these aspects. As Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen summarizes:

> The early narrativists highlighted the narrativity of historiography and narrativity entails two important ideas: (1) there is a lower and higher level of cognition in historiography; and (2) the truth-values of the lower level statements cannot be translated into a justification (or falsification) of higher-level cognition. This is the central premise in the subsequent narrativist philosophy of historiography.[33]

The arguments of this type became popular in philosophy of historiography with Hayden White's *Metahistory* (1973), where it was argued that historiographical works are shaped by conventions that determine what kind of story is told about the past, and that there is nothing in the historical reality that corresponds to these stories: "Historical narratives are verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences."[34]

Frank Ankersmit makes the same point in the context of his narrativist philosophy:

> The "historical landscape" is not given to the historian; he has to construct it. The narration [i.e., the narrative] is not the projection of a historical landscape or of some historical machinery, the past is only constituted in the narratio. The structure of the narratio is a structure lent to or pressed on the past and not the reflection of a kindred structure objectively present in the past itself.[35]

Kuukkanen also questions whether a colligatory concept—that is, synthesizing expressions used in historiography, such as "the Renaissance" or "the Thaw" (see p. 40)—"can be an accurate representation of historical reality. The concept 'accurate' implies something like a faithful representation or a correspondence to facts." He concludes that "historiographical (re)presentation cannot be a faithful copy of historical reality . . . [because] historiography cannot do without colligatory concepts [and] colligatory concepts are not objectively given and do not refer to corresponding entities in historical reality."[36]

Interestingly, as Kuukkanen notes, "both White and Ankersmit assume that the individuation of historical facts is unproblematic, an example of which is a chronicle."[37] Kuukkanen himself does not make a clear distinction between unproblematic facts and higher-level representations, arguing that there is "no clear demarcation line but instead a sliding scale, according to which all works of historiography can be located somewhere on an axis of the subject-sidedness and object-sidedness." However, an anti-realistic position

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follows because "colligatory expressions amount to the most interesting and useful type of historiographical language."[38]

It seems that Kuukkanen is correct in the claim that there cannot be a clear-cut distinction between historical facts and some unit that represents them together, where facts can be known and correspond to reality while the unit cannot. A clear-cut distinction raises the awkward question of where, exactly, the line is drawn. Is the landing of a unit on D-Day a historical fact? Is the whole Operation Overlord a historical fact or a narrative/colligation? What about the Second World War?

Problems nevertheless remain. First, it is difficult to see how the fact that a historiographical account is supposedly presented with literary tropes—or any story-like structure—is in any way relevant to whether we should consider the account as true of the past. Surely, that some episode was presented with the literary structure of, let's say, a tragedy is not relevant to what is said about what happened (how events, entities, and states of affair were related) during the episode. If the main product of a historiographical work is to narrate something in the mode of a tragedy, then it is difficult to say why we would need different stories about different historical events. Once we understood what a tragedy is, then we could just say about any historical episode "that was a tragedy" and that would be all the interesting things to be said about the event. If we read a tragedy about the fall of the Roman Empire and understand the nature of a tragedy, then it would be easy to understand the First World War by simply stating that it was a tragedy; there would be no need to know anything about the war. Of course, this is not the point of the argument. However, we can notice that what is relevant in historiography is how certain events developed and were connected to each other, not the type of story the events can be seen as constituting. Given this, it remains an open question whether we should take a realist attitude. The necessity of story-telling devices in historiography does not, in itself, establish anything on this front. The extinction of dinosaurs can be presented as a tragedy, but the event still remains a piece of knowledge that can be understood realistically. Finally, even if it is argued that the story-like form adds some further meaning to what happens and this meaning cannot correspond to the historical reality, anti-realism hardly follows. Given that such a "creature of darkness"[39] can also be added to theories about the Big Bang (to have some cosmological feeling), and given that the nature of this further meaning has no relevance in a debate over our realistic attitude over the Big Bang, the supposed further meaning of a historical work is equally irrelevant to whether we should interpret that work in realists' terms.

Second, it is difficult to understand why we should accept that colligatory expressions are such that they cannot be understood in a way that makes realism about them possible. Surely, they do not refer to any one thing, as

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they are, by definition, synthesizing expressions. However, why could we not interpret them as claims about patterns or trends? Consider an example that Kuukkanen uses:

> The "Thaw" as a historiographical concept refers to the period in the Soviet History from the mid-1950s to the early years of the 1960s, when the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev initiated the process of de-Stalinization. . . . The "Thaw" is seen as a period in which politics on many fronts and especially the cultural atmosphere of the Soviet Union in general changed and warmed from the "freeze" of Stalin to Khrushchev's "Thaw."[40]

Kuukkanen argues that

> The objects that the "Thaw" subsumes under it can be very different, such as the publication of Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, greater tolerance for humor in what is said and published, and the release of prisoners from the Gulag. It is difficult to see anything "natural" in putting this group together in exactly this way to suggest that only the "Thaw" can colligate them correctly. There are no essences or even any obvious shared qualities.[41]

It is unclear why we cannot consider all the heterogenous objects as signs or constituents of an underlying trend or pattern. Obviously, the examples used in the case of the "Thaw" can be understood as the types of things that occur only when society has certain minimal liberal qualities—this is what "the Thaw" captures. Of course, we could put together different items and suggest different trends and patterns, but this hardly establishes that the trend and patterns do not deserve realist interpretations as attempts to describe the mind-independent world. In cosmology, it is believed that the universe expands. This is a pattern in the development of the universe. This conclusion has been reached by putting together evidence of things that would occur if the universe really did expand. Of course, we can make competing hypotheses and cherry-pick evidence for them, but this hardly takes away the possibility of the realist reading of the theory of an expanding universe. And if one hangs on to the fact that, in historiography, the objects are more heterogenous, then one should remember that (a) "biodiversity loss" is a trend that is non-homogenous with respect to the things that constitute it, and (b) can, and should, be interpreted realistically. We can be realistic—at least in principle—about several patterns and trends that sciences capture, and it seems unclear why this would not be true in historiography.

Of course, one can, in a sense, constitute a pattern by choosing items that are then used to define the pattern, but this does not have any constructivist consequences. We can criticize a supposed pattern by pointing out items that are left out of it. If we notice that the objects subsumed under "Thaw" are not

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a sample of objects that can be typically found from the historical period, then we can deny that such a pattern really exists. It hardly means much that one can *define* the "Thaw" as the set of objects that were chosen initially. If I am a realist and suppose there are real patterns, then the "Thaw" is relevant only if it aims at capturing such a pattern and is not merely a trick performed with definitions. Of course, if one denies realism, then the person can easily say that there is nothing beyond what we happen to present, and thus the "Thaw" automatically captures a pattern once it is defined. But this surely is not an argument from the colligatory nature of the "Thaw" to anti-realism but the other way around.

Finally, and most importantly, we need to notice that the main problem with the anti-realistic arguments above is not whether they accurately draw the lines between what can and what cannot be interpreted realistically. The biggest problem is that the arguments suppose that certain historiographical claims or wholes are the main product of historiography and that the production of such claims or wholes is the True Nature of historiography. The arguments have the following structure:

1. Historiography produces many types of products: knowledge of facts, narratives, colligations, etc.
2. The product P of a certain type cannot be understood realistically.
3. The product P is what historiography really is about.
4. If a field is really about P and P cannot be understood realistically, the field can be declared as an anti-realistic field.
5. Historiography is an anti-realistic field.

The main problem concerns premises 3 and 4 (we discussed 1 and 2 briefly earlier). First, it is unclear why historiography should be understood as a field where narratives and colligations that (supposedly) demand anti-realistic reading are the main products. If one discusses with historians or observes them working, it is rarely visible that they are aiming at narratives and colligations. Usually, they discuss issues such as where certain information can be found; how events in the past were related to each other; how someone or some group was thinking; the unclarities in evidence with respect to events and thinking; and so on. Rarely does one hear discussions about suitable colligatory expressions and so forth, except when the finalized historiographical products are debated in highly sanitized environments such as book reviews. One could suggest that what historiography has been especially good at is (i) understanding the subtle relations between events, and (ii) understanding what people were like as cognitive agents with beliefs, experiences, and emotions. These are, prima facie, exactly the types of things that we could be realistic about. For example, consider the case of Eddington that has gained

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much historiographical attention.[42] Due to detailed historiographical work, we know that the confirmation of Einstein's general theory of relativity by Eddington's 1919 observation of the amount of gravitational deflection was not due to the data being clear and definite; we know that Eddington confirmed the theory only after he had interpreted the data in a somewhat idiosyncratic manner. Notice that this knowledge has required serious historical work and interpretation. It does not fall into Ankersmit's category of "saying true things about the past is easy—anybody can do that,"[43] and yet it is not a highly abstract historical narrative or colligatory expression.

Second, due to the consideration above, it does not seem correct to highlight the (supposed) anti-realistic tendencies of historiography. Even if we assume, for the sake of argument, that at a certain level of abstraction, historiographical products are necessarily anti-realistic, declaring that the whole field is anti-realistic seems like a mistake—even if the anti-realistic products were at the essence of historiography according to philosophers. The question of whether our best historiographical works are true descriptions of the mind-independent world is at the core of the realism issue. There certainly are many levels of historiographical claims that can be understood realistically even if the most abstract level is cut off from realists. Moreover, these claims are what people usually are interested in when they wonder what to think about history. It is one thing to suggest that we should not, perhaps, be realists about the somewhat metaphorical picture that "relativity triumphed over vicious nationalism in World War I";[44] it is another thing to suggest we should be anti-realists about the explanation of Eddington's conclusion about gravitational deflection (see above). Suggesting that historiography is anti-realistic gives the wrong impression about (i) many historiographical claims, and (ii) the merits of historiography in relation to other fields. If we compare sciences and historiography at the level at which their products are similar, it is far from clear that we should be anti-realists about historiography but realists about science. Even if we should be anti-realists about historiography at the same level as we tend to be realists about science, nothing in the arguments about the nature of "True Products" of historiography has established this.

Summing Up the Section: A Striking Absence

A common feature in all the arguments above is that they either establish too little or too much. Either anti-realism floats everywhere from historiography or it does not even get to the right departments of historiography. When we contrast philosophy of historiography with philosophy of science in this respect, the differences are remarkable. In philosophy of historiography, there have not been serious analyses about what realism is supposed to mean

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in historiography and what reasons to be anti-realistic are such that they are *unique* to historiography (in contrast to all knowledge).

A striking absence in philosophy of historiography is that of discussion about the possible differences between different historiographical works when it comes to their quality. One would expect that whether we can take historiography as describing the mind-independent world depends on the quality of the works in historiography. Moreover, one would expect to find an argument where an anti-realistic conclusion is reached by looking at the track record of historiography, like in the case of science (see pessimistic induction). However, arguments of this genre are completely absent in philosophy of historiography. Instead, we face abstract arguments with a rather general scope about the human knowledge and predicament in the world. Given how popular anti-realism is among philosophers of historiography and given that anti-realists have put serious pressure on realism even in philosophy of science with their historical arguments, should it not be easy to give a historical argument against realism in historiography? Assuming that historiography does not capture the mind-independent world, should not the history of historiography be full of evidence about the inability of historiography to create lasting knowledge? Perhaps there is a reason for the absence. For example, even though "every generation has used the story of Einstein and the eclipse to explain what science is, how it works, and what it means,"[45] there is no fundamental disagreement about who the relevant people were, what the most important events were, and how people reasoned.[46] Why is it that, in the historiographical debates about the Eddington case, the same overall picture is at play through the years? My hunch is that this could have something to do with the knowledge that historiography has established beyond reasonable doubt about the episode as it really was.

THE SHORTCOMINGS OF ANTI-REALISM

In this chapter, I have discussed anti-realism in philosophy of historiography from a strategic perspective. I have discussed the absurd consequences of arguments for anti-realism and how they might not convince a person who does not already have anti-realistic inclinations. A common theme in anti-realist arguments is that they do not have a scope limited to historiography: either the arguments apply to all knowledge, or they apply only to certain aspects of historiography. In the latter case, the arguments seem to resemble the position of scientific realism that applies to our best theories. In the case of historiography, however, the aspects of historiography that supposedly have a forced anti-realistic reading are not in any obvious way at the

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center of our historical knowledge like the best theories are in science. The resemblance is deceiving.

What is worrying in these strategic shortcomings is not only the inability of anti-realistic arguments to convince someone with realistic inclinations. The more serious problem is that the realism debate about historiography seems unable to clarify the conceptual and epistemic issues in historiographical practices and the place of historiography among different fields of inquiry. If an argument applies to all knowledge (forcing an anti-realistic interpretation of the knowledge), it cannot illuminate the specific details of historiographical practice or its nature with respect to the nature of other fields. If an argument applies only to certain aspects of historiography, one might be interested to know about the nature of other aspects.

Compare this situation to the scientific realism debate. In that debate, the arguments center around the approximate truth of our current best theories, and the proponents of different positions utilize arguments that are directed at the features and history of such theories. Due to this, we can learn much from the debate with respect to science even if the debate itself remains unsolved. For example, the debate has produced nuanced historiographical studies that analyze the features of past theories and their relation to current theories. There have also been several studies on how to think about issues such as inference to the best explanation and its credibility in theoretical domains of science.[47]

There are very few insights of this type in the realism debate in philosophy of historiography. This is a serious problem, as the ability to clarify the nature of any given field is perhaps the most important feature of any philosophical account of that field. It is not enough that one draws conclusions about the nature of the results of a field from some highly abstract considerations. One should also be able to tell how the field works and how the workings of the field should affect our judgments about its results. To be sure, some heroic attempts have been made on this front, for example when Kuukkanen analyses justification and warranted assertability in historiography at the level of historical theses or colligatory expressions.[48] However, even here a problem remains. One can hardly study the epistemic underpinnings of historiography at only one level. Again, the problem can be illuminated by using philosophy of science, where Stanford famously argued that

> we have, throughout the history of scientific inquiry and in virtually every scientific field, repeatedly occupied an epistemic position in which we could conceive of only one or a few theories that were well confirmed by the available evidence, while subsequent inquiry would routinely (if not invariably) reveal further, radically distinct alternatives as well confirmed by the previously

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> available evidence as those we were inclined to accept on the strength of that evidence.[49]

This is called "the New Induction." It follows that there seem to be historical reasons to believe that alternatives to the current science exist, but we are not able to conceive those alternatives. This speaks against the epistemic optimism of realism.

Stanford suggested that unconceivable alternatives are a problem in the fundamental domains of science, that is, theoretical science. Stanley argues that eliminative inferences (where conclusions are reached by ruling out possibilities until only one remains) work in cases where we are able to conceive plausible possibilities. However, the New Induction indicates that scientists have been unable to conceive plausible theoretical possibilities, and the eliminative inferences have therefore not worked in theoretical science.[50]

Interestingly, Rowbottom has analyzed different levels of science that can have unconceived alternatives.[51] The title of this article—"Extending the Argument from Unconceived Alternatives: Observations, Models, Predictions, Explanations, Methods, Instruments, Experiments, and Values"—is a rather good summary of those levels. Rowbottom argues that unconceived alternatives at any level can affect other levels and that the problem is not generated merely by the theoretical level eliminative inferences. This means that the consequences of unconceived alternatives at one level permeate the whole system. It follows that one cannot analyze merely the theoretical level of science in order to understand how to interpret the robustness of its results. Different levels need to be analyzed together. This should also be the case in the philosophy of history. Different levels of historiographical practice and results are intertwined and do not have neatly separatable epistemic and conceptual issues. Like philosophy of science, philosophy of history should proceed in a piecemeal manner when it comes to issues involved in the debate over realism. Otherwise, the arguments and conclusions remain disproportional to the clarificatory goals of philosophy.

The arguments in this chapter mean that we need to analyze *the historiographical practice, the whole historiographical practice, and nothing but the historiographical practice*—in contrast to focusing on merely this or that aspect of the historiographical practice—in order to discuss the realism/anti-realism issue in a way that enables us to find convincing positions that illuminate historiography beyond the abstract domains of the issue itself. In philosophy of history, we wish to understand historiography and its place among different fields of inquiry. Even if one disguised this wish as a passion for (anti)realism, one should never lose oneself.

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NOTES

1. By "historiography" I mean the study of history, and by "history" I mean the past (no matter how the ontology of the past is understood). The point is to make a distinction, for clarity's sake, between what historians do and what their work is about. This distinction does not presume historical realism or anything like that.

2. Psillos, *Scientific Realism*, 4. We could also add an *axiological thesis*: Science aims at truths about the mind-independent world. However, whether science achieves such truths is somewhat independent of whether it aims to do so. In this chapter, we focus on scientific realism as it is characterized by the three theses above. We touch the issue of aims in III below when we discuss (post)narrativism.

3. Putnam, *Mathematics, Matter, and Method*, 73.

4. See Ladyman, *Understanding Philosophy of Science*, 163–74; criticism in Devitt, "Scientific Realism"; and Psillos, *Scientific Realism*; general discussion in Laudan, "Demystifying Underdetermination."

5. Laudan, "A Confutation of Convergent Realism."

6. Ibid., 134.

7. E.g., Psillos, "Fine Structure"; Douven, "Testing Inference to the Best Explanation"; Khalifa, "Default Privilege and Bad Lots."

8. E.g., Menke, "Does the Miracle Argument Embody a Base Rate Fallacy?"

9. Vickers, "Disarming the Ultimate Historical Challenge," 987.

10. Ibid.

11. Goldstein, *Historical Knowing*, 38.

12. Ibid., xxii.

13. Ibid., xii.

14. Ibid., xxv– xvi.

15. Psillos, *Knowing the Structure*, 11.

16. Goldstein, *Historical Knowing*, 60–61.

17. Psillos, *Knowing the Structure*, 5. Italics in original.

18. Van Fraassen, *Scientific Image*, 69.

19. The absurd consequences are not a problem only for Goldstein but for all philosophy of historiography that assumes that the past does not exist. As Timmins notes, "Philosophers of history on the whole, though, still tend to proceed on the basis that there is an objective difference between space and time, holding the widespread folk belief that the present is all there is" (Timmins, *Towards a Realist Philosophy of History*, 18).

20. Danto, "Narrative Sentences," 152.

21. Roth, *Philosophical Structure,* 8.

22. Danto, "Narrative Sentences," 159.

23. Mink, *Historical Understanding*, 139.

24. Roth, *Philosophical Structure,* 24.

25. Ibid., 25–26.

26. Ibid., 28.

27. Ibid., 29.

28. Ibid., 7.

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29. Ibid., ch. 3.
30. Massimi, *Perspectival Realism.*
31. Roth, *Philosophical Structure,* 57.
32. Psillos, *Knowing the Structure*, 155.
33. Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*, 19.
34. White, *Tropics of Discourse,* 82.
35. Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic,* 81.
36. Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*, 105.
37. Ibid., 40.
38. Ibid., 114.
39. To borrow a phrase from Quine, "Quantifiers and Propositional."
40. Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*, 101.
41. Ibid., 107.
42. E.g., Collins and Pinch, *The Golem*; Earman and Glymour, "Relativity and Eclipses"; Kennefick, *No Shadow of a Doubt*; Stanley, *Einstein's War*.
43. Ankersmit, "Historiography and Postmodernism," 178.
44. See the title of Stanley, *Einstein's War.*
45. Stanley, *Einstein's War*, 321.
46. E.g., Collins and Pinch, *The Golem*; Earman and Glymour, "Relativity and Eclipses"; Kennefick, *No Shadow of a Doubt*; Stanley, *Einstein's War*. Of course, these authors surely disagree about what we can, in general, conclude about science but the historiographical outlines of the event are remarkably similar.
47. E.g., Psillos, "Fine Structure"; Douven, "Testing Inference to the Best Explanation"; Khalifa, "Default Privilege and Bad Lots."
48. Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography.*
49. Stanford, *Exceeding Our Grasp,* 19.
50. Ibid., 30–31.
51. Rowbottom, "Extending the Argument."

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PART II

Critiques

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Chapter 3

Historical Accuracy and Historians' Objectivity

Branko Mitrović

Aristotle wrote that historians describe things that happened, *τὰ γενόμενα*; Leopold von Ranke stated that his aim was to describe the way things *actually* were, *wie es eigentlich gewesen*.[1] The difference between Ranke's and Aristotle's views that is implied by the term *eigentlich*, "actually," may seem minor, but it is significant, and its implications are one of the main topics of this chapter. Ranke's formulation suggests the expectation that one description of the past can differ from other equally accurate descriptions by somehow stating what *actually* happened—or that the same past events happened in a variety of ways and one of them was what actually happened. Ranke's view easily combines with two additional expectations attributed to historical realism: that a historical work should provide a complete description of what happened, and that historians select the facts they write about with absolute objectivity. Typically, these two additional expectations are then used to dismiss historical realism as an unrealistic project.

I argue here that all three expectations (i.e., including Ranke's) are incompatible with realist perspectives on the past and history writing. The paper starts with an analysis of these expectations that are inaccurately associated with historical realism, and then proceeds to analyze the necessary assumptions of historical realism in order to specify and clarify the consistent realist stance on these three expectations.

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ASSUMPTIONS

Let us start with Ranke's assumption that among numerous historical accounts there can be one that describes what *actually* happened. Similar formulations are to be found in other authors and are not necessarily related to historiography. Hilary Putnam, for instance, defines metaphysical realism as the view that "the world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects."[2] This sounds reasonable, but then he adds that metaphysical realism includes the view that "there is exactly one true and complete description of 'the way the world is.'"[3] It is not clear how this second claim can be squared with the assumption that the world contains mind-independent objects. Certainly, it should be possible to describe elements of the world (such as things or events), and consequently the way the world is, in a variety of ways—for instance, by using different languages or by conceptualizing the elements of the world in different ways. The fact that things can be conceptualized or described in different ways does not mean that these things do not exist independently of how people think about them. Realism is precisely the claim that mind-independent objects exist independently of how they are described. It cannot be tied to claims about the number of possible descriptions that can be made about independently existing objects.

Putnam's mention of the "complete description" pertains to the second of the three assumptions about realism mentioned above. Applied to historiography, it implies a curious expectation that historians can provide such descriptions. I have never heard of historians who claimed that their works, or any historical works they knew of, provided the "complete description" of an event, object, or a document. Nevertheless, various authors often state this assumption as an important point in their rejection of historical realism. Eighty years ago, in his review of Maurice Mandelbaum's *The Problem of Historical Knowledge* Charles Beard described his own relativism as the endorsement of the view that no historical work can tell the whole truth about the past.[4] Carl Becker, in his review of the same book by Mandelbaum, said that it should be a relief "to renounce omniscience."[5] They both clearly implied that some unnamed historians believed that they describe "the whole truth" (as Beard put it) or hope to achieve omniscience (as Becker suggested). Maybe such historians exist, but it is also possible that Beard and Becker were merely constructing a strawman realist position that they could easily reject and at the same time appear reasonable. In what follows I will analyze what a complete historical account would look like. The point I want to make is that while historians cannot make such accounts, this does not prevent them from describing the past accurately. At the same time, the very idea of

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a complete account is a useful regulative principle that delimits the pool of historical claims that can be regarded as credible.

The problem of selection pertains to the fact that historians cannot report everything when they describe past events. Consequently, they need to select the facts that they will include in their descriptions of the past. This led American historical relativists in the 1930s to insist that such selections are necessarily subjective.[6] As Beard stated, "I do not hold that historical 'truth' is relative but that the facts chosen, the spirit, and the arrangement of every historical work are relative."[7] Arguably, during the era, it did make sense to emphasize the importance of selection in a historian's work in order to oppose the view that "facts speak for themselves"—a phrase that was a long-term *bête noire* of relativists.[8] Clearly, facts alone could never achieve such a feat—but the phrase seems to have been common at the time. As late as 1980 Louis Mink thought it important to praise Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* for the insight "that of itself the past, however definite, is mute."[9] All this admitted, subjectivity in the selection of facts for a historical description does not mean that this selection is arbitrary, as was commonly argued by mid-twentieth-century historical relativists.[10] It merely entails that it is done by a human subject. When an engineer designs an engine, this design too is the result of his or her subjective mental processes, but we expect the engine to work, if the engineer has done the job well. Similarly, we should have the right to expect that the selection of facts in a historical description accurately describes the past, if the historian has done the job well—even though the historical account is a product of his or her subjectivity.

Before proceeding, here is a useful comparison that will indicate the direction of the arguments that follow. Architectural historians often do not deal with events that happened in the past but with physical buildings that exist now. They survey these buildings and draw their plans. Architectural surveys are descriptions of a historical building that is physically present and accessible today. What would it mean in this case to describe (provide a survey) of a building the way it *actually* is? The building exists only in one way, as a physical structure, and it does not have numerous modes of existence, so that one of them would be the way it actually is. Different presentations of the same building (different sets of drawings) based on different conventions can still describe the building with the same level of accuracy. It seems pointless to debate which one, out of a number of different surveys, describes the building as it actually is. At most, since different surveys have different levels of accuracy, one can say that a given survey shows the building the way it "actually is" in the sense that it is more accurate than other surveys. Also, there is no such a thing as a definite or a complete survey of a building: the architectural historian who conducts the survey pays attention to the details that he or she considers important. Later debates between architectural historians will

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then often introduce new questions and the need for new surveys. The selection of the building's aspects that the survey describes thus depends on the questions that the historian asks about the building. The survey necessarily depends on the historian's subjective judgment. This does not mean that the survey cannot be accurate in the sense of its correspondence to the building. It is accurate or inaccurate relative to the properties of the building the architectural historian has decided to document.

THE REALITY OF THE PAST: STARTING FROM THE MATERIALIST PERSPECTIVE

In order to discuss realism about the past it is necessary to start by considering what the past reality might be. Here is one possible view, which I would call "materialist" (or "physicalist")—I am presenting this perspective here as an illustration suitable to start the discussion, even though some readers may reject it as excessively scientistic. This would be the view that the world we live in, our reality, consists of the things that physics tells us about and nothing else—for instance, space-time with particles in fields of force. Particles are physical particles such as atoms or molecules, while fields of force are, for instance, gravity or electromagnetic fields. Past reality is then the past dispositions of particles and fields of force in space-time as well as the changes of these dispositions that occurred in the past. Historical figures, from this point of view, were large clusters of particles that constituted their biological bodies. Their mental states and the contents of these mental states were biological, and consequently they also resulted from particles in fields of force. Napoleon's *Grande Armée* that crossed the river Niemen on June 24, 1812, was a large number of clusters of particles and fields of force that constituted the soldiers, officers, horses, equipment, artillery, ammunition, and so on. A historian who describes such an event ultimately describes the movements of these particles and fields of force, for there was nothing else that participated in the movement of Napoleon's army but the physical constituents that made it up. Obviously, no historian has ever phrased a description of that historical event (or any other) in terms of physical constituents such as particles and fields of force. This would require identifying every individual particle—an impossible and unnecessary task. Rather, historians describe historical events in terms of various clusters of particles and fields of force that normal human interactions with the material world can register: individual human beings, physical objects, larger sets of individuals such as military units, and so on. The vocabulary that historians use in order to describe historical events depends on the kind of descriptions they want to provide and the historical questions they want to answer. In the case of the *Grande Armée*'s crossing of

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the Niemen a historian is unlikely to talk about individual soldiers (let alone physical particles) and will most likely concentrate on the movements of groups of individuals, that is, military units.

This materialist understanding of historical reality need not motivate all historical realists—I have already mentioned that I am presenting this view merely to start the discussion. Many readers will probably disagree with the physicalist austerity of the picture I have just described. Some may insist that this materialist view of the past reality may not be enough to explain the historical figures' mental states. We still do not know whether or how the biology of the brain generates thoughts and their contents. It is therefore not unreasonable to believe that biology alone is not enough to explain the mental states of historical figures. It may be argued that in order to explain the mental states of historical figures it is necessary to postulate emergent mental capacities, immaterial souls or something else, attached to their physical bodies. Other readers may think that social entities (such as Napoleon's *Grande Armée* or its individual units) are something more, over and above the individuals that participate in these entities and their interactions. The advocates of this view will seek to expand the social ontology of the *Grande Armée* and assume that it was more than just the set of individuals, their physical equipment and the interactions that made it up. A materialist may disagree, but from the point of view of historical realism such expansions of ontology are certainly legitimate: a historical realist does not need to be a materialist and may claim that reality includes other, immaterial constituents. The materialist perspective that I have just presented is merely one of many possible ways to understand the ontology of the historical past. For our discussion here, its main advantage is its straightforward simplicity. It allows that various ontological expansions—such as those that I have just described—can be treated as add-ons to physical objects, while the latter are understood as clusters of particles in fields of force. Obviously, one may also deny that physical objects consist of particles and assume that the atomist worldview of modern science is false. A historical realist may endorse Aristotelian physics and believe that things consist of matter and form or Thales's view that everything consists of water. From the perspective of view of historical realism these are also legitimate views. Nevertheless, a wholesale rejection of all of our contemporary science that the rejection of the atomist worldview entails is hardly credible today. Therefore, through this chapter I generally assume that the materialist worldview of modern science is *grosso modo* correct, but I also leave space for the approaches that introduce additional entities as the constituents of the world. The important background assumption is that all that is historically relevant and that historians study and describe is in space and time. Historical events are then dispositions and changes of dispositions of the constituents of reality in space and time (particles, fields of force, emergent

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mental capacities, immaterial souls, holist social entities, and whatever else that constitutes objects in past reality, including Thales's water or Aristotle's matter and form). Historians describe everything that happens in a region of space during a period of time by registering the dispositions and changes of dispositions of these constituents.[11] Such a description would then be as complete a description of a segment of the past as possible. For instance, if the world consists (and has consisted in the past) of particles and fields of force then it should be possible, in principle, to describe the positions of all these particles and fields of force at a given moment in a given area. (Quantum uncertainties need not be relevant here, since they do not pertain to the level of macro-objects that interest historians. The instrument that would register the positions of particles could be calibrated to work with particles that are big enough to be resistant to quantum uncertainties.)

A series of such snapshots could be made every millisecond, or as often as we need it. This would give the history of everything that happened in the given area in the given time as precisely as we need it. There is nothing else that could have happened, if dispositions and changes of dispositions of all the constituents of the world have been registered. As described, the materialist perspective would expect these constituents to be particles in fields of force, but if the constituents of the world included other immaterial things, their dispositions and changes of dispositions could be registered too. If they exist, emergent mental capacities, immaterial souls, or holist social entities have to exist somewhere and during a period of time. If Napoleon's soldiers had immaterial souls attached to their bodies, their souls would move with these bodies as well. Similarly, if Napoleon's military units were more than individual soldiers and their interactions, then as the *Grande Armée* moved these holist entities would have to change their position as well. Divine interventions in the form of miracles (if they happen) that come from outside space and time could also be registered, insofar as they affect dispositions of the constituents of reality. In the case of divine interventions (miracles) the series of snapshots would register that some constituents of reality change or retain their dispositions contrary to the laws of the universe, which would indicate, to religious believers, a supernatural causal intervention.

We can thus imagine a device—let me call it the "Physical Chronicler"—that could produce a series of complete snapshots of all the world's constituents (particles, fields of force, or whatever else) in a given area at a given moment. The device would be a cross between Pierre-Simon de Laplace's demon and Arthur Danto's Ideal Chronicler. Laplace imagined a demon that would know the dispositions and the momenta of all atoms in the universe and could therefore calculate all future events. The Physical Chronicler has no ambition to predict the future—the device merely registers the dispositions of the world's elements at a given moment within a segment of space, and

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can do it as often as we need it. Danto's Ideal Chronicler was imagined to register all events as they happen using descriptions that were available at the time. His description of the Ideal Chronicler, however, left it unclear which language(s) it would use when recording events. (Danto did suggest that it would be using human languages, since it would use phrases such as "Thirty Years War," and from his account it is reasonable to assume that it could not use languages before they historically come about.) The Physical Chronicler, however, would use its own machine language in order to register the dispositions of the world's constituents. It could use various conventions, languages, coordinate systems and so on, independent of human communication conventions and the languages available in a given era. Contrary to what Putnam says, numerous different complete descriptions of everything that happened are always possible. At the same time, the Physical Chronicler is similar to Danto's Ideal Chronicler because neither of the two could register actions using descriptions that became available only after the action was completed ("Aristarchus anticipated Copernicus's heliocentric system").

If we assume that a "complete description" of a past event is the one that describes *everything* that happened in a given area during a given period of time, then the Physical Chronicler's account satisfies this request. For instance, if the world consists of particles in fields of force, then an account that does not register everything that happens with particles and fields of force cannot be considered complete. However, it should be clear that the Physical Chronicler's descriptions of past events, although as complete as can be, could only be marginally relevant for practicing historians. Neither historians nor their readers are interested in what happened with clusters of particles described in terms that talk about particles. The questions historians seek to answer may indeed ultimately pertain to clusters of physical particles in fields of force (or other constituents of the world), but they are stated in terms of physical objects, as they appear in human experience and not the constituents of these objects. Imagine that the Physical Chronicler provides a practicing historian of Napoleon's campaigns with the full account of all the movements of all the constituents of reality (particles and whatever else) of the *Grande Armée* while it crossed the Niemen. Such an account would be the *complete* account of how the *Grande Armée* crossed the Niemen. Admittedly, a practicing historian who would have such a physical description of the event and would know how to translate it into a description that talks about soldiers, cannons, horses and the like, could produce as comprehensive and as detailed a description of the event as necessary. However, such descriptions are not available, and if they were available, historians would probably find it difficult to interpret them in order to obtain answers to the questions that interest them. Individual clusters of particles (and whatever else) would still have to be identified as individual soldiers, horses, equipment, and so on. The

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conclusion has to be that historical research, as it is commonly understood, does not deal with and cannot provide complete descriptions of past events. I will argue later that this is not its purpose anyhow.

All this admitted, if a device such as the Physical Chronicler existed, complete descriptions of historical events formulated in terms of particles (and whatever else) would be possible. This imaginary possibility does impose serious methodological constraints in historical research. It tells us that certain kinds of things could not have happened in the past. An account of a past event produced by a historian cannot be right if it contradicts the account that the Physical Chronicler would make. A historical account that located Napoleon in Paris at the same time when the cluster of the particles that constituted Napoleon's body was crossing the Niemen could not be correct. We may not be able to identify every constituent particle of the bodies of all Napoleon's soldiers on June 24, 1812, but we know that they were biological humans. They consequently had no wings and could not fly over the Niemen. As the forthcoming months showed, their biological nature entailed that they were less resistant to low temperatures than the campaign in which they were involved required. This is decisive for the explanation of an important historical fact—that six months later only a tiny fraction of them were still alive. The *Grande Armée* could not do things that a cluster of physical particles, and whatever else it consisted of, organized the way it was, could not do.

HISTORICAL DESCRIPTIONS

Historical works consist of sentences and every sentence express one or more propositions.[12] I assume here that individual propositions are contents of mental states. (Propositions are sometimes conceived of as abstract, Platonic entities, that exist independently of the human mental states. For reasons I have explained elsewhere, I do not think that such expansion of ontology is necessary.[13]) When reading a text, one commonly seeks to understand the propositions that the author wanted to express. However, one can also be interested in the propositions other people understood that the text conveys. The meaning that the author intended to convey is only one of several possible meanings of the text. A historian who studies Thomas Aquinas's interpretation of some statement of Aristotle is not necessarily interested in the propositions Aristotle wanted to express—he or she will be interested in the meaning that Aquinas attributed to the statement. As contents of mental states, propositions are extra-linguistic: one and the same proposition can be expressed (or understood from) numerous sentences and in various languages.[14] Propositions have conditions of satisfaction that need to be satisfied in order for the proposition to be true. These conditions of satisfaction are closely related to

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the meaning of the sentence: the proposition expressed by the sentence "the cat is on the mat" is true if there is a cat on the mat. Propositions are true on the basis of how they fit reality, including past reality, insofar as reality meets their conditions of satisfaction.[15] They are false if it does not.

The sentences that constitute a historical work express a conglomerate of propositions and these propositions can be true or false. On definitional grounds it would be meaningless to talk about the truth or falsity of the entire conglomerate of propositions that a historical text conveys. By definition truth or falsity belong to individual propositions as truth-bearers, and not to conglomerates of propositions. For this purely definitional reason, it is inconvenient and misleading to talk about the "truth" and "falsity" of historical works by taking all of the propositions that they convey as a single whole. It is therefore more appropriate to talk about *accuracy* and *inaccuracy* of historical works.

The sum of all propositions that a historical work conveys is not identical with the sum of all propositions expressed by each individual sentence of its text. A historical work (typically) says much more than the sum of all propositions expressed by all its sentences taken individually. This is because the reader often infers new propositions from those that were conveyed by the text's individual sentences. Very often the author intended that readers should infer new propositions from those that he or she has stated in the text. This does not apply to historical texts only: in the analytic philosophy of language there exists a massive literature about presuppositions and implicature in communication. (Presuppositions are propositions that need to be assumed in order to understand a statement; in the case of implicature, the author expects the reader to infer what has been implied.[16]) Let us call the sum of all propositions conveyed by all sentences of a historical work, together with the propositions that can be inferred from these propositions and only these propositions, *the narrow meaning* of a historical work.[17] The narrow meaning does not include propositions that readers can infer by combining the propositions that the work conveys with the propositions they believe or know to be true, independently of the content of the work. Since some ambiguities are typically present among the sentences that make up a historical work, different readers may attribute different narrow meanings to it—but these differences should not be great, unless the work is seriously deficient in clarity. This narrow meaning is a paltry reflection of the actual meaning that readers will get from reading a historical work, and that the author normally intends them to get—but it is the actual, specific content that a historical work conveys. In addition to the narrow meaning, readers will also infer further propositions by combining this narrow meaning with the propositions that they know or believe to be true. Some of these propositions would have been known to the historian who wrote the work, and he or she would typically even expect

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the readers to know certain things and rely on that knowledge when reading the work. If readers do not know the propositions that the author expected them to know, they will not be able to make the inferences that the author intended them to make. In any case, the propositions that could be inferred from propositions external to the narrow content could hardly be regarded as part of the meaning of the text in the strict sense. Additionally, readers often make inferences that rely on propositions that were unknown to the author, and the author could not have predicted that they will make such inferences, especially if the difference between the author's and the reader's historical and cultural contexts is too great (for instance, modern readers reading texts by Thucydides, Tacitus, and other ancient historians). In any case, a historical work conveys a conglomerate of propositions, and one that is greater than the sum of all the propositions expressed individually by all its sentences.

In his *Narrative Logic*, Frank Ankersmit accurately noted that a historical work normally says much more than the sum of all propositions ("statements" was the term he used) that make up the work. However, he failed to take into account the statements that can be inferred from the statements included in the work.[18] This oversight led him to postulate non-propositional "narrations" over and above sets of statements (propositions). Ankersmit's argument was that two historians may use two sets of true statements to characterize an event in the past and still be in disagreement.[19] In his view this should not be possible—and yet historians often disagree on the basis of descriptions that contain only true statements. The argument overlooks the possibility that different inferences may be made from these two sets of true statements—and it is these resulting inferences that historians will disagree about. The inferences that can be made about an event from a set of true statements about it depend not only on the statements that are included in the description, but also on those that are omitted from the description, that a historian fails to mention. A notorious example is Christopher Clark's attempt to exculpate German leadership for starting the First World War by omitting from his history of the 1914 July Crisis any information about the way Germany declared war on France.[20] Historical works allow readers to infer accurate or inaccurate answers to questions about the past, and these inferences depend both on what these works say and what they omit.

The idea that the content of a historical work is some kind of a holist entity, over and above individual propositions, is common among postmodernist authors. They talk about such entities as narrations, narrative substances, representations and so on. The ontology of these entities—be they mental contents, Platonic Forms, physical entities—typically remains unexplained. This is a problem, since even if they are conceived of as abstract Platonic substances, they still have to be mentally accessible to the authors and the readers of historical works. Since they are something else and not

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mere conglomerates of propositions (statements), explaining how they can be grasped would require postulating some kind of non-propositional thoughts—and it is not clear what kind of mental capacity would enable it. The only conceivable alternative to propositional thinking could be the use of mental visual imagery. However, mental visual imagery could not contain all the information that historical works contain, such as years, arguments used in diplomatic exchanges, the kind of poison used in order to assassinate political opponents, and so on.[21] Consequently, since holist representations of the past are neither propositional nor visual representations, the mental capacities that enable us to grasp them remain mysterious. These problems with the holist understanding of the content of historical works become particularly obvious when trying to specify the content of individual historical works. What could be, for instance, the non-propositional, holist content of Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*? How can Gibbon's readers grasp this non-propositional content? If one tried to specify the content by summarizing the propositions that the work conveys and that can be inferred from it, one would merely get new propositions, that belong to the category of the propositions inferred from the historical work.

At the same time, there are strong reasons that compel historical anti-realists to defend the holist perspective on historical works. They usually endorse the view that individual propositions about the past can be true or false on the basis of their correspondence to the past—this is the view of Frank Ankersmit, Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, Hayden White, and Keith Jenkins.[22] But beyond individual propositions, anti-realists have to argue that the content of historical works is something over and above individual propositions because of an old argument about the accumulation of knowledge about true propositions.[23] If historians know that individual propositions are true on the basis of their correspondence to the past, they can accumulate numerous such propositions and eventually formulate comprehensive descriptions that correspond to what happened in the past. For those authors who claim that historical "narratives" (or historical descriptions in general) cannot correspond to the past, it is thus important to differentiate these "narratives" from the sum of propositions that a historical work conveys and that can be inferred from it. As mentioned, it remains unclear what the ontology of these "narratives" might be and how human beings, whose thinking is propositional, can grasp them.

When we talk about the accuracy of a historical work, this pertains to its narrow content.[24] Accuracy of historical works differs from the truth-value of propositions in the sense that a historical work can be accurate or inaccurate in relation to different questions that we expect it to answer. The truth-value of a well-formed proposition is, however, conceived to be one and definite. Historians choose the propositions they include in or omit from their descriptions relative to the questions they want to address in their work. Common

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questions include "How did this event happen?" or "What caused this event to happen?" Sometimes these implicit questions can be very loose, such as "What were important events during such-and-such era?" A historical work is accurate or not depending on the propositions it contains and the accuracy of the response they provide when taken together. I have already mentioned that Christopher Clark's *Sleepwalkers* presents an inaccurate description of the outbreak of the First World War because it fails to describe how Germany declared war on France. Something is certainly wrong with a history book whose subtitle promises to answer the question "How Europe Went to War in 1914" and then makes such an egregious omission. Fritz Fischer's *Griff nach der Weltmacht* analyzes the extensive documentation that pertains to the contribution of the German leadership to the outbreak of the First World War and in that sense it is generally comprehensive and accurate, but it fails (and Fischer clearly stated that this was not his topic) to describe the actions of other governments that contributed to the outbreak of the war.[25] In other words, if one expects the book to answer the question it was not meant to answer, it is not unlikely to give an inaccurate answer. There is no reason to assume that historical works must seek to answer only one question about the past that they describe. Especially in the case of more extensive historical works it is reasonable to expect that the historian intended them to answer more than one question about the era they cover. Many historical works are formed as large-scale surveys of events during an era and can be taken to answer numerous questions. Responses to some of these questions may be accurate and to others less so. Sometimes reading a historian's work one gets the impression that the author had parallel unstated agendas. The selection of facts Tacitus presented in his *Annales* leaves the impression that his actual topic was the decline of personal integrity among Roman aristocracy. Readers at the same time will have their own questions with which they approach the historical work, and these questions are often likely to differ from those that the author intended the work to address. The work may be accurate or not, and provide useful information or not in relation to these questions.

THE THREE EXPECTATIONS

I believe that by now it should be clear why realism about the historical past cannot be combined with the claim that one can describe the past as it *actually* was. The past was the way it was; it consisted of dispositions and changes of dispositions of the constituents of reality such as physical particles, fields of force, or maybe immaterial souls, holist social entities, or other constituents of the world. The past did not happen in numerous ways so that only one of them could have been "actual." It is not even clear what this qualification

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might mean at all: How could one accurate description of the past differ from another accurate description by describing the past as it "actually" was?

Similarly, the expectation that historians can produce a *complete* historical description of a past period in a certain spatial area is irrelevant for historical research. A complete account of a segment of the past would have to account of all dispositions and changes of disposition of all the constituents of reality in a certain segment of space during a certain period of time. The Physical Chronicler, if it existed, could provide such information, but this is not something that historians can do. It is also not something that they are or should be interested in doing. It would mean providing a massive overload of information that is irrelevant to the questions they want to address.

As for objectivity in the selection of facts they write about, historians need as much objectivity as is necessary in order to give accurate answers to the questions their works are intended to address. This accuracy is affected by what the work says and what it fails to say. Historians often yield to the temptation to present one-sided descriptions of the past. Arguably, this is the moment when they cease to be historians and become propagandists. The objectivity that is necessary in order to achieve its accuracy is not impossible, but sustaining it is not always easy. It is hard to imagine that any historian could be *consistently* biased or objective. It is reasonable to expect that historians will be biased in relation to some questions and show objectivity in relation to other questions. The resulting omissions can produce inaccurate responses to some questions that the readers may expect the historical work to answer—while, at the same time, such a work may also give accurate responses to some other questions. Also, sometimes a work may include false propositions and nevertheless be accurate in relation to some questions, but the presence of such propositions will typically become a problem when other questions are considered.

A subjectively motivated selection of facts for a historical description does not necessarily mean that the description is inaccurate. An architectural historian may be biased against modernist architecture, believe that it would be better to design and build classical buildings today, and this bias may motivate him or her to produce comprehensive and thorough studies of the design methods of Renaissance architects. Bias against Modernism could thus make such a historian particularly zealous in his or her efforts to establish as accurately as possible how Renaissance architects designed. The same applies to other fields of research as well: a biologist may be subjectively motivated to find a cure against a disease caused by a certain kind of microbes—but we do not expect that such motivation would make his or her research less accurate. The problem is not the bias or the passion that motivates the work people do, but the form in which this bias or passion affects the content of this work—ultimately, do they seek to find the answer to a specific question,

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or do they seek to show that an answer is the correct one, whereby the motivation to endorse the answer does not come from the desire to establish what happened?

CONCLUSION

Human beings, including historians and historical figures, are biological creatures living in a physical world. Barring various skeptical arguments (for instance, that God could have created the world five minutes ago with all the evidence of the preceding past), the historical past is the physical past of human reality and human history is a history of physical events. Alternative views are simply not credible insofar as they stand against the complex account that natural sciences give us about the way the world works. Maybe some day some very original idealist thinker will refute all of the natural sciences. (Good luck with it.) Similarly, some idealist philosophers of history seek to dismiss the correspondence-based understanding of the relationship between historical works and the past by invoking Willard van Orman Quine's view that theoretical systems, including those of natural sciences, are underdetermined by empirical data.[26] Presumably, this should mean that historical knowledge is also underdetermined by historical evidence. Such theorizing typically avoids taking into account critical analyses of Quine's views.[27] Again, maybe some day indeed, some Quine-inspired biologist will demonstrate that a theory that postulates human evolution from centaurs is as valid as the one that is commonly endorsed by evolutionary biology today. (Good luck with that too.) A credible rejection of modern science requires the formulation of a credible alternative to it, and in the meantime, as long as such an alternative is not available, it is reasonable to assume that the nature of reality is a physical and not a metaphysical question. This entails that the world consists (and has consisted in the past) of space-time and particles in fields of force, though possibly not exclusively. Since it is not known how brains produce thoughts, perhaps there are immaterial souls or cognitive capacities attached to bodies or something similar. Perhaps also groups of individuals together with their interactions constitute social entities over and above these individuals and their interactions—although for the past century numerous efforts have been made in the social sciences to show that this is the case, but without much success.

The past happened the way it happened, and it can be described in numerous accurate ways. It makes no sense to say that one accurate description of what happened describes what *actually* happened while other accurate descriptions do not. *Pace* those who believe that they can formulate alternatives to modern science, the historical past is physical (maybe with some

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additional constituents, as mentioned), but the descriptions of the past that historians can give are necessarily couched in ordinary human languages that describe entities encountered in possible human experiences. Human languages reflect the physical reality in ways that possible human experience does. Napoleon's *Grande Armée* was a cluster of atoms and molecules, but historians do not describe it in those terms, and the information they find in archives is not available in terms of atoms and molecules. In order to be complete, an account of how the *Grande Armée* crossed the Niemen on June 24, 1812, would have to list and describe every movement of every atom and molecule of every soldier, horse, and piece of equipment that crossed the river on that day. Human historians certainly cannot provide such an account and they have neither need nor ambition to provide it. Historical accounts are thus always partial in the sense that they are never complete: historians necessarily have to choose to describe those aspects of events that answer the historical questions they want to address. "Partial" here does not mean "biased" or "arbitrary"; it means that historical accounts describe those aspects of past reality that answer the questions that we ask the account to answer, or that the historian intended it to answer. These are not questions about physical particles but about kinds of entities known from everyday experience, such as human individuals, historical figures, or groups of individuals, military units, and so forth, and historians certainly can give accurate responses to these questions.

All in all, we can see the realist response to the dilemma with which this chapter started. It is fair to say that realist historians and philosophers of history should choose to follow Aristotle rather than Ranke. It was Aristotle's view that historians describe things that happened in the past, that (in most cases) things that are known pre-exist our knowledge about them and he also endorsed the correspondence theory of truth.[28] Some postmodernists may dismiss such views as "naïve realism," but, as discussions in this volume show, it is not clear that in matters of the philosophy of history their views deserve much consideration. After fifty years of meaningless idealist *Schwärmerei* postmodernism is as dead as the dodo in most other fields of the humanities. It has inflicted immense damage on the philosophy of history by reducing the entire discipline to unproductive efforts to show that the past did not happen or that it cannot be known, and it is hard to imagine that such a jejune intellectual diet can continue for much longer. Sooner or later philosophers of history will have to return to more coherent perspectives and work again from the assumptions originally formulated by the Philosopher.

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NOTES

1. Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1451b3; Ranke, *Geschichten*, 4.
2. Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, 49.
3. Ibid.
4. Beard, "*The Problem of Historical Knowledge*," 571.
5. Becker, "*The Problem of Historical Knowledge*," 364.
6. In Beard's words, "Facts, multitudinous and beyond calculation, are known, but they do not select themselves or force themselves automatically into any fixed scheme of arrangement in the mind of the historian. They are selected and ordered by him as he thinks." Beard, "Written History," 220. See also Cole, "The Relativity of History," 164; as well as the comprehensive analysis of this line of argument by Lovejoy, "Present Standpoints," 177–89.
7. Beard, "*The Problem of Historical Knowledge*," 572.
8. See, for instance, Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," 232–33; and Becker, *New Liberties*, 131.
9. Mink, "The Theory of Practice," 21.
10. For the use of the term "subjective" this way see, for instance, Cole, "The Relativity of History," 164; Beard, "Written History," 222 and 226; Schyler, "The Usefulness of Useless History," 31; and Marks, "Grounds Under Our Feet," 629.
11. Externalists about mental contents may deny that contents of thoughts are located in minds or brains. Nevertheless, even immaterial contents of thoughts have to be somewhere and sometime in order to manifest themselves in the thoughts of historical figures. If they enjoy a purely Platonic existence outside space and time, without causal impact on things in space and time, they will have no relevance for what happens in space and time. My assumption here is that historians do not study or describe things outside space and time.
12. It may be pointed out that some historical works contain non-verbal visual material (drawings in architectural surveys or films). This is certainly true, but they can play their role within a historical work only if their import is identified by means of sentences ("Illustration X presents . . . "). They can be then treated as parts of their identifying sentences that convey propositions.
13. For a survey of arguments about the opposing view, see Mitrović, *Materialist Philosophy of History*, 115–23.
14. This account of propositions generally follows the one by Searle, *Intentionality*, 1–35.
15. See Searle, *Intentionality*, 7–18 for the explanation of the mind-to-world direction of fit. Such an account can be basically seen as compatible with Aristotle's explanation of the correspondence theory of truth in Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1011b26–27.
16. See Paul Dekker, "Presupposition," and Laurence Horn, "Implicature," in Russell and Fara, *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Language*, 42–52 and 53–66.
17. More precisely, let $A=\{A_1, A_2, A_3, \text{etc.}\}$ be the set of all the propositions that are expressed by the individual sentences that constitute a text T. Let $I=\{I_1, I_2, I_3, \ldots$

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etc.} be a set of propositions such that every member I_i of that set must satisfy at least one of the following two conditions:

(a) I_i can be inferred from members of A.

(b) I_i can be inferred from other members of I or by combining members of I with members of A.

The narrow meaning of T is the union of sets A and I.

18. Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic*, 107.

19. Ibid.

20. Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, is a particularly fine example of postmodernist historiography. See my analysis in Mitrović, "A Refutation of (Post-)Narrativism."

21. Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic*, 204, says that statements of a historical work enable the construction of "image" and "picture" of the past, but he is probably talking metaphorically and not about real visual representations or mental imagery. He puts the words "image" and "picture" in quotation marks himself, so he is not to be taken literally.

22. Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*, 173, allows that the sentence "Stalin owned a gun" could be true or false; White, *Metahistory*, 6n5; Jenkins, *Re-thinking History*, 40; Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic*, 70 and 101.

23. This argument was presented a long time ago, by Marks, "Grounds Under Our Feet," 630.

24. This is a simplification since there are propositions that a reader needs to know in order to understand the text—for instance the meanings of words in the language in which the text is written. See the discussion in Mitrović, *Materialist Philosophy*, 196–205. The propositions that the historian chooses to include or omit also depend on his or her assumptions about the readers of the book. Ancient Roman historians such as Tacitus often seem to leave some important information unstated, typically in relation to Roman public and military offices. Tacitus obviously assumed that his readers would know these things. This does not mean that Tacitus's descriptions are inaccurate, but they are incomplete for a typical modern reader, and one rightly expects that modern editions of his works need to include supporting information.

25. Fischer explicitly rejected this expectation in his "Begleitwort" from 1977. Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht*, 15.

26. Idealist philosophers sometimes overemphasize the implications of Willard van Orman Quine's claim that theories are underdetermined by empirical experience that he presented in the final section of his paper "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" in Quine, *From a Logical Point of View*, 20–46, esp. 42–46. The section is short and the underdetermination thesis—that "Any statement can be held true come what may, if we make drastic enough adjustments elsewhere in the system"—is merely presented, rather than properly argued. The thesis certainly leads to absurd consequences: something must be wrong with a philosophical position from which it follows, as Quine admits, that the belief in centaurs is as epistemologically sound as the belief in material objects (44). He justifies such claims by saying that recalcitrant experiences that contradict the theory can always be accommodated into the theory by changing various quarters of the theoretical system. The idea is that statements that belong to a theory and are contradicted by experience "can be held true in the face of

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recalcitrant experience by pleading hallucination or by amending certain statements of the kind called logical laws" (43). In other words, any theory can be defended against empirical evidence that contradicts it by dismissing the evidence as hallucination or by rejecting the laws of logic. Obviously, once this position is taken, serious claims of knowledge cannot be made. It also remains unclear how much a theory can be changed without becoming a new theory. For instance, astronomical observations made it necessary to abandon the Ptolemaic geocentric system and endorse the heliocentric system—but can we say that the replacement of the geocentric view with the heliocentric view was mere adaptation of the Ptolemaic system? In his later writings such as *Word and Object* Quine significantly softened the radical tone of the underdetermination thesis (see Laudan, "Demystifying Underdetermination," 279–80). In spite of its brief presentation and incomplete justification, the underdetermination thesis has received great popularity among idealist thinkers, because of its implication that empirical findings can never be taken to refute a theory.

27. For an analysis of the limitations of such claims see Laudan, "Demystifying Underdetermination."

28. Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1451b3. Aristotle, *Categories*, 7b24. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1011b26–27.

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Chapter 4

Historiography beyond Partisanship

Establishing Facts and Evaluating Theories

Tor Egil Førland

BEWARE OF PARTISANS

The notion known as the theory-dependence of facts has become predominant among theoretically inclined historians. This refers to the view, often connected with W. V. O. Quine and Thomas Kuhn, that empirical statements only gain factual status within a certain theory and therefore have no independent power to support that theory over others. In recent decades this notion has been verging on the point of truism. Along with anti-realist surges in the humanities such as those associated with Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, it has led to a dramatic depreciation of the epistemological value of facts in historiography and in particular in the philosophy of history. In the first part of this chapter, I use a recent archaeological sensation as point of departure for an attempt to restore value to facts: or rather to show that facts have more purchase than appreciated by analysts who believe in their theory-dependence.

Hailing the success of narrativists such as Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit in exposing the illusion of historiographical objectivity, Anton Froeyman claims that historians must be regarded as "engaged intellectuals, partisans of a political cause." Since every set of facts can entertain several equally true narratives, choice "is always determined by personal, ideological preferences."[1] In the second part I venture to show that this

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implication of narrativism, although common, is unwarranted and overdrawn. We have a set of cognitive criteria for evaluating competing theories, including narratives. These criteria have wide acceptance also among avowed post-foundationalists.

The appreciation of the value of facts and the recognition of cognitive criteria for theory choice indicate that even in the post-foundational twenty-first century, historians of different political and ideological persuasions have ample room for academic discussion along substantive, methodological, and epistemic lines. We need not all be partisans. Indeed, to the degree historians let partisanship override scholarship, they may find themselves on the road to insignificance.

A TRANSGENDER VIKING WARRIOR: THEORY-INDEPENDENT FACTS

In September 2017 the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* carried an article that after only a few weeks had been covered by more than 130 international news agencies and was discussed across more than 2,200 individual online accounts with millions of followers. Three years later PBS devoted an episode in its *Secrets of the Dead* series to the finding revealed in the article.[2] The piece that went viral was written by a group of archaeologists and osteologists from Sweden. It presented definitive proof—or so the authors claimed—that the body of a high-status Viking Age warrior excavated from a grave in the settlement Birka near Stockholm was female. Ever since its excavation in 1878, archaeologists and historians had taken for granted that the Viking was male. Signifying high rank and a warrior's life, the body had been buried with a rich arsenal of weapons (a sword, two lances, an axe, twenty-five armor-piercing arrows, two fighting knives, two shields), a gaming set complete with pieces and board, and two horses. The grave was devoid of jewelry, domestic tools, weaving equipment, and so forth. In short, everything indicated the deceased was a man, except the shape of some bones that would have suggested a female character had anyone noticed at the time of excavation. In themselves the bones would have been far from definitive proof anyway. After all, everybody knew that the world of warring Vikings was a man's world. Or to put it differently: undisputed theory said the body was that of a man.[3]

The Birka warrior, however, although long dead, would not lie down. An osteological analysis in the 1970s concluded that the body in the Birka warrior grave was female, but this conclusion was dismissed for lack of decisive proof.[4] Another osteological analysis presented in 2014 again failed to convince the skeptics.[5] Even after DNA analyses published in the 2017 article

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corroborated beyond doubt the female sex of the body in the grave, alternative hypotheses were suggested to explain away this fact and salvage the theory. Perhaps there had been another, male, body in the grave?[6] And who could tell for certain that the weapons and so forth that had been buried with the body had belonged to the deceased herself?[7]

If the Birka grave contained a high-status female warrior, it would definitely rock the Viking ship and destabilize the established notion of gender roles in medieval Northern Europe. If a woman could have a commanding warrior role among Vikings, a bundle of assumptions about Viking society are challenged and lose their unassailable status. Viking warriors were the epitome of male dominance in Scandinavia near the end of the first millennium CE. The remains of the Birka grave had been used to embellish that picture ever since their excavation. But what if the "ultimate Viking" of Birka was a woman?[8]

The Birka case is a textbook illustration of how new and potentially disturbing or disruptive factual claims are treated by the scholarly community. First, the reliability and validity of unsettling factual assertions are questioned as long as there are the slightest grounds for doubt. There is seldom a shortage of volunteers, last-ditch defenders of the established theory, ready to take on uppity contenders. Such defenders and their critical questions are extremely valuable to science since they help push back overeager crusaders who attempt to take the commanding heights of theory by shelling the reigning theories with their factual and potentially disruptive statements. But cognizant that science is party to the same kind of institutional mechanisms (such as turf wars and infighting) and human weaknesses (such as lust for power and fame) as the rest of society, we must allow for the possibility that the status quo sometimes is more entrenched and its defenders more ready to die fighting than is propitious for scientific progress. The opposition among leading physicists against awarding Albert Einstein the Nobel Prize for the relativity theory is illustrative and illuminating—if also disheartening. (As a way out, he received it for his work on the photoelectric effect.)[9]

Second, there is no dearth of creativity in the ability to suggest ad hoc hypotheses that can rescue established theory. This, of course, is in line with the Quine–Duhem thesis that any challenge to a scientific theory from misbehaving data can be accommodated (and hence protected from Popper-style falsification) by adjustments in auxiliary hypotheses employed to derive the results that fail to stand up to empirical scrutiny. The most widely known variation of this picture is perhaps the one proposed by Imre Lakatos: a scientific theory, according to Lakatos, consists of a hard core of central tenets protected by an outer shell of malleable auxiliary hypotheses, and these hypotheses can then be adapted to deflect or absorb the blows from data that seem to threaten the theory.[10] Hence the argument that the presence of war

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gear in the grave does not allow us to conclude without doubt that the weapons had belonged to the deceased herself. The point must be granted but it is of little use, since consistency demands it be applied not just to findings that run contrary to prevailing theory. The application of such hyper-skepticism would render worthless all similar deductions in other graves and would thus pull the rug out from under much of what we think we have learned about Viking society from excavation of graves. The excavated males on which a large chunk of our knowledge of the era is based would follow the Birka female to her exile from the realm of reliable data. Hence, this attempt to dismiss the unpleasant fact backfires against the theory one tries to save.[11]

Third, and most important for the argument of the present article, after the initial questions regarding the solidity of the 2017 Birka analysis had been satisfactorily and definitively answered, the archaeological team in question could declare confidently in 2019 that "this person has been proven to be biologically female."[12] This conclusion seems then to have been established as a fact: a lower-order statement that no one with appropriate background knowledge would dispute.[13] The implications are huge, and reach far beyond the Birka case.

Let me reiterate the centrality of the Birka finding for the interpretation of Viking society. Since its discovery in 1878, the grave had been used as a prime example of the centrality of the (male) Viking warrior. For Viking scholars this was not one theory among several: it was theory that had hardened and ossified into doxa. Vikings incarnated male (macho) ideals of bravery, brutal violence, and skills in weaponry. And then it turns out one of the prime archaeological examples of this ideal-type male was female.

According to the notion of the theory-dependence of facts, the female sex of the Birka warrior should have been impossible to establish as a fact. If facts get their meaning from the theory, you cannot establish facts that threaten to blow apart central tenets of the theory. So why was the Birka Viking's female identity accepted as a fact? And what are the implications for the theory-dependence of such facts?

The simple answer to the first question is that no serious archaeologist today questions the general accuracy of ancient DNA (aDNA) in establishing facts about sex, genetic composition, and a host of other issues. Both the original 2017 article and the 2019 follow-up were open access and included links to supplemental information about the methods and results so skeptics could see for themselves. The more complex answer to the first question, which also provides the clue to the second, is that facts are often established independently of the theory in which they are used as building blocks—or bombs as in the present case. John Greenwood has pointed out that many facts depend not on the theory in which they play a crucial role for interpretation (or explanation as was Greenwood's focus) but on what he terms

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exploratory theories, such as the genomic and chemical theories leading up to the development of aDNA analysis, or the classical example of optical theory and lenses development that enabled Galileo to make observations that were contrary to the geocentric worldview but made sense within a heliocentric universe.[14]

The consequences of this point are vast and far-reaching. Since many facts, in historiography as in other disciplines, are independent of the theory in which they form building blocks (though they may depend for their reliability on other theories, often within other disciplines such as paleography or ancient languages), they function as theory-independent information relative to the theory (and often the discipline) in question. The significance of the information they carry may be determined by the theory, but the information or data itself can be treated as independent. This restores to facts their status as independent foundations for higher-order theories—including narratives—and provides a much more solid ground for theory building than within the conception of facts as dependent on the theory for which they are used as props. Instead of bootstrap historiography we get historiography (or in the Birka case: archaeology) supported by facts provided by other disciplines and able to carry weight—information—independently of the theory in question.

One could try to explain away the salience of Birka by asking how often such factual earthquakes happen in historiography (or archaeology). My first answer would be that one case should be enough to deflate, if not demolish, the notion of the theory-dependence of facts. This notion does not claim that some or most facts are theory-dependent; it claims that there are *no* theory-independent facts. Hence, one instance is enough to disprove it—and here, Birka is a black swan. My second answer would be that Birka is not alone—and one need not go to the Dead Sea Scrolls or other examples of literal digging up of sources from ancient history to prove the point. Admittedly, new facts are seldom so theory-shattering as the female sex of the body in the Birka grave. Recent Cold War history provides an example of sudden access to sources that through their sheer factual weight tipped the scales of interpretation, namely, the opening of Soviet and East European archives in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent implosion of communist rule.[15] The ruthlessness of Soviet leaders; the all-encompassing attempts of DDR authorities to monitor and control the East German population; the extent to which West European communist parties had been directed and financed by Moscow: these and other factual findings followed the availability of documents that had been inaccessible until the communist regimes collapsed. On a much smaller scale, almost every practicing historian has experienced a little Birka, having discovered facts that compel them to revise second-order interpretations of limited magnitude.

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We must not get ahead of ourselves. Science provides no Archimedean point that can form the basis for absolute certainty. Ultimately, all facts depend on some theory. Many facts and tools, however, as well as quite a few theories, are so solid and have stood the test of time and criticism so well that we are justified in considering them accurate and in erecting theories with their aid. As historians, we can treat many facts with the certainty that allows us to write narratives in which such facts figure prominently and fundamentally. And we do. The amount of uncontested facts in historiography dwarfs the relatively few disputed factual claims. Among those who share this rather obvious observation are Leon Goldstein: "For all the rivalry and jealousies with which historians are affected, for all the spite and pettiness which sometimes mar their disputes, a large and growing body of established historical truth, while always subject to correction, is nonetheless agreed to."[16]

Despite agreeing on the facts, eminent and diligent *bonus pater* historians publish narratives and other second-order interpretations that are sometimes so much at ends with each other that they cannot be reconciled.[17] Apparently the constraints provided by facts are not enough to prevent widely divergent accounts. But although the insistence on factual accuracy leaves ample room for theory choice, this does not mean that the scholarly community is bereft of means with which competing theories can be evaluated.

COGNITIVE CRITERIA

Froeyman's claim that historians must be regarded as "partisans of a political cause" since their choice among equally true narratives "is always determined by personal, ideological preferences" is representative of a dominant strand of thinking among postmodernist philosophers of history about the futility of objectivity. Keith Jenkins typically hails the day when historians appreciate that their métier is basically "a discursive practice that enables present-minded people(s) to go to the past, there to delve around and reorganise it appropriately to their needs."[18] Despite current consensus on the lack of determination of theory by facts, however, historians are not free to mold (their interpretations of) the past as they wish. Not only is their choice limited by what can be reconciled with the facts, as we have just seen. Within this band of possible interpretations, theory choice is not left to political, ideological, or aesthetic preferences but is constrained by a set of cognitive values that distinguish historiography from partisanship and make it an academic discipline.

Heather Douglas has observed that "the value of cognitive values has been underdeveloped in philosophy of science."[19] That their analysis is lagging and agreement is far from complete do not justify ignoring, however, the

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role of such values in theory evaluation. *Pace* Froeyman, Jenkins, and other like-minded theorists, we shall see that thinkers from Kuhn to Kuukkanen, and from McMullin to McCullagh, not only concur that epistemic and other cognitive criteria exist and are important, but also largely agree about their content (albeit not about their denomination). My main vehicles are two matrices that, in rough but illustrative ways, compare the evaluative criteria. Having presented the concord on criteria for theory choice in science and historiography, I shall furthermore try to advance it by submitting, in a third table, a nomenclature and a categorization of the different values.

Two of the first to describe the role of cognitive values in theory choice were Thomas Kuhn and W. V. O. Quine: this is perhaps somewhat surprising since the existence of such criteria undermines the notion of what the so-called strong program in science studies calls the "priority of the social."[20] The latter notion is subscribed to by many whose post-foundationalism is based on how Kuhn and Quine themselves challenged the conviction that science had established objective answers to the riddles of nature. Between smug objectivism and the priority of the social (or ideological) lie cognitive values, which provide the friction that stops scholarship from sliding down the slippery slope to partisanship.

Kuhn nods to cognitive values in the 1970 edition of his groundbreaking *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* and elaborates on them in the paper "Objectivity, Value Judgment and Theory Choice" from 1973. Quine, apparently independently of Kuhn, discusses what he terms cognitive "virtues" in his and J. S. Ullian's popular *The Web of Belief*, also published in 1970. Both Kuhn and Quine present five criteria for theory choice. Two—simplicity and what Kuhn calls "scope" and Quine "generality"—are more or less identical. A third, Quine's "conservatism," overlaps with the external dimension of Kuhn's "consistency." Kuhn's "accuracy" and "fruitfulness" have no Quinean counterparts, whereas Quine is alone in suggesting "modesty" and the pragmatic virtue "refutability." Another pragmatic virtue, namely, "precision," is mentioned by Quine as a possible supplement to the other five. Such pragmatic values seem to be accepted across the board. What little discussion there is centers on epistemic values, the point of which in Ernan McMullin's words is to "improve the conformity between theory and the world."[21]

Table 4.1 compares Kuhn's and Quine's criteria. The table also incorporates McMullin's 1982 elaboration on Kuhn's epistemic values and Paul Thagard's 1978 discussion of criteria for theory choice in inference to the best explanation.[22] There is scant consensus on terms—Kuhn's "scope" is similar to Quine's "generality," McMullin's "unifying power," and perhaps also Thagard's "consilience"—but as this example shows, agreement on substance is considerable and disagreement almost non-existent. I venture to

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Table 4.1. Cognitive criteria for theory evaluation in science

Kuhn 1970/1973 ("values")	***McMullin 1982 (building on Kuhn)***	***Quine 1970 ("virtues")***	***Thagard 1978 (inference to the best explanation)***
Accuracy: The consequences deducible from the theory should accord with existing data ("experiments and observations")	[***Prior accuracy***]: Accordance with data existing prior to the formulation of the theory		
	Predictive accuracy: Accordance with data not yet available when the theory was designed		
Consistency: The theory should be consistent both internally and with other "currently accepted theories applicable to related aspects of nature"	***Internal coherence***		
	External consistency	***Conservatism***: Compatibility with previous beliefs	
		Modesty: "Events that it assumes to have happened are of a more usual and familiar sort, hence, more to be expected"	
Scope: The theory's consequences should "extend far beyond" the data or theories of lower order or laws for which it was designed	***Unifying power***: "The ability to bring together hitherto disparate areas of inquiry"	***Generality***: "The wider the range of application of a hypothesis, the more general it is"	***Consilience***: "How much a theory explains, so that we can use it to tell whether one theory explains more of the evidence than another theory"

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Kuhn 1970/1973 ("values")	***McMullin 1982 (building on Kuhn)***	***Quine 1970 ("virtues")***	***Thagard 1978 (inference to the best explanation)***
Simplicity: The theory should bring order to phenomena that without it would be left "isolated individually and, as a set, confused"		***Simplicity***: "The more complex the hypothesis, the more and wilder ways of going wrong"	***Simplicity***: Shun the ad hoc hypothesis "that serves to explain no more phenomena than the narrow range it was introduced to explain"
Fruitfulness: The theory should "disclose new phenomena or previously unnoticed relationships among those already known"	***Fertility***		
			Analogy: "The explanations afforded by a theory are better explanations if the theory is familiar, that is, introduces mechanisms, entities, or concepts that are used in established explanations"
		Refutability	
		(***Precision***)	

guess that the reason why Quine and Thagard disregard accuracy is that they take it for granted. The double exception to the rule of agreement on substance but variance in notions is "simplicity," which is included by everyone but McMullin. He describes it as "a favorite among the logical positivists"—hardly a compliment—but impossible to nail down in formal terms. Still, the ban on ad hoc hypotheses as formulated by Thagard seems a good candidate for something approaching consensus on the gist of simplicity. In order not to overstate this consensus, it should be noted that there might be some tension between Quine's "modesty"—a close kin to his "conservatism"—and Kuhn's

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"fruitfulness." One reason for this tension could be that Quine's virtues normally are employed to assess quite limited hypotheses, whereas Kuhn's values are put to work for evaluating theories that are often more comprehensive.

Those who consider historiography a completely different discipline from science should find it interesting to compare the criteria Kuhn, Quine, McMullin, and Thagard suggest are used when evaluating scientific theories with the criteria listed by, respectively, Behan McCullagh, Mark Bevir, and Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen for theory evaluation in historiography, presented in table 4.2.[23] The values discussed by these three are used to evaluate different kinds of second-order interpretations: explanations, webs of interpretations, and colligations. But this difference just underlines that more or less the same criteria are used to evaluate various types of second-order interpretations that historians present. Kuukkanen, editor of the *Journal of the Philosophy of History* after Frank Ankersmit retired, must be described as a postmodernist (if also post-narrativist) philosopher of history; McCullagh has for decades been the prime defender of more conventional views on historiography; whereas Bevir is located somewhere in between. What is noticeable here is their accordance, both with each other and with Kuhn, Quine, McMullin, and Thagard. There is the (by now expected) notional variation, but there is also considerable agreement on substance, and hardly any discord. In particular, variants of accuracy ("plausibility"/"accuracy"/"exemplification") and scope ("comprehensiveness") are valued by all three (and Kuhn). None of them takes issue with criteria suggested by the other philosophers of history or by the philosophers of science.

It may be a moot point whether the most noticeable feature of the two tables presented here is the close concert or the dearth of discussion. With the exception of McMullin, who explicitly builds on and discusses Kuhn's values, each philosopher puts forward his own list without reviewing alternatives submitted by others. Of course, ignoring a criterion may be a polite or conflict-aversive way of indicating disagreement with its salience. Although consensus is considerable—in all probability every one of the philosophers included here would value accuracy, internal consistency, scope, and arguably also power and simplicity—there is still room for discussion. Quine and McCullagh's conservatism or coherence with existing beliefs seems not to square with the fruitfulness or fertility cherished by Kuhn and McMullin and the progressiveness or originality hailed by Bevir and Kuukkanen. Despite some suggestive wording ("conservatism," "progressiveness"), the difference seems to have little to do with politics and more with the distinction drawn by Peter Lipton between the "likeliest" and the "loveliest" explanation. The former has most warrant; the latter provides more understanding.[24]

McMullin observes that scientists may differ over the importance of different criteria.[25] If one theory scores higher on accuracy and another on scope, which is to be preferred? Douglas maintains that all philosophers regard

Table 4.2. Cognitive criteria for theory evaluation in historiography

Kuhn et al. (Kuhn's notions)	*McCullagh 1984 (analyzing inference to the best explanation)*	*Bevir 1994 (comparing "webs of interpretation")*	*Kuukkanen 2015 (evaluating colligatory concepts)*
[Prior] accuracy	***Plausibility***: The data available must imply the explanatory hypothesis	***Accuracy***: "A close fit to the facts"	***Exemplification***: "The descriptive content of a colligatory expression has to exemplify the historical data it subsumes"
	Power: The more probable the data are made by the hypothesis, the better		
			Coherence: "A maximally coherent set" of material to be subsumed under the colligatory concept
Internal consistency		***Consistency***: Not "contravening the principles of logic"	
External consistency	***No disconfirmation by other existing beliefs***		
Scope	***Scope***: The wider range of data explained, the better	***Comprehensiveness***: Fit to "a wide range of facts with few outstanding exceptions, and especially . . . facts from different areas, or from areas that previously seemed unrelated"	***Comprehensiveness*** and ***Scope***: Colligations that apply to as large amount (for comprehensiveness) and area (for scope) of data as possible are to be preferred
Simplicity	***Less ad hoc-ness***		
		Progressiveness: "Postulating new predictions not previously connected with that web of interpretations"	***Originality***: "A more innovative and original concept should be preferred to a more customary one"

(*Continued*)

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Kuhn et al. (Kuhn's notions)	***McCullagh 1984 (analyzing inference to the best explanation)***	***Bevir 1994 (comparing "webs of interpretation")***	***Kuukkanen 2015 (evaluating colligatory concepts)***
Fruitfulness		***Fruitfulness***: Entailing that "the new predictions made by associated speculative theories characteristically receive support from the facts"	
Refutability (Quine)		***Openness***: Consisting of "clearly defined propositions thereby facilitating criticism"	

internal consistency and what she terms empirical adequacy—the ability to account for existing evidence, which seems akin to prior accuracy—as must-haves or "minimal criteria." In addition come nice-to-have "desiderata" pertaining to either the internal qualities of the theory or its relation to evidence. Along the internal dimension, Douglas identifies scope, simplicity, and potential explanatory power, the conjunction of which she somewhat confusingly calls "fruitfulness." Along the external dimension—the theory's relation to evidence—she once more lists scope, simplicity, and explanatory power in addition to consistency with other theories, the ability to produce novel empirical predictions, and a pragmatic favorite, precision.[26]

I think the internal/external distinction is useful, although calling consistency with other theories a value that concerns the theory's relation with evidence seems a bit problematic. More challenging to Douglas's analysis is the potential damage by ad hoc-ery. As Duhem, Quine, and later Lakatos have observed, even the most critically attacked core of a multi-layered theory can be saved by ad hoc adjustments of its outer shell. Ad hoc-ery is particularly effective in combatting empirical inadequacy. It can also be of use for repairing internal inconsistencies. This indicates that Douglas's two minimal criteria are perhaps less different from the desiderata than her analysis suggests.

Taking Kuhn's values (and notions) as my point of departure, and honing his criteria by means of the subsequent lists and a slightly amended version of Douglas's internal/external dichotomy, I submit, in table 4.3, my own list

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Table 4.3. Suggested cognitive criteria for theory evaluation in historiography

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Values	**The theory's relation to data/ evidence**	**The theory as theory**
Accuracy	Prior: The closer the theory fits data existing prior to the formulation of the theory, the better	
	Predictive: The closer the theory fits data produced (or evidence unearthed) after the formulation of the theory, the better	
Power	The more compellingly the theory makes sense of the data, the better	
Scope	The wider range and the more diverse kind of data the theory makes sense of, the better	
Consistency		Internal: The more logically compelling and coherent the theory is, the better
		External: The more consistent the theory is with our other beliefs, the better
Fertility		The more new theories and predictions the theory produces, the better
Simplicity		The less ad hoc-ery the theory contains, the better
Refutability		The easier the theory lends itself to refutation, the better

of cognitive values in evaluating theories in historiography and similar disciplines. (The list might have salience for the sciences as well, but I stick to disciplines with which I am familiar.) I find it helpful to distinguish between the theory as theory and the theory's relation to evidence or data. Prior and predictive accuracy, power, and scope are reserved for the relation between theories and evidence/data. The theory's strength as theory is determined by its internal and external consistency, its fertility, simplicity, and refutability (which entails precision).

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CONCLUSION: BEYOND PARTISANSHIP

The first part of this chapter showed that facts can be independent of the theory in which they function as building blocks. The theory-independence of facts means that a certain theory—for example, that only men could be prominent Viking warriors—can be rocked by novel, intransigent facts such as the sex of the Birka warrior. Whether the theory survives more or less unscathed depends on how well it can absorb the blow from the unpleasant fact, once the latter is established as such—that is, accepted, if sometimes grudgingly, by well-nigh every bona fide scholar with the requisite competence. This means that new factual claims have the power to tip the scales from one theory to another that better accommodates the facts.

Sometimes—perhaps quite often—facts alone are not sufficient to tip the balance of competing theories. The second part showed that philosophers of science and history agree that theories are evaluated on several cognitive criteria, of which (factual) accuracy is one—or two, if we split it in prior and predictive accuracy—and arguably a must-have. Power, scope, consistency, fertility, and simplicity are other epistemic virtues valued across the board, to which we can add the pragmatic value of refutability, which entails precision. Which weight should be accorded the different criteria is up for discussion. Unless politics or ideology is broadened to the point where all evaluation is included, however, these criteria are unpolitical and unideological.

The import of these findings for the role of historiography should not be underestimated. Facts matter, and adherents of different theories can agree on them and on the need for theories to accommodate them. Accuracy is a requirement, although it can be diluted by ad hoc-ery—which is precisely why simplicity is valued. Moreover, historians' political, ideological, or other personal inclinations need not and ought not determine which theory is preferred. And they do not, something which even a cursory study of scholarly historiographical debates will show. This is not equivalent to claiming that political or ideological views are irrelevant to academic debate: such an assertion would be naïve. Cognitive values have such a strong position within the historical discipline, however, that for political or ideological values to have salience, they have to masquerade as epistemic values—external consistency would seem the best candidate—or else be brushed aside by the scholarly community as partisanship.

The upside, especially if one values historiography's cohesive or civilizing function in society, is great. Of course, not all historians or philosophers of history do. But even those who value historiography's role as a cognitive tool or weapon in a struggle among different groups for hegemony or liberation should appreciate the advantage of being able to engage in academic

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discussion with counterparts. *Bonus pater* historians can discuss historical narratives and other interpretations across political or ideological divides, and they can retain a scholarly communication and exchange views on the epistemic worth of alternative accounts. Historians can be engaged intellectuals and might well be partisans of political views—several great historians surely have been—but in the evaluation of historical theories, cognitive values must have priority. In this role, cognitive values both define and constrain academic historiography. If historians succumb to the priority of the social, their authority as scholars will be reduced accordingly. Academic debate will decline to a shouting match between political or ideological factions. By adhering to cognitive values as described by philosophers from Kuhn to Kuukkanen, historiography can transcend partisanship.

NOTES

1. Froeyman, "The Ideal of Objectivity and the Public Role of the Historian," 219.
2. Barrett, "PBS Series Set to Examine Controversial Female Viking Warrior."
3. My recounting of the Birka story is based on Hedenstierna-Jonson et al., "A Female Viking Warrior"; and Price et al., "Viking Warrior Women?"
4. Hedenstierna, "A Female Viking Warrior," 857.
5. Ibid., 855 and 857.
6. Price, "Viking Warrior Women," 189.
7. Ibid., 192.
8. Ibid., 187.
9. Friedman, *The Politics of Excellence*.
10. Lakatos, *Philosophical Papers*.
11. For a generalized version of this predicament, see Greenwood, "Two Dogmas of Neo-Empiricism," 564–66.
12. Price, "Viking Warrior Women," 189.
13. Accepting the female sex of the Birka body does not entail acceptance of the implications for our understanding of Viking society drawn by the group that published the findings. For an example of this important distinction, see Jesch, "Viking 'Warrior Women.'"
14. Greenwood, "Two Dogmas of Neo-Empiricism."
15. Gaddis, *We Now Know*, is a triumphalist example of how dire depictions of Soviet intentions and actions by so-called orthodox U.S. Cold War historians were seen as vindicated by the new evidence. Careful overviews of other fields of Soviet studies that were transformed by the new access to documents are Westad, "Secrets of the Second World"; and Fitzpatrick, "Impact of the Opening of Soviet Archives."
16. Goldstein, *Historical Knowing*, 200. Goldstein's concept "historical truths" is akin to facts in my terminology.
17. Kuhnians might claim incommensurability, but the theories within which historians of today operate are seldom so divergent that this notion is apposite. Historians

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operating within a wholly Marxist conception of society, complete with Marxist value theory, etc., might be a possible exception. For the notion of a *bonus pater* historian, see Førland, *Values, Objectivity, and Explanation in Historiography*, 60.

18. Jenkins, *Re-thinking History*, 68.
19. Douglas, "The Value of Cognitive Values," 796.
20. Bloor, "The Sociology of Reasons," 310.
21. McMullin, "Values in Science," 19.
22. Ibid.; Thagard, "The Best Explanation."
23. McCullagh, *Justifying Historical Descriptions*, 19–29; McCullagh, *The Logic of History*, 51–52; Bevir, "Objectivity in History," 336; Bevir, *Logic of the History of Ideas*, 102–3; Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*, 123–28.
24. Lipton, *Inference to the Best Explanation*, 59.
25. McMullin, "Values in Science," 16; see also Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 185–86.
26. Douglas, "The Value of Cognitive Values."

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Chapter 5

Irrealism and Historical Theory

A User's Guide

Adam Timmins

Increasing reference is being made in historical theory to the concept of irrealism, particularly in the work of Paul A. Roth. As yet, however, the literature has not critically examined this concept nor even explained all that much just what irrealism is—a somewhat odd state of affairs given the heavy lifting that said concept is doing in said works.[1] The present piece aims to provide a corrective to this, and point out some of the more problematic aspects that the concept throws up; thus, it aims to serve as something of a brief primer for those uninitiated with the concept of "irrealism" as well as a jumping-off point for debate over the merits (or as the case may be, lack thereof) of the concept.

Off the bat, it should be noted that the discussion of irrealism follows a general trend where philosophical views take center stage in historical theory even when said views play a marginal role at best in their original field. The classic example is Hayden White: philosophers of literature have been somewhat dismissive of his Frye-inspired structuralism, yet in historical theory, White is seen as a central and hugely innovative figure.[2] Similarly, there has been no significant support for Goodman's notion of irrealism in general, with his nominalism and work on induction being his major influence and contribution to the philosophical literature. Yet the idea of irrealism seems to be gaining new life in historical theory just as it draws its dying breath in mainstream philosophy. Moreover, it appears to be doing so largely unchallenged; hence the need for a paper that at the very least points out some of the more problematic aspects of the position.

This chapter will proceed as follows. I will first sketch out what we might term the "classic" irrealism position, before then going on to outline how its

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main exponent in historical theory, Paul A. Roth, sees its relevance for the philosophy of history. I will then outline some concerns with Goodman's construal of irrealism, as well as Roth's historiographical irrealism.

IRREALISM FOR BEGINNERS

The reason the very concept of irrealism needs to be clarified is that it is, by and large, associated with the work of Nelson Goodman, whose presentation of the ingredients that go into this view are at times somewhat obscure. Goodman's reasons for pursuing this oblique style are themselves obscure; at one point he writes that while he could have presented his ideas more simply, "after a time, one becomes somewhat weary and even distrustful of flatfooted philosophy."[3] Flatfooted philosophy does have its merits though; there are many passages in his work where a lot is compressed into a relatively small space, and the reader has to do a lot of work in terms of unpacking the content for themselves. Take for instance (to jump ahead momentarily) Goodman's distinction between versions and worlds:

> Though we make worlds by making versions, we no more make a world by putting symbols together at random than a carpenter makes a chair by putting pieces of wood together at random. The multiple worlds I countenance are just the actual worlds made by and answering to true or right versions. Worlds possible or impossible supposedly answering to false versions have no place in my philosophy.[4]

As Brian Huschle notes, there is a lot compressed into these three sentences: that we make worlds by making versions; that only right or true versions make worlds; that these multiple worlds are actual; and that worldmaking involves work and skill akin to making a chair.[5] In sum, unpacking Goodman's philosophy is no easy task.

Irrealism essentially boils down to the idea that there is no single, neutral reality that underlies our various theories and descriptions of what the world is like. It is important to note that "irrealism does not hold that everything or even anything is irreal, but sees the world melting into versions and versions making worlds, finds ontology evanescent, and inquires into what makes a version right and a world well built."[6] Goodman is fond of contrasting irrealism with realism, whereby the latter he takes to mean the claim that there is exactly one world—call this position, for lack of a better term, "reality monism." However, he also rejects an unbridled relativism that argues that all of our representations are on a par: "My relativism is equidistant from intransigent absolutism and unlimited license."[7]

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Thus, irrealism is distinguished from both realism and relativism: while realism and relativism share the assumption that representations are metaphysically distinct from objects, irrealism argues that there is no single and fixed distinction between representations and objects; instead, representations are not metaphysically distinct from objects, and therefore, "objects and their properties and relations result from the active process by which a cognizer fits together a representation and object."[8] For Goodman, irrealism is "not one more doctrine . . . but is rather an attitude of unconcern with most issues between such doctrines"—where "such doctrines" denotes positions like realism, idealism, empiricism, and so on.[9]

The starting point for the notion of irrealism is that some truths conflict, and that there is no way to accommodate said truths within the same world. It is worth quoting the relevant passage from *Ways of Worldmaking* in full here:

> To anyone but an arrant absolutist, alternative ostensibly conflicting versions often present good and equal claims to truth. We can hardly take conflicting statements as true in the same world without admitting all statements whatsoever (since all follow from any contradiction) as true in the same world, and that world itself as impossible. Thus we must either reject one of two ostensibly conflicting versions as false, or take them as true in different worlds, or find if we can another way of reconciling them.[10]

Thus, when presented with two good and equal, yet conflicting, claims to truth (or versions, as Goodman puts it), we have four options open to us:

a. We can say that both versions are true in the same world (in other words, live with the contradiction).
b. We can say that one version must be false.
c. We can say that both versions are true, but in different worlds.
d. We can reconcile the conflicting versions so as to eliminate the contradiction.

Goodman thinks that the correct option to choose here is (c), for reasons we will see shortly. It is worth noting that Goodman uses the terms "takes" and "rejects" here, suggesting a potential epistemological approach. This would, of course, give us more than the four ways to treat the versions: we could adopt an attitude whereby we suspend judgment on the truth of the alternative versions.[11] But Goodman intends to make a *metaphysical* claim here, specifically, the claim that these conflicting worlds actually exist, as we will examine momentarily.

Sometimes it seems we are able to dissolve the contradiction: either by deciding that one of the "truths" is in fact false; or by (in Goodman's words)

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"seeking refuge in simple-minded relativization": for example, according to the geocentric system, the earth is at rest, while according to the heliocentric system, it moves—thus, "contradiction is avoided by segregation."[12] But for Goodman, this move will not do: for now we have two statements that tell us nothing about how "the world" behaves, but only something about what these "versions" say—that "the earth is at rest according to one system says nothing about how the earth behaves but only something about what these versions say. What must be added is that these versions are true. But then the contradiction reappears, and our escape is blocked."[13] As Cohnitz and Rossberg gloss the relevant passage, if we assume that both statements are true,

> we end up with a contradiction if we take them to be literally true of one and the same world. If we do not take them to be literally true, but to be elliptical and implicitly relativized, we end up with two truths that are not about any world. At least, they are not about the parts of the world we were interested in. They turn out to be truths about versions, but not truths about planets.[14]

Goodman's solution to the problem is to make the move that both claims are true of *different worlds*. And "if there is any actual world, there are many. For there are conflicting true versions and they cannot be true in the same world."[15]

What exactly does Goodman mean when he talks about a plurality of actual worlds? He is clear that "there is only one Earth; and the several worlds are not distributed in any space-time. Space-time is an ordering within a world; the space-times of different worlds are not embraced within some greater space-time."[16] But the concession that there is one earth should not be seen as entailing any backsliding: "A world is a totality; there can be no multiplicity of totalities, no more than one all-inclusive whole."[17]

I highlighted the word "version" a moment ago: as we can see, this is a term that does some fairly heavy lifting in Goodman's philosophy. "Versions" and "worlds" are not to be confused: a version can be in a language and consist of words, whereas worlds are neither in a given language or consist of words—"a version saying that there is a star up there is not itself bright or far off, and the star is not made up of letters."[18] However—and this is arguably the crux of the irrealist position—"no firm line can be drawn between world-features that are discourse-dependent and those that are not."[19] As we saw earlier, Goodman rejects the dualism between scheme and content: in *Ways of Worldmaking*, he argues that we draw the line between content and convention "wherever we like, and change it as often as suits our purposes. On the level of theory, we flit back and forth between extremes as blithely as a physicist between particle and field theories."[20] For Goodman, the distinction between fact and convention is itself conventional: and it follows that "if

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all facts are conventions and all conventions facts, how can the distinction be meaningful, especially for the hard-boiled extensionalist?"[21]

Goodman also rejects the idea that there is a "neutral" world that underlies our various world-versions.[22] As he puts it, "What is *it* that is so organized? When we strip off as layers of convention all differences among ways of describing *it*, what is left? The onion is peeled down to its empty core."[23] There are no "version independent" features of the world; no organization of objects "into units is unique or mandatory, nor is there any featureless raw material underlying different organizations. Any raw stuff is as much the creature of a version as is what is made out of that stuff."[24] As he notes in the early pages of *Ways of Worldmaking*,

> Talk of unstructured content or an unconceptualized given or a substratum without properties is self-defeating; for the talk imposes structure, conceptualizes, ascribes properties. . . . Predicates, pictures, other labels, schemata, survive want of application, but content vanishes without form. We can have words without a world but no world without words or other symbols.[25]

Goodman concludes that while an underlying world, bereft of the properties a version ascribes it, "need not be denied to those who love it, it is perhaps on the whole a world well lost."[26]

In sum, then, irrealism may be said to embrace a *metaphysical pluralism*: if each system of knowledge has truths relative only to that system, and different systems can be incompatible and equally true, then we have many different worlds.[27] All knowledge is relative to the system in which it resides, and truths within a system are relative only to that system, making all knowledge relative—"the issue is not what is given but how it is given."[28]

Yet, as one of Goodman's collaborators puts it, it is a rigorous relativism: the admission that there are alternative acceptable versions does not entail that all versions are acceptable.[29] In the preface to *Of Mind and Other Matters*, Goodman wrote that "I am a relativist who nevertheless maintains that there is a distinction between right and wrong theories, interpretations and works of art."[30] However, Goodman believes that the notion of 'truth' should be replaced with that of rightness, on the basis that there is no way to make a correspondence theory of truth work: if the latter is construed as correspondence between "discourse and the readymade world beyond discourse, it runs into double-trouble: there is no such world independent of description; and correspondence between description and the undescribed is incomprehensible."[31] The concept of rightness, for Goodman, has greater "reach" than truth, for "right" and "wrong" apply to both verbal and nonverbal symbols. Additionally, "rightness pertains to all the ways that symbols function. A symbol may be right or wrong, in what it says, denotes, exemplifies, expresses or

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refers to via a homogenous chain of referential steps; *rightness, unlike truth, is multi-dimensional*."[32] So what constitutes rightness? In a nutshell, it is a matter of "fit": that is, the

> Truth of statements and rightness of descriptions . . . is primary a matter of fit: fit to what is referred to in one way or another, or to other renderings, or to modes and manners of organization. . . . Rightness of categorization, which enters into most other varieties of rightness, is rather a matter of fit with practice; that without the organization, the selection of relevant kinds, effected by evolving tradition . . . Thus justifying such tests for rightness may consist primarily in showing not that they are reliable but that they are authoritative.[33]

Rightness is not a matter of correspondence, but rather a matter of fitting "into a context"; but fitting is not a matter of "sheer coherence . . . the fabric, the background, that which is being fitted into, has some degree of inertia, some claim to preservation, some tentative priority over what is being fitted into it."[34] Moreover, fitting is not a passive, but an active process: "The fit has to be *made*, and the making may involve minor or major adjustments in what is being fitted *into* or what is being fitted in or both."[35]

This leads us neatly into Goodman's new riddle of induction. As Deanna Shottenkirk notes, the project of worldmaking leans heavily on Goodman's answer to the question of which predicates we can and cannot project. Hume argued that trying to establish the foundation of our inductive inferences was somewhat problematic; Goodman argued that Hume had neglected to address the issue of just how we do in fact distinguish between cases where an inductive inference has been legitimately drawn and cases we deem invalid, and Goodman gives the example of a made-up predicate, "grue" as an example of this—why do we project predicates like "green," but not ones like "grue"?[36] It cannot be because the predicate "green" picks out an essence whereas "grue" does not, because for Goodman (and indeed any nominalist) there are no essences.

Goodman's answer is that justified induction ultimately depends upon community practice: an inductive inference "is justified by conformity to general rules, and a general rule by conformity to accepted inductive inferences. Predictions are justified if they conform to valid canons of induction; and the canons are valid if they accurately codify accepted inductive practices."[37] Goodman framed this solution as an appeal to *entrenchment*—a predicate is entrenched if it has been used to formulate true predictions in the past, and Goodman argued that entrenchment was the only property that separated genuinely projectible predicates from predicates that satisfy syntactic constraints, but are not projectible. So the answer to the question as to why we prefer "green" to "grue" is that when we consult the record of the

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past projections of the two, green "has the more impressive biography . . . The predicate 'green' we may say, is much better entrenched than the predicate 'grue.'" [38]

What makes a category right then, ultimately boils down to our social practices, and these are things that we are free to remake at our own will: "Inductive practices, which are the fundamental mechanism with which we cognize, are determined by social practices, yet we—as a collective of individuals—are able to remake those patterns. We can consciously alter our habits, and, in fact, that is exactly what constantly changing cultures do."[39] To return to the notion of rightness: the notion of entrenchment plays a pivotal role in Goodman's work on induction and the idea of worldmaking, but rather than entrenchment deriving from rightness—it is the other way around: rightness derives from entrenchment.[40]

IRREALISM WITH A HUMAN FACE: ROTH'S HISTORIOGRAPHICAL IRREALISM

Like Goodman, Roth's writing at times suffers from a certain opacity and is in similar need of explication. Roth shares Goodman's rejection of the idea of a ready-made world, that is, a world with properties that precede our practices of classification—and this of course, extends to the past that was once present.[41] Just as Goodman sees us as engaging in worldmaking, so Roth sees historians as engaging in pastmaking: "application of categories . . . may extend back in time, and, with regards to inferences about past events and actions, typically does."[42]

Roth sees Leon Goldstein's work on historical theory as an important precursor of his irrealist take. Goldstein argued that "no examination of the actual character and procedures of historical study reveals a role for the real past to play, either in the formulation of historical hypotheses or in their confirmation."[43] Rather, the sole object of historical study and inquiry was a constituted past: as the result of a "set of intellectual procedures whereby the historical past is reconstructed in the course of historical research."[44] But whereas Goldstein's motivation for taking on this view was *epistemological*—he believed that the inaccessibility of the past to perception constituted an insurmountable problem for the historian—Roth's is *ontological*. To put it another way, whereas Goldstein thought there was an epistemological barrier that prevented historians from accessing a ready-made past, for Roth there is no ready-made past to discover—past events and actions, like those of the present, only come into being through practices of categorization. As Roth asks rhetorically, "On what basis could one hope to say that events qua human kinds of activities are found, not made?"[45]

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Roth also contends that Goldstein's characterization of historical practice as involving abduction in turn implies irrealism. The notion of abduction has something of a complicated history (which characteristically, neither Goldstein nor Roth see fit to mention): sometimes it is cited as being akin to inference to the best explanation, although there are differences between the two also. In one of his later writings on abduction, Pierce characterized it thus:

> The surprising fact, C, is observed;
> But if A were true, C would be a matter of course,
> Hence, there is reason to suspect that A is true.[46]

So in historical practice, this translates into historians constituting events in order to account for present evidence; and for Roth, Goldstein's historical constitution should be seen as a Goodmanian exercise of organizing traces in kinds.[47] One of Goldstein's key themes was that historical evidence always has to be organized by the historian: on the realist view (or at least, the view that Goldstein attributes to realists), the "evidence itself provides a chronological framework . . . It's [the evidence] hanging together in that way is a characteristic of its own. It does so entirely independent of historians' work."[48] Goldstein rejects this: "For the accounts historians produce, deciding what evidence belongs together is part of the historical problem. In the course of working out the solution, historians determine that some evidence belongs together with other evidence, that writings once thought germane to the issue do not, in fact, have any relevance to it, and so on."[49] And it is here where Roth sees the categorization and inductive practices that characterize irrealism gaining their grip.

At this point, Arthur Danto's conception of narrative sentences comes into play. It is no exaggeration to say that Roth sees narrative sentences as being at the heart of the historiographical enterprise, but here they only need concern us insofar as Roth sees them and their role in historical writing as providing a key plank of the irrealist case. Recall that Goodman characterized irrealism as being equidistant from realism and relativism; Roth sees it as being equidistant from realism and anti-realism, a distinction he draws in terms of how realism and anti-realism relate to truth-value. A realist believes that truth-values are evidence-transcendent: even if we have no way of knowing whether, for example, "it rained on October 13, 1385," the sentence still has a truth-value—truth comes apart from justification, and the principle of bivalence holds. An anti-realist however—here I am thinking primarily of the work of Michael Dummett—argues that truth cannot be evidentially unconstrained: in other words, that to understand a declarative sentence is to be able to be capable of recognizing what would count as evidence for or against it. Thus, if we are unable to gather any evidence to speak either for or against

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a declarative sentence, then for that sentence the principle of bivalence no longer holds, and we have a sentence with a truth-value gap.

In a sense, however, realism and anti-realism share some common features, insofar as an anti-realist can still hold to a truth-conditional semantics, "provided the truth of a statement is always taken to require the availability of evidence for its truth . . . It ought to [however] be possible to take a realist view of what makes for the truth or falsity of statements whose truth-values are not conceived as evidence-transcendent."[50] Thus, in a sense both can remain committed to the idea of a ready-made world: the contingency to knowledge claims that anti-realism brings to the table stems from evidence, or in Goldstein's case, the supposed lack thereof. But in the irrealist view that Roth argues for, knowledge of the past remains contingent, but not due to a lack of evidence about the past. And it is here (finally! exclaims the reader) that narrative sentences come in.

Danto's key insight was that there are truths about an event that takes place at time *t* that only becomes available to us after time *t*, and these take the form of narrative sentences, whereby an earlier event is described in terms of a later one. The canonical example is the sentence "The Thirty Years War began in 1618": clearly this sentence could not have been uttered in 1618, but only from 1648 on, after the war concluded. As Roth phrases it, "later events form on earlier ones so as to add to the list of statements true at the earlier time *t* under descriptions not available at *t*."[51] Roth takes another sentence from Danto as motivating the irrealist insight: "Talleyrand begat Delacroix and Delacroix painted the *Mort de Sardanapale*." For Roth, the interesting logical feature of this sentence is that although both of its conjuncts are now true, they were not always simultaneously true; so, there was a time when the first was true and the second was false. In order to get a "time-true" (the phrase is Danto's) version of this sentence, we would need to rephrase it as

> (2) "Talleyrand begat Delacroix and Delacroix will paint the Mort de Sardanapale."

Yet for the sentence to be true simpliciter, it would need to entail that

> (3) "Delacroix will paint the Mort de Sardanapale."

But (3), according to Roth, "is a paradigm instance of a sentence without a truth-value, since it speaks of what will be, not what is or was."[52] Thus, time-true sentences do not have timeless, determinate truth-values—"a key realist doctrine"—but instead are "inferentially opaque . . . Without the relevant model, uncertainty exists whether or not the usual deductive inferences can be applied."[53] If we take the insights of Goodman and Danto together,

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then it is clear, for Roth, that "questions of the reality of the past turn out to be anything but investigation independent."[54] The assignation of truth-values to sentences about the past are intimately tied to issues of language use—in particular, categorization.

For insight on the constitution of kinds, events, and intention actions, Roth invokes the work of Ian Hacking, who like Goodman, tends toward a form of nominalism. As we noted earlier, nominalism rejects the idea of essences; or at least, for the nominalist, "essence" simply denotes theoretical entrenchment, and such entrenchment is always a community affair.[55] And this applies to the practice of history as much as any knowledge-producing endeavor:

> We can well understand how new kinds create new possibilities for choice and action. But the past, of course, is fixed! Not so. As Goodman would put it, if new kinds are selected, then the past can occur in a new world. Events in a life can now be seen as events of a new kind, a kind that may not have been conceptualized when the event was experienced or the act performed. What we experienced becomes recollected anew and thought in terms that could not have been thought at the time.[56]

To recapitulate this somewhat tangled web. In order for the past to be as fixed and immutable as the realist takes it to be, we would need it to have joints: that is, essences and natural kinds. But if we are skeptics with regard to such joints, then nothing makes events or actions "intrinsic": said events and actions are always under a description, and new descriptions become available as time progresses—not least because later events enter into relations with earlier events, which are picked out by narrative sentences. As a result, there can be no view from nowhere, a past seen *sub specie aeternitatis*, and the result is a "plurality of pasts."[57] Put another way: if we are using a theory of reference in which the properties of an object play a key role (i.e., a term refers to an object if the object possesses the properties associated with the term), but properties are almost wholly conventional, then it follows that properties are not picked out from a ready-made, antecedent world, but rather are ascribed to it on the basis of the world-versions—or in the historians case, the past-versions—that we create.

ISSUES WITH GOODMANIAN IRREALISM

In the final section of this chapter, I want to look at some issues with the work of both Goodman and concomitantly, that of Roth. There has been little to no critical comment on the use of irrealism as posited in historiography, with the one exception being an exchange between Daniel Swaim and Adrian Currie

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versus Roth and Fons DeWulf in a recent issue of *Journal for the Philosophy of History*. Nor for that matter has there seemingly been much engagement with the work on Goodman's conception of irrealism. The remainder of this paper will tackle both.

Let us first take the spectre of idealism that attends to Goodman's notion of irrealism. Goodman has denied that he is an idealist, preferring the term "rigorous relativist," but the fact remains that it is hard to see how he can avoid the charge of idealism, particularly given his remarks on what sort of constraints that worlds/versions are subject to. Responding to a collection of papers on his notion of worldmaking, Goodman denied that he was an idealist on the following grounds:

> Realism and idealism disagree over what is admissible in the foundation of the unique correct description of the world. Irrealism dismisses the issue, denying that there can be any such unique version . . . According to my usage of these terms, "realism" shuns all idealistic systems; "idealism" shuns all realistic systems; "irrealism" does not discriminate either way.[58]

It can be argued that this somewhat hinges on a non-standard definition of "idealism." Generally speaking, idealism is taken to involve at least one of the following two conceptions: that the ultimate foundation of reality is something mental, or that even if "the existence of something independent of the mind is conceded, everything that we can know about this mind-independent 'reality' is held to be so permeated by the creative, formative, or constructive activities of the mind (of some kind or other) that all claims to knowledge must be considered, in some sense, to be a form of self-knowledge."[59] It is hard to see how Goodmanian irrealism differs from this second formulation of idealism, in spite of the vague appeals to the fact that making worlds is "not easy." As Hilary Putnam noted, once we take the step that Goodman does—that worlds are made by us—then we are left with "a form of idealism as extreme as Hegel's or Fichte's!"[60]

Goodman's odd definitions of idealism and realism also make his arguments for the collapsing of scheme and content somewhat problematic. As Huschle notes, Goodman seems to class realism as the view that all that exists is content, and idealism that all that exists is conventional: recall the remark that we draw the line between content and convention wherever we like. Yet we do not generally characterize realism as the idea that *all* elements are independent, and idealism as the notion that *all* elements are dependent.[61] Moreover, in order for the argument to get off the ground, Goodman needs to show that we can make *any* given element conventional or content, and it is by no means clear he has achieved this.[62]

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Worries over idealism would be assuaged were Goodman able to provide a convincing account of how versions/worlds/world-versions are constrained; for Goodman himself argues that making versions is subject to severe constraints. This begs the question (as he himself phrases it): "if nothing stands apart from all versions, what can be the basis and nature of these constraints? How can a version be wrong about the world it makes?"[63] When correspondence is rejected, the first port of call is usually coherence; but as Goodman correctly notes, coherence by itself will not do, "for a false or otherwise wrong version can hold together as well as a right one."[64]

We have hinted above at the answer Goodman gives to this question: inductive validity; specifically, what is required for inductive validity is formal relationships among the sentences in question along with right categorization. And what makes a category right?

> Very briefly, and over simply, its adoption in inductive practice, its entrenchment, resulting from *inertia modified by invention*. Why some categories rather than others have become entrenched—a subject of avid philosophical debate—does not matter; the entrenchment, however achieved, provides the required distinction. Rightness of categorization, in my view, derives from rather than underlies entrenchment.[65]

This is somewhat thin gruel and leads to the sorts of worries raised by Kuhn's emphasis on the role of dogma: we seem to be left with the spectre of mob rule (the phrase is Lakatos') holding sway in terms of correctness, as well as that of unbridled relativism. In order to avoid said relativism, the world needs to constrain our versions in some way; yet if the world has no features worthy of the name, it cannot do this. Thus, for all Goodman's talk about the difficulty of constructing versions, it is hard to see what exactly makes it *difficult*. In sum, we are entitled to call Goodman a *radical metaphysical constructivist*, who argues that to all intents and purposes, there is no such thing as an independent unconstructed reality.[66]

Moreover, given that Goodman eschews a distinction between scheme and content, it is difficult to see what exact work the distinction between worlds and versions is doing. Matters are not helped by Goodman's own pronouncements on the subject; for instance, in his reply to the symposium on *Ways of Worldmaking*: "Talk of worlds and talk of right versions are often interchangeable. . . . If I take advantage of the privilege to speak sometimes as if there are only versions and other times as if there are worlds for all right versions, I often do it just to emphasize that point"—that is, there is no firm difference between a version and a world.[67] Indeed, Goodman looks awfully like he wants to have his cake and eat it here: he wants to hold that a world constrains belief, but also allow that we make changes and/revisions to a

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world; a world is able to constrain right versions, even though in constructing a right version, we may also alter that world; if no "firm line can be drawn between world-features that are discourse-dependent and those that are not," then there can be no firm differences between a world consisting of discourse-independent features and a version consisting of discourse-dependent features.[68] Ultimately, one is tempted to conclude that "responsible relativism" is an oxymoron.[69]

The irony is that there is much in the "irrealist" position that a realist can quite happily agree with; for instance, to "claim that in fashioning concepts and categories, we partake in making our world is compatible with the idea that sentences purporting to describe the products of our work are true or false independent of us."[70] As we noted earlier, a realist about historiography can quite happily concede that outside of human conceptual activity, there are no wars or revolutions (though there are deaths); but once we have criteria for what a war or revolution is, whether something is a war or revolution depends in no small part on how things actually were. The slide into idealism occurs in part with the assertion that there is seemingly nothing that can give us even a minimal notion of constraint apart from mere "habit." As Hempel noted, to say as Goodman does that "some of the felt stubbornness of fact is the grip of habit" does not do full justice to the stubbornness of facts.[71]

Let us return to Goodman's remark about the "world well lost." As Caleb Millar has noted, what this remark seems to imply is that the realist can stick to their guns in the face of this argument, but doing so is somehow misplaced; and the reason for this seems to be that "since all we can ever know is contained within versions of the world, we have no good reason for thinking that there is anything else."[72] Indeed, this line of thought is at the bottom of most arguments for anti-realism and idealism: the idea that even if realism is true, we could have no way of knowing that it was true, that is, we have no cognitive access to anything that might be relevant to the issue. Ergo, we should stick to the things we do have cognitive access to, such as "our own cognitive life and concepts, our own conceptual schemes, language, reality as known by us or conceptualized by us, and the like."[73]

ROTH'S ARGUMENTS FOR IRREALISM

Like Goodman, Roth does not see himself as an idealist;[74] nor, for that matter, does he see his position as entailing an opposition to realism. As Roth puts it in an article co-authored with Fons DeWulf,[75] irrealism does not constitute an argument against realism, nor need it do so: "rather, it articulates an *alternative* metaphysical account that accords best with what Roth also takes as the *epistemic* position of theorizers."[76] Thus it is understandable that Roth does

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not explicitly refute realism, for his aim was rather to show that we can make sense of "sentences having semantic interrelationships within a narrative structure" without having to opt for realism or anti-realism.[77]

One point where Roth deserves credit is for highlighting the similarities between Goldstein's historical theory and Goodman's irrealism. There are several passages in Goodman's work that could easily have been taken, *mutatis mutandis*, from the pages of Goldstein—for instance, take the following passage from the former:

> If we are tempted to say that "both are versions of the same facts," this must no more be taken to imply that there are independent facts of which both are versions than likeness of meaning between two terms implies that there are some entities called meanings. "Fact" like "meaning" is a syncategorematic term; for facts, after all, are obviously factitious. . . . Meanings have been replaced by reference—or the relationship among terms—and facts also are replaceable by analysis of relationships among versions.[78]

Compare this with a passage from Goldstein discussing A. J. P. Taylor's *Origins of the Second World War*. For Goldstein, when Taylor argued that Hitler's foreign policy was in line with that of his predecessors, he

> is surely not seeking to explain the outbreak of war in 1939 by selecting among the historical facts some overlooked by the usual interpretation and shunting aside, as not relevant, facts that those who subscribe to the usual interpretation prefer to emphasize. The character of the dispute is rather that each side opposes to the other a set of historical facts which the other cannot assimilate. The usual view holds that with respect to Hitler's diplomacy the facts are thus and so; Taylor argues that the facts are this and that. It cannot be the case that thus and so, this and that are all real events existing in the same domain from which historians make their choice. Taylor's conception of the origins of the Second World War involves historical facts which have no existence at all in the conception of his opponents: each side thinks the evidence calls for the constitution of different historical facts.[79]

It is striking how well this dovetails with Goodman's conception of irrealism. Recall that for Goodman, we accommodate conflicting versions by treating them as true in different worlds; "versions not applying in the same world no longer conflict; contradiction is avoided by segregation."[80] Transferred to historiography, what we get is: different facts correspond to different pasts, for it cannot be the case that thus and so, this and that are all real events existing in the same domain. As Roth approvingly glosses, the "real—truth-makers for statements about the past—emerges from within a constituted past. Items

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appear as candidate truth-makers by virtue of their location within a constituted framework."[81]

Many of the issues with Roth's historical theory stem from his self-professed starting point. As the recent paper co-authored with De Wulf puts it, the jumping off point for historiographical irrealism is the "existence of multiple, incompatible histories" with both realism and anti-realism providing somewhat unpalatable solutions to this state of affairs: "Realism, as traditionally conceived, unduly narrows the field of possible histories to those that prove mutually compatible. On the other hand, anti-realism typically offers no good account of what constrains histories. . . . The former imposes too strong a constraint on historical explanation and the latter too weak."[82] This looks like a slightly opaque construal of realism on the face of it, until we add some context from elsewhere. In "The Pasts" Roth cites Louis Mink's argument to the effect that, were realism a viable construal of what historians do, then historical accounts would "aggregate":

> Historical narratives *should* aggregate; insofar as they make truth-claims about a selected segment of past actuality, they must be compatible with and complement other narratives which overlap or are continuous with them . . . While historical narratives ought to aggregate into more comprehensive narratives, or give way to rival narratives which will so aggregate, in fact they do not; and here is where conceptual discomfort should set in.[83]

Interestingly, Roth/DeWulf state that the arguments for irrealism are independent of Roth's advocation of the "lack of aggregation" thesis; this is an arguable point, which I will come back to. Here though, the problem with realism as Roth frames it seems to be this: were realism operative in a given subject area of historiography, then the field would consist of a series of mutually compatible accounts; since in most areas we have accounts of the past that seem to contradict each other in terms of interpretation and in some cases fact, then realism cannot be operative. The problem with anti-realism is that it seems to provide us with no criteria for narrowing down said field of competing accounts, and we are left with the problem that Goldstein had: there seems to be no way to "go wrong" in constituting a historical account.

The main point to be made here is that it is not entirely clear that irrealism succeeds where anti-realism fails in terms of constraining historical accounts: the main difference appears to be that irrealism *licenses* a plurality of accounts in a way that anti-realism doesn't. The only constraint that irrealism appears to offer stems from the appeal to community practices, but it is not clear how far this gets us, particularly if one has to fall back on some of the hand-waving arguments that Goodman puts forth as to the difficulty involved in world-making, and Goldstein's on how community practices

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stabilize historical knowing. Thus, it seems that in fact Roth is plagued by exactly the same problem that Goldstein had: that we have a community of historical practitioners spinning frictionlessly in a void (to use a phrase of John McDowell's). To talk about the stabilizing practices of the community simply begs the question as to what stabilizes them—and as noted earlier, Goodman's answer of inertia and custom is a thin reed on which to save historiography from the wilds of relativism. A realist will want to argue that it is the real past which constrains historical accounts, and this is something that Goldstein argues can play no role in historical practice.[84] So at the very least, Roth needs to clarify how the knowledge-producing activities of historians "hook onto" the past, for lack of a better term.

Roth's conception of events also raises some questions; in particular, what is missing is a worked-out conception of the ontology of events. At best, we get the odd hand-waving reference to the idea that events are always events under a description and can be sliced thick or thin. In "Essentially Narrative Explanations," Roth approvingly quotes Martin to the effect that "It is the end of the temporal series—how things eventually turned out—that determines which event began it."[85] But, surely, all this tells us is that events are entities that have temporal parts, and thus the fact that later truths that emerge about an event that took place at t after time T is an epistemological issue. This is something that Roth explicitly denies, stating that "the issue here does *not* concern, e.g., ignorance at some moment or a lack of access to some relevant facts." He then gives the example of the Black Death: "In the case of an event such as the Black Death, the fact that it began sometime in the 14th century simply could not be known then because the event so named emerges only later than when it first started."[86] One could view this another way, however: because by their very nature, there is no such thing as an incomplete event, and events have temporal parts and duration, certain truths about an event emerge only at its completion; and this seems quite natural.[87]

Finally, there is the suspicion that Goodman's skepticism about kinds is being projected into an area where it doesn't quite apply. For there is a prima facie difference between natural properties—that is, universals (or lack thereof)—and the type of actions and events that the historian deals with. We see how this is supposed to work—Goldstein's example of "Roosevelt's career" is trotted out by Roth as an example of how kind-making works in historiography; Roosevelt's "career" did not exist until we decided to apply the kind-criterion "career" to the events of the past. But this seemingly eliminates the fact that the material that historians study is, for lack of a better word, "pre-interpreted" in a way that the work of the natural scientist is not.[88]

Ultimately this all ends up by positing the kind of colligatory anti-realism that is prevalent in historical theory in general, and as a result you get all the attendant problems in those accounts as a kind of free lunch. To give but one

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example: to say that applying colligatory terms/"organizing traces into kinds" cannot or is not constrained by anything inherent in the past itself invites the conclusion that when we speak of the "First World War," that "war" is an organizing concept and that we could classify the events on the battlefield of Europe in 1914–1918 as something other than a war.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have outlined the key tenets of Goodman's initial characterization of irrealism, as well as Paul A. Roth's utilization of it in historical theory. I have also provided some critical scrutiny of both notions which has been hitherto lacking in the historical theory literature. As noted earlier, the philosophical niche that historical theory resides in has generally provided suitable conditions for ideas and concepts that are looked at with askance in mainstream philosophy; and as a result, one suspects that proponents of irrealism may safely dine out on the concept for a while yet.

NOTES

1. See for example, the somewhat sketchy definition provided in Roth's "The Pasts."
2. See for instance, Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics,* Chapter 8; also, Lamarque and Olsen's *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*, in particular 304–7.
3. Goodman, "Comments," 215.
4. Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, 94.
5. Huschle, *From Conflicting Versions to Many Worlds*, 14–15.
6. Goodman, *Of Mind and Other Matters*, 29.
7. Ibid., 40.
8. Huschle, *From Conflicting Versions to Many Worlds*, 11.
9. Goodman, *Of Mind and Other Matters*, 43.
10. Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, 110. Oddly enough, at one point Hayden White comes very close to a similar view: "There is no such thing as a 'single' correct view of any object under study, but . . . there are many correct views, each requiring its own style of representation." See Hayden White, *The Tropics of Discourse*, 47.
11. White, Tropics, 82.
12. Goodman, *Of Mind and Other Matters*, 30–31.
13. Ibid., 30.
14. Cohnitz and Rossberg, *Nelson Goodman*, 195.
15. Goodman, *Of Mind and Other Matters*, 31.
16. Ibid., 31.
17. Ibid., 32.

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18. Ibid., 41.
19. Ibid.
20. Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, 119.
21. Goodman and Elgin, *Reconceptions,* 95–96.
22. As more than one commentator has noted, there seems to be an ambiguity in Goodman's views on the existence of a "neutral" world; at times he seems to reject the existence of such a thing altogether, but on other occasions he seems to plump for the view that it exists, but is virtually useless. Huschle argues that Goodman is committed to the former view, and I am inclined to agree. See Huschle, *From Conflicting Versions to Many Worlds,* 162.
23. Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, 118. Robert Schwartz also makes a similar point: the world the realist wants to regain "is a stark world, stripped of its facts and properties, bereft of any definite character or nature. If this, then, is all the Realist has to show for denying us the boast of making our world, it is really worth the effort." Schwartz, "I'm Going to Make You a Star," 438.
24. Goodman, *Of Mind and Other Matters*, 34.
25. Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, 6.
26. Ibid., 4.
27. Shottenkirk, *Nominalism and Its Aftermath*, 89.
28. Ibid., 87.
29. Elgin, "Goodman's Rigorous Relativism," 41.
30. Goodman, *Of Mind and Other Matters*, i. Elsewhere, in *Ways of Worldmaking*, Goodman states that his irrealism does not entail "that right versions can be arrived at casually." *Ways of Worldmaking*, 97.
31. Goodman and Elgin, *Reconceptions*, 154. Italics in the original.
32. Ibid., 156.
33. Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, 138–39.
34. Goodman and Elgin, *Reconceptions*, 158.
35. Ibid., 159. Italics in the original.
36. For the initial presentation of the "new riddle," see Nelson Goodman, *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*.
37. Goodman, *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*, 82.
38. Ibid., 94.
39. Goodman, *Problems and Projects*, 26; see also Shottenkirk, *Nominalism and Its Aftermath*, 86.
40. Chokr, "Nelson Goodman on Truth, Relativism, and Criteria of Rightness," 64.
41. In a footnote in "The Pasts," Roth characterizes historical realism as adhering to a "woolly mammoth" view of the past: "This stems from an article I once read concerning how explorers in some arctic region found an entire woolly mammoth frozen, embedded in the ice. Realists view past events on analogy with such a discovery. As past, events become forever locked into some fixed configuration, awaiting a historian to come along and chip away the excrescences of time so that 'the past' can stand revealed in all its original glory." Roth, "The Pasts," 314n5.
42. Ibid., 327.
43. Goldstein, *Historical Knowing*, xix.

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44. Ibid., xxi.
45. Roth, "The Pasts," 319.
46. C. S. Pierce, quoted in Douven, "Abduction."
47. Roth, "The Pasts," 327.
48. Goldstein, "Impediments to Epistemology," 86.
49. Ibid.
50. Wright, "Realism, Anti-Realism, Irrealism, Quasi-Realism," 27.
51. Roth, "The Pasts," 313.
52. Ibid., 325.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid., 326.
55. Ibid., 328.
56. Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?*, 130.
57. Roth, "The Pasts," 339.
58. Goodman, "Comments," 203.
59. Guyer and Horstmann, "Idealism."
60. Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy*, 111.
61. Huschle, *From Conflicting Versions to Many Worlds,* 153–54.
62. Ibid., 156.
63. Goodman, "Notes on the Well-Made World," 104.
64. Ibid., 105.
65. Ibid. My italics.
66. The phrase comes from R. Dudua, *The Realism/Anti-Realism Debate in the Philosophy of Science*, 128.
67. Goodman, *Of Mind and Other Matters*, 41.
68. Huschle, *From Conflicting Versions to Many Worlds*, 76. The Goodman quote comes from *Of Mind and Other Matters*, 41.
69. It is no surprise that this phrase also crops in Alun Munslow's later work.
70. Schwartz, "I'm Going to Make You a Star," 429.
71. Hempel, "Comments on Goodman's Ways of Worldmaking," 198. Indeed, Goodman's view seems at times to resemble Peirce's "method of tenacity."
72. Millar, "Realism, Anti-Realism, and Common Sense," 20.
73. Ibid.
74. Then again, no one ever does.
75. A piece that oddly refers to Roth in the third-person throughout.
76. DeWulf and Roth, "Real True Facts," 208.
77. Goldstein, *Historical Knowing*, 84.
78. Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, 93
79. Goldstein, *Historical Knowing*, 84.
80. Goodman, *Of Mind and Other Matters*, 31.
81. Roth, "The Pasts," 320.
82. DeWulf and Roth, "Real True Facts," 208.
83. Mink, *Historical Understanding*, 196.
84. One of the editors noted that the answer to what stabilizes the practices of the community is the evidence, and this is something that Goldstein himself adverts to.

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It strikes me that this doesn't quite get us where we need to get to though, for it begs the question "evidence *of what*?" The realist will wish to say the past as it was, but Goldstein cannot make this move, as it would obviate his claim that the real past has no part to play in historical practice.

85. Martin, *The Past Within Us*, 74.

86. Ibid.

87. This, of course, relies on a fairly well-worked out theory of events that space does not permit to elaborate here. Yet is important to note that Roth never provides such a theory either; at best, we get hand-waving references to the idea that events can never be shown not to to be of our own making, and that they can be sliced thick or thin. Presumably these assertions lean on Goodman's work, but Roth never makes this clear.

88. The phrase comes in a quotation in (ironically enough) Goldstein's *Historical Knowing*, 192.

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Chapter 6

Saving Historical Reality (Even If We Construct It)

David Weberman

There has been a debate about historical realism (also called historiographic realism) for decades, centuries, or perhaps even millennia. What is historical realism? One of the points of the present essay is to show that defining it sharply is no easy matter. At the very least, we can say that historical realism concerns our knowledge of the past and whether that knowledge can ever capture the past "as it actually was" (Ranke's *wie es eigentlich gewesen*) and thereby yield truths. On the one side are those who deny that we do or can arrive at such truths because we always "construct" the past. On the other side are those who defend the possibility that historians can and sometimes do provide truths as well-supported (or nearly so) as the truths we get in other scientific and non-scientific contexts.

The problem with this debate, I think, is that historical realism and its opposing view, historical anti-realism, depend on the use of several difficult concepts and what they are thought to entail—concepts such as truth, objectivity, construction, perspective, and interpretation. Not only are these words used differently by different theorists, their everyday usage lets slip into the discussion unfiltered resonances and expectations. Far be it from me to stipulate their usage once and for all; rather, by unpacking these concepts and disconnecting some of them from others, I hope to define better what is at stake and ultimately to defend a certain view on the epistemic status of historical knowledge. I hope to show that while historical knowledge is, at every level, perspective-bound, it is still capable of a certain kind of objectivity. Consequently, it can and does give us lots of pretty well-supported truths. Perspectivity does not preclude truth. Rather, it leads to a kind of pluralism and a recognition of the inexhaustibility of what one can truly say about the

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past (which leaves room for some assertions about the past being false). This may not be everyone's idea of realism, but I do wish to hold onto truth, confirmability, and a certain notion of objectivity.

This chapter proceeds as follows. In the first section, I begin by identifying an extreme version of the opposition between historical realism and anti-realism. I contend that each position is either indefensible or unclear, if not both. I also suggest that it is difficult to come up with more reasonable formulations of the two positions at the outset, since doing so presumes having already sorted out the thicket of contested concepts. In the second section, I enter the thicket myself, beginning with the question of whether the past is determinate and fixed and in what sense we can be said to "construct" it. This issue leads to a discussion of facts and interpretations, perspectives, and two different notions of objectivity. In the third section, I come to the issues of evidence, confirmation, and truth. I discuss, partly critically, Louis Mink's idea of non-detachability and distance myself from recent theories put forth by Paul Roth and Chiel van den Akker. In the fourth section, I conclude by arguing that holding onto constructions and perspectives *as well as* truth and confirmability leads to pluralism, meaning here that not all true narratives can be aggregated or combined into one mega-account of the past.

DIFFICULTY IN FORMULATING PRECISELY WHAT REALISM AND ANTI-REALISM ARE

Philosophical debates are often usefully framed by providing clear, sharp, and plausible formulations of two opposing theses, thereby setting the stage for arguments and possible revisions to the original formulations. Can one proceed in this manner with historical realism? It turns out that this is not easy to do in a productive manner due to lack of clarity and plausibility.

A simple analogy to formulations of scientific realism and anti-realism cannot be had. The debate about scientific realism depends on the right way to understand concepts referring to non-observable phenomena, whether they correspond to real entities and events or are merely tools for supplying the best possible explanations. But the opposition between the directly observable and the theoretical is not the central issue in the disagreement about historical realism. At issue in historical realism is the application of all concepts about the past, not merely particularly theoretical ones. This is even more significant than the fact that historians, being concerned with the past, do not directly observe things at all. It is not the step up to theoretical posits that historical anti-realists put into question; it is the very telling of ordinary narratives.

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Leaving the scientific debate behind, we might start with a rough-and-ready formulation of the opposition between historical realism and anti-realism:

> Historical realism (rough-and-ready): Historical knowledge can, and sometimes does, give us objective truths that correspond to the way the past was.
>
> Historical anti-realism (rough-and-ready): Historical knowledge can never give us objective truths that correspond to the way the past was, it can only "construct" the past.

These rough-and-ready formulations of the two positions do not, in fact, provide us with a great starting point. The problem is a lack of sharpness in the key concepts referred to by words such as "objective," "truth," "the way the past actually was," "construct," "correspond," "fact," and "interpretation." One might try to avoid the concepts and use other ones instead. Though I have tried myself, I cannot find alternative concepts that do the job. So, I think that there's no avoiding getting oneself dirty by stepping into the maze even before the two theses are properly pinned down.

I mentioned above that the rough-and-ready positions are not only underclarified but implausible. Let me state briefly my reasons. Historical realism is untenable and implausible because there is no single way in which the past *was*, fixed and determinate once and for all and capturable by our descriptions, as I will argue. Historical anti-realism is untenable and implausible because construction, whatever it might mean, need not defeat objectivity and the acquisition of well-established truths.

My plan is to proceed according to the following sequence of steps. I'll begin with the idea of a fixed and determinate past—the past as it actually was. From there, I'll move on to the notions of perspective, construction, and interpretation. Here I'll be agreeing with several points often made by historical anti-realists. There is a deep truth in what they stress. In the next section, I'll be contending that interpretation, construction, and so forth still allow what the anti-realists back off from, namely, a certain objectivity and truths about past reality. In the last section of the chapter, I'll develop the notion of a kind of pluralism that follows, I believe, from the arguments delivered.

THE PAST, CONSTRUCTING, PERSPECTIVE, AND OBJECTIVITY

The Past as It Was

Is there such a thing as the past as it (actually) was, fully determinate and fixed? The short answer to this question is "yes and no, depending . . . ," an

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answer with which perhaps all recent participants would or should agree. It depends on recognizing the limitations of the yes part and then spelling out the exact reasons for the no part. A similar, parallel question arises about whether there is such a thing as the present as it actually is. I'll return to that parallel question shortly.

A good place to start is with something that Paul Roth has written:

> Briefly, the problem is that past events exist, qua events, only in terms of some historically situated conception of them. The notion of a historical truth for events, that is, a perspective on happenings untainted by human perception and categorization, proves to be incoherent. There exists a world not of our making, but any subdivision of it into specific events is our doing, not nature's.[1]

I want to set aside truth for the moment to focus on the distinction between a (past) world not of our making and a historical past that is of our making. Roth does not deny that there is a world not of our making. He holds, however, that we leave that world behind as soon as we subdivide it into events. This location of the distinction might mislead one into thinking that it is only events, not entities themselves that remove us from the (might one say?) "unadulterated" past. Yet even the individuation and description of entities or states of affairs, changeless or at a single point in time, already makes the move away from the world not of our making insofar as all individuation and verbal description already engages in, to use Roth's words here, "perception and categorization." It would be better to say that the fundamental distinction is between the way the world was and the way we represent, describe, or capture it to have been. As soon as we capture it, it is no longer free of our doing and making.[2] What can one say of that world not of our making? Nothing, except that it is real and that such and such atoms were located at such and such places at such and such time. Of course, the use of the concept "atom" and specification of place and time already introduces our categorization, but leaving aside that complication, it should seem fair to say that the way the world was at a given point in time is, in minimally physicalist terms, fully determinate, completely fixed, and independent of us. Once we set out to capture the past in words (images or ideas), things get more complicated; descriptive possibilities are open-ended and, as I will argue, the past is no longer fixed with regard to those of its properties that go beyond the mere physicalist ones.

Let me be clear about my use of the term "physicalist" and my suggestion that there is more to the world than what can be captured in physicalist terms. I am not endorsing metaphysical dualism according to which there exist non-physical substances or entities. In fact, I think of myself as a non-reductive physicalist, though nothing depends on that here. What I am saying

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is that there is more than one way to refer to and capture the physical world. We can use physical or non-physical predicates. By non-physical predicates, I mean those that refer to an entity's global or emergent properties (whether phenomenal, intentional, social, or the like).

An example might help here. A banknote, such as a Hungarian 200-forint banknote, is a physical entity, through and through, but it can be truly described in terms of both physical and non-physical predicates. Physical predicates refer to its physical properties, such as size and chemical composition. Non-physical predicates refer to its emergent properties, such as its value. When the Hungarian National Bank (as I sadly discovered) withdrew the 200-forint banknote from circulation in 2009 and declared it null and void after a certain date, the banknote did not change its physical properties, but one of its most important non-physical properties. The example of the banknote is meant to indicate that all relational changes are real and some of them are important. Does it show that the past changes? Of course, it doesn't show that the banknote was worthless at the earlier point in time—it had value at that time. But it does show that the banknote, at that earlier point in time, comes to have a new property, namely, that it would become worthless after a certain lapse of time.

My claim is that while the past is determinate and fixed in terms of physical predicates (e.g., which atoms were at which place at which time), it is a different matter when the past is captured in terms of its emergent predicates. In this case, open-endedness and even a certain kind of non-fixity is sometimes evident. It is one thing to say that historians must, to the best of their abilities, converge on a single account of the past in terms of its facts physicalistically construed. It is another thing to indulge in the mistaken belief that there is a single account of the past thickly described in terms of its emergent predicates.

My view is that the past (not just our accounts of it) is not fixed, indeed that it changes, insofar as past events or entities come to have new relational properties—not new physical properties, but new emergent ones. Many will balk at the idea that the past changes, questioning my appeal to the past's new relational properties. One might argue that relational properties and relational changes are not real, that is, that such changes are only bogus "Cambridge changes" as they have come to be called. Yet it is hard for me to see that all such changes are bogus or unreal since new emergent properties, such as a banknote's becoming worthless, make a real difference to thought, action, and history. By the same token, the argument that such relational properties and relational changes are somehow irrelevant seems false as well. They are sometimes of great relevance. Finally, one might argue that such relational properties and relational changes are not really new. That is, one might say that the past event *x* was always a cause of later event *y*, but that we didn't

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know that until after *y* occurred.[3] This objection is correct but only if one accepts a theory of time where time, like space, is already ontologically all there all at once—past, present, and future—even if epistemologically inaccessible to us. This static theory of time denies the passage of time and the coming-to-be of history. On that theory, my contention that old events come to have new relational properties is indeed mistaken. But on that theory, there can be nothing at all new since everything is already there in the first place. I do assume, then, that time, unlike space, is dynamic. The upshot is that if we see time as dynamic rather than static, and if we see that emergent properties are as real as bare physical properties, we must conclude that the past is not fixed.[4]

However, to return to Roth's claim, there are two problems with his arguing in that way, making non-fixity and non-determinacy depend on the mere fact that it is we who are doing the categorizing. First, it has little to do with historical realism and events as such since it is a somewhat generic anti-realism. If it is the fact that we impose our categorizations on reality that is doing the work here, then one thing to notice is that this is not only true about our knowledge of the way the world was, but also about our knowledge of the way the world is. It applies to all science and all everyday knowledge, to "water boils at 100 degrees Celsius" or "the cat is on the mat," since these also depend on how we perceive, describe, and categorize the world. Now, such anti-realism may well be defensible, and since it encompasses everything, it encompasses historical knowledge too. But then the argument is no longer about events or about the past—it is no longer really a debate about history and what makes its epistemic status distinctive.

The second problem with Roth's claim is that it does not lead to some of the conclusions drawn by opponents of historical realism. For, as we will see below, these opponents go on to conclude that the usual epistemic notions of evidence, confirmation, objectivity, and truth are wrong-headed when it comes to narrativistic historical knowledge. Some or all of these notions might be wrong, but it wouldn't be on the grounds that we are the ones who do the categorizing, since there are many generic anti-realists who do draw such skeptical conclusions that abandon the idea that evidence allows for confirmation and disconfirmation allowing us to distinguish something like truth from something like falsehood.

The foregoing does not mean that historical realism is right or that there are no specifically historical reasons for saying the past, with all its properties, is not completely determinate (i.e., that it is underdetermined) and non-fixed. In fact, the opponents of realism do provide specifically historical reasons for thinking that the past is not determinate or fixed.[5] And I agree with many of these reasons. But the generic argument above is too blunt a tool to do that job

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and to entail some of the conclusions that these opponents of realism endorse. The question is what is involved in our construction of the *past* specifically that differs from our capturings of the *present*. What I want to do now is to start with the commonalities and gradually move to the divergences between constructing past and present.

Constructing

Historical and other types of empirical knowledge have in common that we capture the world in terms of our making. This observation does not strictly entail that there are different possible ways in which we might capture the world, though it seems natural and harmless to assume such possible diversity. This, then, leads to the multiple describability of reality. Scientific realists will sometimes insist that typically scientific concepts are canonical, or privileged, because they conceptualize and describe reality at its proper seams, even if some anti-realists deny this and endorse a pluralist universe (à la William James). In the case of historical knowledge, though, no set of descriptors seems likely to gain such a privileged status, and I doubt that anyone would argue for it. Historical knowledge (excluding studies that focus solely on nature) deals with human actions, and, as is clear, these can be accurately described at various levels of specificity and according to various selected aspects, especially once agents' intentions are factored in. A single action might be described as a movement of the limbs, as the lighting of a cigarette, or as giving away one's position to the enemy troops. So, there is at least this difference between historical and other empirical knowledge. Multiple describability is abundant and undeniable in the case of history without the possibility of appealing to anything like a canonical scheme of individuation.[6]

There are further differences. As has been widely discussed and accepted since Arthur Danto's philosophy of history in the 1960s, we capture past historical events in terms of later events that could not have been anticipated at the time of the occurrence of the original events and states of affairs. Thus, we see a battle as the beginning of a certain kind of war, or an experiment in terms of a certain scientific revolution, and so on. The importance of the insight is that it provides a further, solid reason for saying that the past cannot be reduced to physicalistically construed facts or even to temporally self-contained facts (facts about the past fixed at the time they occurred). Many relevant facts are dynamic rather than static, just in the sense that they depend on later events.[7] Because some facts about the past are dynamic, the set of true facts about the past (now) was and is not fixed by what already happened at the time it happened (at least until the end of time). Facts about the past expand as time unfurls in two ways. First, past states of affairs and events

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come to have relational properties they didn't have before (e.g., an event comes to have the new relational property of having caused a war).[8] Second, past states of affairs can come to be described in ways that were not available at the time they occurred.[9] Here it is not new properties acquired, but old events newly describable (e.g., a person from long ago might be described, *avant la lettre*, as a feminist or as a utilitarian, or a painting as cubist). An opponent of the view might argue that it is anachronistic. It is; but as long as one does not describe the agent's state of mind in terms of the later descriptor, but only the event or behavior or work, this type of anachronism, far from being invalid, can tell us something true and illuminating. This second feature is an instance of multiple describability, as above, but a type that depends specifically on concepts made available by later history. While the physicalistic past is fixed, the historical past, captured in terms of action concepts or in terms of meaning and meaningfulness, is not.

I think it is fair to say that all agree (or should agree) that the retroactive impact of both later events and descriptors distinguishes historical knowledge from non-historical empirical knowledge. If the past consists not only of what can be said about its static facts, but also its dynamic facts, then not everything about the past is fixed at a given point in time, and as time moves forward, there will be "different pasts" to be discovered. Accounts of the past cannot pretend to give us an unadulterated past in terms of the properties it had at its time of occurrence. Thankfully, the past can be recognized as being, and it really *is*, more than it actually was. When past events acquire new relational properties, the past changes. When new descriptors become available, the past does not itself change, though our descriptions do. Both occur. Construction, then, *is* something *we* do, but it amounts to discovering what the past has become (in terms of new dynamic facts about it) or how the past has become newly describable due to new descriptors. These are two different things; still, either way, our reckoning with the past remains a matter of discovery, not invention, as I will argue below.

Interpretation

Historians are faced with choices about how to capture the past, whether to use these or those descriptors, whether to bring out these or those relational properties. At least in this sense, historians interpret the past. If history is fundamentally interpretive, does this mean that historians fall well short of factuality and truth in their broader conclusions, the narratives they assemble, or even at the level of describing particular events? Not necessarily. We need to be wary of a common idea about the relation between interpretation and truth.

Nietzsche famously said that "there are no facts, only interpretations," suggesting that the two are mutually exclusive. Nietzsche had his own ideas

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about perspectival truth that are more valuable than the short statement just quoted. But, still, that opposition between interpretations and facts is often assumed in the way laypeople use those words, as when it is said in conversation, "Well, that's just your interpretation," meaning that it is not a fact. Here, "to interpret" means to guess or to speculate to opine.

Let me suggest a different conception of interpretation as an activity that, when successful, is actually a matter of finding out what is factual, what is true. Following Heidegger, to interpret is to take something as such-and-such rather than as some other such-and-such. According to Heidegger, ordinary people do this all the time, for example, whenever we take that button on the wall to be a light switch rather than the switch for a fan. We also do it when we take someone's words to indicate displeasure rather than approval. Historians do it when they take a piece of evidence as a threat rather than a bluff, or when they take a series of events to amount to a certain trend rather than a different trend or no trend at all. Interpreting, in this sense, is a process that sometimes leads to facts and truths, not something that one falls into when facts are unascertainable or set aside. Indeed, for scientists, historians, and scholars, the whole point of interpreting is to find or approximate the truth.

Just as we should reject the idea that constructions, simply because they are constructions, don't give us reality, we should reject the idea that interpretations, simply because they are interpretations, don't give us what is factual or true.[10]

Perspective

If we construct and interpret the past, we always do so from a particular point in time with a particular set of circumstances that shape what we see, what we believe, what we find salient. So, Paul Roth is right when he writes, as quoted above, that "the notion of a historical truth for events, that is, a perspective on happenings untainted by human perception and categorization, proves to be incoherent." A perspective untainted by our thinking would be no perspective at all, but the absence of perspective, or a God's-eye view, a view from nowhere. So, historical knowledge *is* perspectival. But what exactly follows from the fact that all historical knowledge is perspectival? (Not, I will argue, what Roth concludes.) What is a perspective in the case of history?

What is a perspective? Originally, it is a visual matter, a matter of how things appear from the particular spatial location of the viewer. In the case of knowledge, it is a matter of how things appear given the knowing subject's location or position (or, more broadly, circumstances) in a different sense from the spatial. Moreover, there is no privileged perspective, just different ones. Particularly relevant for historical knowledge is the temporal location

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of the observer, given, as we have seen, that a later temporal location will enable the observer to see new relational properties of earlier events and to see earlier events as describable with a potentially different set of descriptors. Things will appear differently to different observers with different temporal locations and conceptual repertoires.

There are other circumstances about the observer/knower that may shape her perspective. There may be a difference in interest, that is, a difference between knowers in what they find interesting or worthy of attention. There may be differences in background beliefs and background values. Some of these factors may render judgments biased. Which do and which do not render knowledge biased would require a lengthy and detailed analysis. But as I'll argue in the next section, not all factors and aspects of the knower's situation—factors and aspects that make for the perspective and that lead to the way things appear and the knowledge gained from the way phenomena present themselves—make such knowledge biased or illegitimate. Some of these perspectival parameters are compatible with a certain kind of objectivity.

Historical knowledge is perspectival, and inescapably so. Particularities of the knowing subject, specifically the knower's temporal location and conceptual repertoire, will play a role in the knowledge one arrives at. But this is not yet to say that historical knowledge must abandon objectivity and truth.

Positional Objectivity

Typically, we think that a belief is objective if it does not depend on anything perspectival, that is, anything about the particularities of a knowing subject and her circumstances. In this view, objectivity requires invariance of perspective, that is, a view from nowhere. It follows from this invariant conception of objectivity that if perspective is inescapable, then objectivity can never be obtained or consistently aspired to. But this invariant conception of objectivity fails to account for a certain sense of objectivity that can be preserved in the face of variant epistemic conditions.

In the case of visual perspectivity, if the variable spatial location of a perceiver is identified and fixed, then there is an objectivity to the way things appear from that perspective, regardless of who moves into that spatial location. The chair will always look this way to anyone from that location (leaving aside other differences between perceivers). Situation-dependency and objectivity are compatible.[11]

Amartya Sen has defended this kind of idea and coined a useful term for it, namely, "positional objectivity."[12] To use Sen's example, the sun and moon appear to be the same size when seen from the same position. Once you fix the position, anyone will observe the same thing, giving the observation positional objectivity. For Sen, the position-variant parameters that can

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still underwrite positional objectivity are not restricted to spatial location, they can also include different belief systems and different value systems. Unfortunately, Sen does not take into account different temporal or historical positions, though there is reason to think that he wouldn't resist doing so.

As Sen nicely puts it, the notion of positional objectivity is not an invariant view from nowhere but a view from "from a delineated somewhere." Once the relevant positional or parametric variances are factored in, a piece of knowledge can be confirmed by anyone else assuming the same parameters. Assuming a certain temporal location and a certain conceptual repertoire, as I've been calling it, historical narratives, and historical accounts generally, can be confirmed or disconfirmed by others.[13]

The upshot of this entire section is the following claim. We can acknowledge the nonfixity and underdeterminedness of the historical past knowable by us, the relevance of our temporal position and the role of our descriptors, its interpretedness, and its perspectivity and still think that a certain objectivity and confirmability allows us to say that we have in fact made accurate and true assertions about past historical reality. We can even hold on to a notion of correspondence. That is, we can say that true historical knowledge corresponds to the way the past was as soon as certain parameters have been fixed.

CONFIRMABILITY, CORRESPONDENCE, AND TRUTH VERSUS THE NON-DETACHABILITY THESIS

While I think it is of great consequence that historical knowledge is constructed, interpretive, perspectival, and nonfixed and that it abandons the ideal of a single, right account of the past (more on monism and pluralism below), I have also made it clear that we ought not to abandon notions of objectivity, confirmability, correspondence, and truth. There are philosophers of history who marshal many of the same constructivist arguments, ably unpack them, and then go on to reject the view that historical knowledge needs an evidentiary basis in a reality to which knowledge claims can correspond. I have especially in mind here authors such as Paul Roth and Chiel van den Akker, though there have been and are other theorists who might be put in the same camp, such as Leon Goldstein, Hayden White, Louis Mink, and Frank Ankersmit. It seems to me that this kind of position is in danger of embracing a kind of post-truth epistemology and ontology of historical reality that leaves us unable to say that certain narratives are true and accurate, while others falsify the past.

How did theorists of history come to this position? Perhaps one major source is a particular argument to be found in the work of the mid-twentieth-century philosopher of history, Louis O. Mink, an argument heavily leaned on

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by both Roth and van den Akker. Mink deserves much credit for his ideas that stressed the role of narrative, the autonomy of historical knowledge vis-à-vis scientific knowledge, and the wrong-headedness of the covering-law thesis. The argument in question here is referred to by Roth as non-detachability and by van den Akker as ingredient conclusions. For convenience, I'll mainly refer to it under the former name—non-detachability.

What, then, is the non-detachability argument? In a paper from the 1960s, Mink introduces it as follows:

> Despite the fact that an historian may "summarize" conclusions in his final chapter, it seems clear that these are seldom or never detachable conclusions; not merely their validity but their meaning refers backward to the ordering of evidence in the total argument. The significant conclusions, one might say, are ingredients in the argument itself, not merely in the sense that they are scattered through the text but in the sense that they are *represented by the narrative order itself.* As ingredient conclusions they are *exhibited* rather than *demonstrated.*[14]

Mink makes a valid and I think very important point. Historians' conclusions are often, if not always, not so much separate and deduced from their narratives: rather, their conclusions are implicit in the narratives they tell—in fact, the conclusions are what shape the telling of these narratives. What stands in the background is what Mink calls the historian's synoptic judgment. Mink writes: "The distinctive characteristic of historical understanding consists of comprehending a complex event by 'seeing things together' in a total and synoptic judgment which cannot be replaced by any analytic technique."[15]

This point is much the same as one already made by Arthur Danto, namely, that narrative descriptions of events typically already imply an explanation of those events. In Danto's illustration, if, after a car collision, a driver provides a police officer with a detailed narrative of what led up to the crash, it would be surprising if the officer were to ask for an explanation of why the collision occurred. The story's description of what occurred simply *is* the explanation for why it occurred.[16] Still, Mink makes more of it than Danto, or something different from the relation between description and explanation. For Mink, it shows that narratives are not the evidentiary basis for conclusions because the events depicted in a narrative are entangled with, all balled up with, what they purport to demonstrate: non-detachable, so-called ingredient conclusions. As Mink says in the passage above: Ingredient conclusions "are *exhibited* rather than *demonstrated*" (his italics).

Yet this leads to a very real worry. If conclusions are simply exhibited, not demonstrated, can conclusions ever be faulted? Exhibiting seems to assume that one's already got the goods. But can we assume that the conclusion is always established and needs only to be exhibited? In some cases, this might

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make sense, namely, in those cases where the conclusion is something like a lens or a prism with which to see the past. Did the Renaissance occur? Perhaps there's not much point in trying to prove that it did or did not occur. The Renaissance is a lens that allows us to group together diverse past phenomena in a way that seems illuminating. To tell the story of those events is to demonstrate the useful quality of the term. The same would go for the "long nineteenth century." Once again, it's not a matter of proving or disproving its existence, but of exhibiting the events of which the long nineteenth century consists so as to illuminate them in a helpful manner. And by "lens," I mean something very much like what philosophers of history call a colligatory concept, but by calling it a lens I mean to stress the fact that it has not only unified first-order data but that it itself serves to organize and generate, at perhaps multiple levels, further description, interpretation, and narration.[17] This doesn't apply just for periods but for other types of phenomena such as wars, revolutions, voting trends, political ideologies, and so forth.[18] On the other hand, many historical conclusions seem different. They are less like lenses and more like propositions such as the election was or was not stolen, a genocide did or did not occur, a war was or was not avoidable had such and such occurred. Here's another test case: the Cold War. I would be inclined to say that the idea that there was a Cold War is more like a lens than a falsifiable thesis. I would also be inclined to think that once one sees the past through that lens, the claim that Reagan's foreign policy ended the Cold War is more like a falsifiable thesis than like a lens. In these cases, it's not enough to exhibit the conclusions, one may need to see it demonstrated or disproven. The question would seem to be what can be merely exhibited and what needs to be demonstrated. In other words, how far does non-detachability go?

To get clearer on this question, I return to Paul Roth's recent book. Roth takes the non-detachability thesis far and deep into all historical narrative. Roth makes Mink's non-detachability thesis one of three weight-bearing pillars of Roth's own "historical irrealism."[19] For Roth, historians' conclusions about the occurrence of wars, revolutions, genocides, and much more fine-grained events are constructed by historians and exhibited in their narratives. To say they are constructed is not to say that these things are made up by historians but that they depend on historians finding meaning and structure in what is otherwise a meaningless and structureless mass of details.[20]

Historians' conclusions and explanations, then, are ingredient in and non-detachable from the narratives they provide. And this seems to be, in Roth, not something that historians sometimes do or that they always do only with regard to certain kinds of judgments. Rather, this seems to be a general feature of the business of history, of reconstructing the past. What makes non-detachability so pervasive? I think this becomes clear when Roth explains that non-detachability depends on something else. According to Roth,

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> non-standardization underwrites non-detachability at least in the following way. Because there exists no standardized way of demarcating either event types (e.g., revolutions) or specific historical events (e.g., the American Civil War) these become nondetachable from histories that discuss them. . . . No prior theories function to "standardize" such events, and neither do they constitute natural kinds.[21]

Roth notes that this idea that there is no standard or standardizable descriptions of events is already present in Mink.[22] Ingredient conclusions are non-detachable not due to any principle of the selection of events, but because the narrative's events are individuated and described in a manner that is already structured in light of the synoptic judgment and its conclusion. One makes sense of the mass of details about a segment of the past by means of and in service of the conclusion. One can and must do this because there is no standard or canonical way of parsing the stuff of the past and no standard or canonical way of applying historically significant concepts.

It is easy to see that a problem of circularity arises. It seems to suggest that a historian will construe discrete episodes of a given segment of the past as genocidal because one has made the synoptic judgment and wants to document the conclusion that a genocide has taken place. This is not a benign, but a vicious-seeming circularity. But we shouldn't want to rush headlong into such a discrediting conception of the enterprise of doing history. Perhaps nonstandardization is not as pervasive and destructive as it appears to be.

Note that the non-standardization thesis resembles another famous and widely accepted thesis. In the philosophy of science, it is said that "all observation is theory-laden" because what one observes and how one conceptualizes it depends on prior theoretical concepts. Just as theory structures our observation in science, so conclusions and synoptic judgments structure what we take the past events to be. There are no brute facts that can independently justify scientific theories or significant historical conclusions.[23] The thesis of non-standardizability says that all events are laden with synoptic judgments or conclusions because the individuation and description of events depends on the prior conclusion to be arrived at. This parallel is one Roth himself calls attention to. He sees non-standardization as attaching to all empirical knowledge.[24] (As I argued earlier, if the claim is generic, then it shows nothing distinctive about historical knowledge.) Mink, on the other hand, says that history does not have standardized concepts, while science more commonly does.[25] Mink may not be talking so much about the overladenness of concepts as about their not being precisely defined.

Theory and observation in the philosophy of science is too complicated to be treated adequately here. Yet it is worth noticing an important disanalogy. In science, observations are laden by a theory, which is not a singular

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proposition but rather a vast and deep network of assumptions of various sorts. In history, the ideas of non-standardization says that event descriptions are laden only by a synoptic judgment or conclusion that does appear to be something closer to a singular proposition. While it is hard to test a whole theory and even harder to replace one, testing and replacing a conclusion or making concepts precise is more easily imagined and carried out.

It may well be the case that our accounts of the past sometimes do suffer from the problem that our individuation and description of events is carried out by the use of concepts that are vague and that are deployed in a manner that depends on conclusions they are meant to underwrite. Yet there is reason to doubt that the problem is as pervasive and irresolvable as is suggested by Mink and Roth. To return to the case of genocide, that concept is contested and not standardized. Yet if one says what one means by it (whether it must be explicit, systematic, ethnicity based, etc.), and if that working definition is not tendentious, then one can put it to work in isolating and describing events. And the circularity involved is no longer vicious, but benign and transparent. This is not meant to be the last word on the non-standardization thesis. It is merely an attempt to slow down a rush to a judgment as to whether all historical narratives are hopelessly entangled with their ingredient conclusions. The non-standardizability of events is not a magic wand that can allow us to use concepts and say about the past whatever we would like to say.

Nondetachability and non-standardizability would seem to lead to the non-evaluability of narrative and historical conclusions. Yet Roth wants to be able to evaluate narratives as better and worse, or right and wrong. He criticizes Leon Goldstein's position on the grounds that it is unable to do just this.[26] Yet Roth holds that the idea of correspondence is incoherent.[27] How to evaluate whether the narrative has gone wrong? He points to "critically important comparative aspects regarding evaluating competing narrative explanations . . . factors both internal to a narrative explanation (assessing the sequencing) and external to it (comparison with competing narratives, if any) . . . [which] in the end can only be on a case-by-case basis." But aside from internal consistency, it is hard to see how narratives can be comparatively evaluated with regard to truth, accuracy, and completeness without correspondence to the touchstone of a past reality. For the solution, the reader is referred to the final chapter, which itself refers to earlier discussions in the book or else mentions inference to the best explanation without saying by what means "best" can be evaluated in the absence of a past reality to which accounts may or may not correspond.

Let me bring in now another probing and worthwhile opponent of historical realism. Chiel van den Akker's recent book provides a sustained defense of what I would see as a rather extreme historical anti-realism.[28] While there is much to learn from his discussion and illustration of the main claims, my

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remarks here will be rather critical.[29] Recall that Mink reasons that the fact that historical narratives have ingredient conclusions means that conclusions are not demonstrated but "exhibited." "Exhibit" is a novel term in this context, and Mink has little more to say about what it means.[30] Van den Akker quotes Mink's line about exhibiting rather than demonstrating, endorsing it as well as the point about ingredient conclusions.[31] He replaces the term "exhibit" with "exemplify," giving us a better grasp of the idea, one that serves as the fulcrum of van den Akker's philosophy of history. Van den Akker writes early on in his book:

> I take from [Nelson] Goodman the idea that exemplification is a semantic term; a form of reference that runs in the opposite direction from the direction we are accustomed with; it runs from object or behaviour under consideration to symbol rather than from symbol to object or behaviour and I take from Goodman the idea that the exemplifying object only exemplifies some but not all of its properties [like a tailor's swatch of fabric, van den Akker adds in a footnote]. I argue that the past under consideration in some narrative exemplifies the historical thesis expressed by that narrative as a result of being historically understood.[32]

This makes Mink's exhibiting much clearer. Events in a narrative do not provide evidence for a historical conclusion or, as van den Akker calls it, a historical thesis. Rather, events in a narrative exemplify that thesis. Van den Akker provides numerous well-considered illustrations of exemplification in history, one of them being the account of the early modern European cultural renaissance, commonly referred to as simply the Renaissance.

I've already argued that this seems to be a very good account of some of what historians claim. One doesn't prove the existence of the Renaissance or the long nineteenth century; rather the Renaissance or the long nineteenth century is exemplified by the events, whereby we come to understand the events in a new way that sheds light on them. Those theses are lenses or prisms for understanding. Exemplifying or exhibiting is what we do when we want to say "Here's a good lens through which to see patterns out there. And here is what we see through that lens." (I'm not convinced that lens or prism is the best metaphor, but I'm at a loss for a better one.)

Yet, as I argued before, this does not seem to be the right way to model many of the claims that historians make. Historians might put forward the thesis that the 2020 U.S. presidential election was fraudulent. They will provide a narrative or argument to make good on that thesis and the events will or will not exemplify that thesis. But the thesis is false. The narrative is flawed because it is highly selective and/or factually flawed, as determined by an overwhelming amount of contemporary evidence. The same would go for any other number of historical theses and their narratives, if not most. They

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are more like propositional claims that can be confirmed or disconfirmed rather than like lenses that allow us to find meaning and order in diverse phenomena. One might falsely assert that slavery in the antebellum U.S. South was benign and slave owners mild and kind in their treatment of slaves. Certainly, there were events that exemplify this thesis. But the thesis can be easily defeated by the abundance of countervailing evidence. The narrative and thesis *misrepresent* the way things were.

What about the possibility of misrepresentation? Van den Akker devotes the fourth chapter of his book to representation and how best to make sense of it. He summarizes his views on it in the following passage: "If some narrative represents the past, then this narrative (i) stands for it, (ii) is not mistaken for the past reality it represents, (iii) expresses a thesis about the past, and (iv), the past as represented exemplifies the thesis."[33] What is left out of this picture is the possibility of misrepresentation. A narrative may purport to represent the past but do a poor job of it by cherry-picking or misdescribing events. While the past events may exemplify the thesis, the thesis may fail to represent the past events, all things considered. Exemplification concerns the relation between the narrative and the thesis. But the problem of representation concerns the relation between, on the one hand, the narrative and its ingredient thesis and, on the other hand, something outside of both, namely, past reality. Van den Akker insists on not conflating a narrative with the past reality it represents, but the past reality plays no further role in exemplification. It no longer serves as a check on what we say. It remains in the background, inertly, whereby representation is replaced by exemplification of the thesis by the narrative.

The upshot of replacing representation and the possibility of misrepresentation by exemplification is made explicit by van den Akker in the following passage where he distinguishes a historical thesis from a scientific theory:

> But narratives are no theories. . . . The relation they have to the evidence is different. A theory treats what exists as an instance of the theory and uses evidence of what exists to validate the theory. The evidence either confirms or disconfirms the particular theory or hypothesis. This is not how evidence relates to historical theses. A central though counterintuitive claim of this book . . . is that a historical thesis cannot be confirmed or disconfirmed since there is not empirical evidence for or against it.[34]

No possibility for a historical thesis to be disconfirmed![35] This may work for what I've called lenses, but what about claims such as that a valid election was fraudulent, or slavery was benign? Van den Akker goes on to say that theses are not true or false, but rather merely taken to be true if they serve to illuminate the past. A thesis "can be taken to be true in the sense that it is our

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best guide to the past" since there are "rational criteria such as consistency and scope that enable us to evaluate the merits and plausibility of historical theses."[36] Yet note that there is no longer the rational criterion beyond internal consistency and comprehensiveness, of anything like truth or accuracy. One can say that a thesis is inconsistent or narrow but not that it is false.

In both Roth and van den Akker, then, we find the view that because we cannot ever capture the past outside of a constructed narrative, there is no past reality to check our narratives and our historical theses against. And with that any notion of correspondence and confirmability gets tossed out.[37] To my mind, this is a mistake. To put it simply, my solution can be put in this way. Just because there is no pictorial representation of a chair that is beyond perspective does not mean that we cannot test the accuracy (truth or veridicality) of the representation against a reality that presents itself from that perspective. In the case of history, we can test the accuracy and truth of narratives and theses against past reality as it presents itself to us within the parameters of a temporal location, a set of sufficiently well-defined concepts or descriptors and perhaps even a certain set of well-defined background beliefs and values. This will sound pretty commonsensical, at least it sounds that way to me. True, we cannot speak of a correspondence between what we assert about the past and the way things were totally independent of our interpretations and constructions. Yet once we identify the parameters of our perspectival assertions, temporal location (and the new relational properties past events come to have), new concepts, and descriptors, then we can say that past reality does or does not correspond to what we say about it. Another thing that we will need to do is to specify how we use terms. For example, the term genocide may not be standardizable to the satisfaction of all. But we can at least say how we are using the term and then go about to see whether a genocide, in that sense of the term, did or did not occur. But in the need to define one's key concepts, history is not different from other scientific disciplines.[38] Conclusions can be tested by saying whether past reality was such and such when observed from a particular position and operationalizing concepts in this or that way.

Now, I did say that "lenses" are not like this. Lenses are not shown to be true or false, though it is required that the data a lens organizes conform to, instantiate, or *exemplify* the lens. They are simply adopted, or not. There remains more to be said about when a historical thesis is a lens and when it is a falsifiable proposition. There may be cases when it is hard to say whether a historical thesis is a lens or a falsifiable proposition. There may well be general criteria for deciding the matter, but applying them might always require case-by-case treatment. I'll not try here to begin to probe that question.

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PLURALISM AND NON-AGGREGATIVITY

I've defended a view of historical knowledge that is both realist in its defense of the truth-functionality of historical knowledge but at the same time recognizes a certain lack of determinacy and fixity about the knowable past. The knowable past is not fully determinate, just in the sense that there is no one right way to describe it and that the set of possible true descriptions of it is inexhaustible. And the knowable past is not fixed, just in the limited sense that the past can take on new relational (emergent) properties as its future unfolds. Yet my view is realist in that once the parameters have been identified and sufficiently well defined, it should be possible to evaluate historical theses, narratives, and items within these narratives in the light of the usual evidence historians appeal to in order to decide whether their claims are sufficiently well-supported to be deemed true. Now, I have said that all of this entails a certain kind of *pluralism* in that it amounts to denial that there is a single story that we can tell about a fixed and determinate past. This is pluralism that does not entail an "anything goes" relativism according to which all claims about the past are equally true for the reasons mentioned above—recall positional or parametric objectivity and the intersubjective confirmability it accommodates.

But does this position really amount to pluralism? Let me introduce here a distinction between a weak and a strong pluralism. Weak pluralism says that our accounts of the past are diverse and open-ended to the point of inexhaustibility. My position is certainly pluralist in at least this sense. But there is a strong pluralism, which I would also subscribe to, which says that our accounts of the past are also non-convergent and non-combinable. There is, though, a problem in embracing strong pluralism. It can be put in the form of the following dilemma. Either diverse knowledge-claims are logically compatible, in which case they can, it would seem, be combined into one mega-account of the past, or they are not logically compatible, in which case they cannot all be true without generating a logical contradiction and running afoul of the law of non-contradiction. The second horn of the dilemma is obviously unattractive. To illustrate the first horn, consider our knowledge of Germany during the interwar period: there is its politics, its culture, its sciences, its sports, the life expectancy and medical health of its residents. But these can all be considered part of one big single story of that segment of history. And in that case, the view is not truly pluralist.

Mink and Roth embrace what I have called a strong pluralism. In fact, Roth makes what he calls the thesis of non-aggregativity one of the three pillars of his theory (alongside non-detachability and non-standardization). Again,

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Roth credits Mink with the insight. So, let us see how his thinking goes in this regard.

Mink first mentions it, as far as I can tell, in his essay from 1972 called "On the Writing and Rewriting of History," while commenting on the complicated nature of historical facts, where he acknowledges "the indefinite number of varieties of different descriptions of an event, which do not aggregate to a 'complete' description."[39] We see that for Mink it is the multiple describability of events that entails non-aggregativity, but he does not elaborate. In his 1978 essay "Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument," however, he returns to this point. I quote at length:

> Can two narratives be combined (under suitable restrictions on chronology and coincidence of characters and events) to form a single more complex narrative? . . . Historical narratives *should* aggregate; insofar as they make truth-claims about a selected segment of past actuality, they must be compatible with and complement other narratives which overlap or are continuous with them. . . . Yet while historical narratives ought to aggregate into more comprehensive narratives, or give way to rival narratives which will so aggregate, in fact they do not. . . . Narrative histories *would* combine into more comprehensive wholes to the extent that they achieve complete objectivity; unfortunately, however, historians have been prone to introduce their individual idiosyncrasies and values both in the selection and in the combination of facts. . . . My purpose is not to decide whether historical objectivity is possible; it is rather to point out that the claim that it is clearly presupposes what I have called the idea of Universal History—that past actuality is an untold story and that there is a right way to tell it even though only in part."[40]

Clearly, then, Mink thinks that not all of our accounts of the past can be aggregated. His reason is that there is no "Universal History," no one right to way to narrate the past. But the lack of a single right way to narrate does not yet explain why the many ways of narrating the past cannot be aggregated. Indeed, I think it is not altogether clear what "aggregation" means here. Does the inability to aggregate mean not being able to add items serially to one another, resulting in something like a list of items that stand in a relation of a non-contradictory conjunction (a + b + c . . . , where each item is logically compatible with the other)? Or does non-aggregativity mean that while one can list them one after another, they cannot be combined, analogous to how water and oil can coexist in one container but do not mix?

I think that the right answer must be something like this: Historians' diverse accounts may always be capable of being added to one another (assuming they are not logically incompatible), giving us a laundry list of what can truly be said about a certain segment of past history, but they do not necessarily allow for integration into a single unified narrative (or other

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account) that genuinely coheres.[41] This is what makes for pluralism. But what is it that prevents such integration into a single unified narrative, if it is not logical incompatibility? What exactly does it mean to declare that two propositions or sets of propositions are, say, compatible and logically consistent with one another, but that they resist being brought together into a coherent larger set of propositions?

Let me suggest that we leave behind logical incompatibility and that we look to a different way in which integration is blocked, what I will call *non-co-tenability*. Two propositions *p* and *q* are non-co-tenable "not as a matter of whether the truth of each excludes the other, but as a matter of whether someone who believes one can (coherently) simultaneously believe the other."[42] In this case, they are compossible but not co-tenable. And, in fact, one cannot believe them both simultaneously because one cannot think them both simultaneously. Here one might think of the famous duck-rabbit drawing. For Wittgenstein, the point is that we can see the drawing as either, showing that we "see as." For me, the point is rather that we cannot see it as both at the same time: duck and rabbit are non-co-tenable. I would suggest here that some historical narratives and accounts are non-co-tenable in the same sense. But why is that? I think it is *not* due to the earlier point about the coming into being of new relational properties. Rather they are non-co-tenable because they are not simultaneously thinkable, and they are not simultaneously thinkable because they individuate and describe the same things with very different descriptors and lenses that do not allow for assimilation into a unified narrative.[43] Ultimately, then, a strong pluralism depends on non-unifiability, which depends on non-co-tenability, which depends on multiple describability.

CONCLUSION

I have moved far away from the kind of historical realism that sees the past as fixed in all its properties and as fully determinate in the ways that it must be described. Retroactive determination of new relational properties, on the one hand, and multiple describability, on the other, make such a view unacceptable. Yet I have tried to defend a picture of historical knowledge that unites the following features. First, historical knowledge is perspectival, constructed, and interpreted. Second, historical knowledge can be tested to see whether it corresponds or conforms with what actually occurred (relative to epistemic parameters). Evidence, confirmation, and disconfirmation are indispensable. Third, historical knowledge is pluralistic. It cannot be unified into one coherent account.

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NOTES

1. Roth, "Truth in Interpretation," 185. For a similar formulation in his more recent book, see Roth, *Philosophical Structure*, 30: "Events simpliciter cannot be shown to exist. . . . Events exist only by proxy."

2. By "capture" I mean something like accurately represent. We capture the world in words or images as when photographs (or paintings) capture a person or object out in the world.

3. Thanks to Branko Mitrović for this objection.

4. One might object here that my view would mean that the past is constantly changing—surely a reductio! Indeed, my view *is* that the past is constantly changing, but only in (many of its) emergent, relational properties. Most of these changes are trivial ("Cambridge") changes that are and should go unnoticed, but some of the changes are of real consequence.

5. Roth says he is an irrealist rather than an anti-realist since he takes anti-realists, such as Dummett, to still buy into the picture of a single, determinate past. See Roth, *Philosophical Structure*, xiv, 48f., 64.

6. This is not to say that there is no multiple describability in the empirical sciences. For example, gold can be identified as "the chemical element whose atomic number is 79" or "the only metal that melts at 1064.18 °C." Thanks to Branko Mitrović for pointing this out. But the multiple describability of actions and events goes far beyond the alternatives of denotatively equivalent referring expressions. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that the pervasive multiple describability I have in mind is shared by human sciences such as anthropology, psychology, etc. Thanks to Tor Egil Førland for that observation.

7. I take the terminology of static and dynamic facts from Currie and Swaim, "Past Facts."

8. For a defense of the view that relational properties are real and not to be dismissed as mere "Cambridge" properties, see Weberman, "Cambridge Changes."

9. Since Danto, philosophers of history have called attention to the new concepts made available by history or historians for describing earlier events. The existence of new *properties* of older phenomena is less well discussed. See Weberman, "Nonfixity."

10. For more on interpretation in this context, see Weberman, "Interpretation."

11. On the kind of objectivity compatible with visual perspective, see Schellenberg, "Situation-Dependency," 61f.: "An object is presented in different ways to different locations in a world and it is an objective mind-independent feature of the object that it is so presented. Since situation-dependent spatial properties are location-relative properties rather than perceiver-relative properties, any perceiver occupying the same location is, *ceteris paribus*, presented with the very same situation-dependent spatial properties."

12. Sen, "Positional Objectivity."

13. On non-absolute objectivity, see also Førland, *Values, Objectivity, and Explanation*, ch. 4.

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14. Mink, *Historical Understanding*, 79. See also an unpublished paper by Mink, quoted in the editors' introduction to Mink, *Historical Understanding*, 12, where Mink writes: "So if a historian were asked about his propositional conclusions, he might properly reply in the manner of the composer who when asked what the sonata he had just played 'meant,' sat down and played it through again."

15. Mink, *Historical Understanding*, 80.

16. See Danto, *Narration*, 202: "Were the officer to persist, after this, in saying that he knows what happened, but still wants an explanation, we should, I think, be puzzled. We could have given a more detailed account, but hardly a clearer one; and it is difficult to think of any further detail which would make it any clearer why the accident took place. What more could he want?" Danto's point is about the implicit explanatory character of all descriptive narrative, but it is not the final word of what we want from explanations. The police officer will need to know much more before arriving at a satisfactory explanation. On explanation in this regard, see Førland, *Values, Objectivity, and Explanation*, ch. 5.

17. For a fine discussion of colligatory concepts, see Kuukkanen, *Post-Narrativist Philosophy*, ch. 6, where Kuukkanen also holds that colligatory concepts cannot be justified in the sense of being shown to be literally true.

18. What I refer to as a "lens" aligns with Mink's comment in *Historical Understanding*, 74, that many historical hypotheses (Mink's example here is Frederick Jackson Turner's famous frontier hypothesis) are "*suggestively* rather than *deductively* fertile . . . not a tentative law but a rule for asking questions, a rule for delimiting the scope of inquiry, and a rule for determining the relevance of evidence." In other words, they are heuristic devices rather than theses that can be confirmed and disconfirmed. Note that Mink says that this is true of some historical theses, not all.

19. Roth, *Philosophical Structur*e, 14. Next to non-detachability, the other two pillars are nonstandardization and nonaggregativity. Roth deserves real credit for bringing these three theses to the fore. As for "historical irrealism," Roth sees it as different from Dummett's and other versions of anti-realism in that it rejects the assumption that there is a single, determinate, fixed past that could be captured if it were not, as a matter of fact, impossible. While his attributing this view to Dummett may be justified, it seems to me that other anti-realists would agree with Roth in rejecting that assumption, and so Roth's irrealism may not be so different from other anti-realisms.

20. Roth, *Philosophical Structure*, 67.

21. Ibid., 14.

22. Mink, *Historical Understanding*, 139, 200f.

23. The thesis of the theory-ladenness of observation in the sciences is different from the more controversial thesis of the cognitive penetrability of sense perception since the former, though not the latter, refers to the nature of linguistically articulated knowledge claims. Most philosophers of science today regard the empirical and theoretical as intertwined.

24. See Roth, *Philosophical Structure*, 57: "This point applies quite generally. What is the case for historical knowing as a type of constituting extends to all forms of knowledge. What counts as evidence, and for what it counts, turns out to be a product of practices of inquiry as informed by the use of predicates (past or present)."

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25. Mink, *Historical Understanding*, 200.

26. See Roth, *Philosophical Structure*, 53f.: "If the *activity* of historical knowing constitutes the very objects of historical knowledge independently of perception, then Goldstein leaves unclear just how on his account, any activity of historical knowing *could fail* to produce knowledge. Since Goldstein's antirealist constitutes the past, how can there be any error in representation? There seems no way for a historian to go wrong."

27. Roth, *Philosophical Structure*, 24ff.

28. Van den Akker, *Exemplifying Past.*

29. For a more comprehensive and concurring discussion, see Weberman, *Review*.

30. Mink's editors point out that Mink uses the term in aesthetics when he says that "a work of art is not a symptom of emotion but a symbol of it . . . *exhibits* what it symbolizes." Artworks do not refer to or symptomize emotion by giving us presentational symbols rather than being symptoms of those emotions. Mink, *Historical Understanding*, 17.

31. Van den Akker, *Exemplifying Past*, 111f.

32. Ibid., 18f.

33. Ibid., 96.

34. Ibid., 17f.

35. In correspondence with Van den Akker, he has written to me: "One of the crucial distinctions I make is between statements on the past that can be confirmed or disconfirmed and historical theses which can neither be confirmed nor disconfirmed. It might well be that some statements in some narrative turn out to be false. I am interested in narrative theses, and how they cannot be confirmed or disconfirmed by the evidence but are exemplified or not. For instance, there is no evidence that confirms or disconfirms that the Brillo Box ended art, that Petrarch is the first modern man, or that Watteau was a proto-Enlightenment painter." (Email correspondence, June 28, 2021).

36. Van den Akker, *Exemplifying Past*, 18.

37. See Roth, *Philosophical Structure*, 24ff., 30, on rejecting the idea of correspondence.

38. Ankersmit agrees with Roth that standardization is not possible. If they mean that it is not possible to reach consensus on contested concepts, they are right. But this should not mean that pinning down concepts for particular investigations is impossible. This surely goes a long way to making the truths amenable to evaluation. See Ankersmit, "Narrativist Revival?"

39. Mink, *Historical Understanding*, 94.

40. Ibid., 195f. In a later essay, Mink repeats the claim that historians' accounts do not "aggregate" but here attributes the idea to Collingwood's work on the logic of question and answer. Mink's analysis of non-aggregativity is brief, but he adds that it involves i) the impossibility of unification under a single *explanatory* rubric (Mink, *Historical Understanding*, 67, my italics) and ii) the incommensurability of narratives and their respective concepts.

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41. Roth suggests as much when he writes: "Non-aggregativity adds that these histories cannot therefore be expected to cohere, to theoretically aggregate into one seamless account of The Past." Roth, *Philosophical Structure*, 15.

42. See Ludwig, "Sources of Relativism," 182, from whom I take both the term and the idea behind it. Ludwig's idea takes the term from Rovane, *Metaphysics and Ethics*, but develops it beyond what Rovane says.

43. See Currie and Swaim, "Past Facts," 184. While Currie and Swaim deny that non-aggregativity entails a strong irrealism or anti-realism (as do I), they accept that historical knowledge is sometimes non-aggregative and explain it similarly in what they call "sensitivity to description."

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PART III

Political Implications

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Chapter 7

Is Historical Anti-realism (Ever) Politically Progressive?

Ian Verstegen

It is the nature of philosophy that there will always be both historical realists and anti-realists.[1] Yet when so much history "does its job," that is, allows us to produce workable knowledge of the nature, chronology, and significance of past events, it is remarkable how many anti-realists there are in philosophy of history and how persistent relativism has been.

As in the case of the 1930s and early 1940s, there is today a strong sense that relativism is merely an epistemological stance toward the world that is based on a healthy skepticism about historical truth claims. However, as I argued in a study of Maurice Mandelbaum—one of the period's most sophisticated and staunch realists—epistemic arguments result in ontological commitments.[2] At a certain point, epistemological skepticism leads to ontological anti-realism, because conditions of knowledge are foreclosed so severely that no kind of realism could be possible. In the cases studied by Mandelbaum, epistemological skeptics failed to distinguish between *objectivism* and *realism* and attempted in vain to embrace relativism without its self-defeating consequences and tacit, parasitic reliance on realism.

The inability of twentieth-century writers to achieve this viewpoint is due to the unavailability of realism for much of the period, occluded by strands of positivism, Ordinary Language philosophy (Gilbert Ryle, J. L. Austin, Paul Grice), and poststructuralism. Philosophically put, vast progress is made by observing Roy Bhaskar's distinction between the intransitive historical object and our transitive account of it, which is fallible. This distinction effectively articulates Mandelbaum's complaint by insisting that we separate the ontological (intransitive) and epistemic (transitive) realms. As a result, we are able to distinguish, in a way ignored by many philosophers, between "epistemic

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relativism" and "judgmental relativism," the former descriptive and the latter substantive.[3] Epistemic relativism is a fact; judgmental relativism is a claim about reality and the incommensurability of its descriptions.

Still, it is perhaps useful to take yet another tack toward reconsidering why anti-realism has been so persistent in the theory of historiography. One reason is undoubtedly that its defenders think, in some way, that anti-realism is politically "progressive." Although commonplace today, in a larger span of time such a position is quite strange. After all, progressives, laborites, and socialists in the first part of the twentieth century in Europe and America relied on the assessment of *real* characteristics of the social fabric in order to promote their policy remedies. At some point, what is real was questioned, and somehow it became possible to view certain efforts as progressive even when they in fact undercut progressive values.

This story passes through the history of poststructuralist and postmodernist thinking and their entrenchment in Anglo-American academia. What makes things stranger, however, is a paradox: members of the second wave of anti-realism like Hayden White (born in 1928) vividly experienced the backlash to anti-realism and relativism after the totalitarian atrocities of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. After such a chastening, how could one once again promote such a theory with the contemporary ethical challenges of Vietnam, the Cold War, and postcolonial independence, as well as the continued challenge of coming to terms with the Holocaust? Postmodernism in general had a strong element of "endism," the idea that some new historical stasis had been reached. Yet in retrospect that, of course, is highly suspect in that it was merely the arrival of globalized late capitalism. Anti-realism in this case *presumed* political stability rather than *enabled* it.

Although Marxist thinking has often been associated with historical relativism—for example in the imputation of false consciousness on others, or the idea of conceptual relativism induced by the base onto the superstructure, and so on—this chapter is based in the narrow Marxist claims of materialist explanation. In this kind of reduction to practice, the explanatory theory of Marxism more narrowly conceived (not in the teleology of the Second International) presumes realism.[4] As a theoretical practice based on practical intervention in society, it is useful for checking the claims of anti-realist theory.

After reviewing the postwar reckoning of relativism and anti-realism as the necessary background for the current discussion, I move on to the first strains of narrative and rhetorical relativism and anti-realism in the 1960s based largely on structuralism and semiotics. Next, I explore the connected but not always explicitly related end of Marxism and Communism as master figures and narratives, respectively, of left thinking, with the rise of anti-realism in historiography. From there, the emergence of anti-realism as a simple virtue

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on its own can be made clear. The chapter ends with a critique, showing how anti-realism tends to accept a tacit realism, and emphasizing the need to observe the distinction between referentially detached reality from conceptual schemes. The idea of a politically progressive historical anti-realism is shown to be a fallacy. Throughout the chapter, examples will be drawn from both general philosophy of history and the theory of art history—my home discipline.

WHAT DOES "PROGRESSIVE" MEAN?

When a philosopher makes a theoretical commitment or affirms a position, ideally she does so on strictly philosophical grounds. Nevertheless, philosophical viewpoints often lead to real-life consequences that the same writer might approve of or appreciate. If one believes that historical realism locks one into some sort of rigid worldview, where immanent contents directly ascribe values, she might believe that the opposite would be less politically oppressive, or allow subjects to enjoy more freedom. For a long time, with the politicization of epistemology since the 1960s, it has often been tacitly presumed that historical relativism or constructivism is somehow more politically democratic or tolerant.[5]

The values of historical scholarship today are largely those of the academy, with a latent, left bent. History has in general evolved for a long time toward making its interests more topical, and it has been a while since it exclusively aimed to tell us, with Ranke, "how it really happened." Rather, historians focus on certain new subjects, or provide a new view of a familiar subject, in order to vaguely extend our knowledge and understanding ("representation") of subaltern subjects. This historiographic goal reflects the values of parliamentary and liberal democracy to extend rights to more and more individuals as an end in itself. (Writing from an American perspective, I have preserved the classic meaning of the term "liberal/liberalism" as a political philosophy of freedom, including free trade, and in this sense it is close to libertarianism. In order to avoid undue confusion, I will use "progressive" and "Labor" to suggest the recent American meaning of "liberal/liberalism.")

Indeed, this "end in itself" is the proper subject of this chapter because what is to be explained is the historical point at which outlining the construction or relativity of other viewpoints—their *irreality*—is the *sufficient purpose of scholarship*. The ideological basis of this kind of historical orientation is scarcely discussed, but it is liberal through and through. Its values seem rooted in the Cold War and the chaste response to the horrors of Hitler and Stalin. The fundamental response to these horrors has been called the "liberalism of fear"—the avoidance of "cruelty and the fear it inspires."[6] It would

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not be perverse to trace this lineage that enters postmodernism with Richard Rorty's "ironic liberalism," a postmodernist radicalization of classic liberalism based on a deflation of its core "positive" values in a spirit of irony.[7] Such ideas become entrenched in postmodernist thought, for example in Stephen White's "weak ontology," crafted to blunt opponents' fundamentalist claims by softening one's own.[8] In this genealogy of thought, liberalism presumes substantial brakes on realism and what one can grant reality to.

The sufficiency of critique as a form of politics that we have inherited today was created to move away from the embrace of any ideology of utopia or liberation. From a liberal point of view, any deviation from a fear-based minimalism is suspicious. Such chastity has been repeatedly criticized of late, however, because of its inability to tell a story, locate human feeling, or motivate groups for much needed political ends (humane pay, socialized health care, climate intervention, peace). Because textual historical critique is a rather elite exercise, using sophisticated rhetorical or semiotic tools, it has not been able to spur any kind of majoritarian politics with any chance to change things.

Today, one can challenge "democracy," "anti-racism," or "anti-misogyny" as political goals for their vagueness.[9] Liberty, freedom, diversity, and representation can be contrasted to old, universalistic values like economic equality, emancipation, or better flourishing, living a good life, or *eudaimonia*.[10] A generally relativist point of view that swaddles the historiographic enterprise in critique similarly has a rather unclear political goal. The counterpart to social equality in historiography would perhaps be Truth, the confident espousal of deeper truths about the world and human action rather than valorizing different truths of many people.

Contrary to popular accounts by right-wing reactionaries who trace all contemporary progressive policies to a vague "Marxism," the general ethos of contemporary academic left historiography is not Marxist at all but liberal, and it espouses liberal values in its histories. Whereas the critical attitude of historiography used to be connected in many cases to the traditional aim of demystification toward the attainment of a roughly larger goal of enlightenment (and emancipation), that goal was eventually deemed unattainable or undesirable, yet the critical attitude remained. Just as with Cold War liberals who challenged anything overly affirmative and therefore suggestive of totalitarianism, the very act of not asserting anything was enough because ideologies and speculative narratives were the enemy. Thus, when historiography is critical, and in some guises relativist, it is content to affirm the liberal values of preserving negative liberties.

Today, this notion of "progressive" history needs to be rethought, alongside our more overtly political conceptions, and begs the question of what exactly progress is. If to be progressive is to see marginal progress within the narrow

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bounds of democracy, it must be understood to be liberal. What does it mean for an anti-realist account of history—denying the reality of an event, or the coherence of a period term like "the Renaissance"—to claim that such indeterminism is "progressive?"[11] The political gain must be made explicit. As I believe we find out quickly, it is not a clear-cut win for any social organization. Indeed, to think in terms of emancipation, it is not clear that skepticism in regard to historical texts is what is called for. I think we instead can see that the traditional aim of history, the goal of representing past events, should be accomplished as carefully and judiciously as possible to pass on to larger social aims that actually affect the material conditions of people rather than the mentalities of readers.

As we shall see, the challenge to let historiography do its work has been expressed at different times in the past. In addressing our current conundrum, it is best to return to the 1930s, when the challenges of historical relativism and anti-realism threw up clear-cut challenges to the accurate assessment of global crisis, and produced, at least for a time, rules of thumb regarding historical practice that were observed.

THE POSTWAR RECKONING

One could say that the "idiographic" (rather than nomothetic) orientation of history, or its usage of "understanding" (*Verstehen*) rather than "explanation" (*Erklären*), leaves it hostile to generalization as a rule. While historians might resist the abstractions of the sociologist, they are all generally committed to capturing and transmitting the unique, contingent historical event. All, that is, accept some form of empirical realism regarding the facts of history. The main question has been how to *theorize* our stance toward that reality, whether deeper investigation reinforces the empirical truth or reveals intractable aporia relating to the construction of historical theories and their elaboration.

In the alternation between realist and relativist beliefs toward historiography, one could perhaps make the argument that in historiography, writers are more amenable to realism and objectivism when there is a crisis, as for instance our contemporary (merely apparent) "realist" revival accompanying widespread economic inequity and environmental collapse. The need to come to terms accurately with the world in order to face challenges requires realism. Conversely, to return to the 1930s, when relativism and anti-realism flourished, one might say that writers sought to take into account human interest, but some of their arguments were incautiously relativist, not anticipating some of the "self-excepting" consequences of their pronouncements.[12]

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No shame, one might think, for these thinkers were engaging in such questions at a large scale for the first time in history.

Relativism and anti-objectivism were represented by many German thinkers—among them Wilhelm Dilthey and Karl Mannheim—and Americans like Charles Beard and Carl Becker.[13] Also influential was the English translation of the works of Benedetto Croce.[14] In general, they argued that historical conclusions were made problematic by various frames of reference, but especially subjective ones: personal interests, attitudes, and biases. In 1936, Mandelbaum put forward the claim that these thinkers were self-defeating.[15] Their theoretical pronouncements contradicted their actual practice as historians.

It is useful to point out that Mandelbaum's 1936 dissertation, published in 1938 as *The Problem of Historical Knowledge*, preceded the worst excesses of both Hitler and Stalin.[16] It was a principled critique not enflamed by the full recognition of the horrors of the Second World War and the Holocaust and the heightened hysteria of the Cold War. Peter Novick's survey of the American historical profession, *That Noble Dream*, focused on the ideological basis for the critique of relativism, connecting it strongly to postwar ideology and the promotion of American expansion.[17] Because some of the relativist theoreticians had been even-handed in dealing with Nazi Germany or later the Soviet Union, their inability to clarify the moral error of totalitarianism was considered damning, leading to a strong affirmation of "objectivity."

There are actually two issues here. The first issue is whether one assigned moral valences to accounts of Hitler, Stalin, or whomever. There is a difference between telling a story objectively and presenting two sides as equivalent. The former presentation seeks to be plain about what happened, perhaps with a presumption of moral superiority of one actor over another, while the second would deny that problem of morality, leaving the reader with no ethical compass. The second issue is when historians subverted the validity of their own results. Novick argues that in many cases critics conflated relativism with political neutrality. In that case, I would agree with Novick that many of those criticized by postwar writers were targeted inappropriately.

Yet that does not address the legitimate epistemological problem of objectivism and relativism and the closely attendant problem of realism and anti-realism. If, as Novick documented, the primary targets of postwar critics were Charles Beard, Carl Becker, and Benedetto Croce, I would argue that each of these figures failed in both senses.[18] That is, their works—due to convictions (for example Beard's isolationism)—were not deemed appropriate in the postwar period, but their anti-realism was also inappropriate as such. By arguing that facts are not determining and that history is a construction of historical factors, their histories were *also* unusable for anti-totalitarian

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purposes, because they were self-defeating. This possibility is muffled by Novick's framework.

In art history, the reaction against relativism was undertaken especially by E. H. Gombrich, who, strongly influenced by his friend Karl Popper's critique of "historicism,"[19] sought to attack those thinkers that he presumed to be too relativist, including Alois Riegl, Hans Sedlmayr, and others.[20] In a similar manner, Gombrich critiqued the content of historicist theories—their tendency to think in terms of loose totalizing metaphors and the like—as well as the rational problem of creating secure knowledge when knowledge is considered as only meaningful according to a developmental scheme in the vein of Hegel or Marx.

There is no doubt that many criticisms of relativism overshot their mark, were too stringent as in the case of Popper, or themselves were ideological (as in the case of the Cold Warriors). But this does not discount realism; instead, it merely indicts beliefs often associated with it. Certainly, Mandelbaum evinces a measured approach.[21] His intelligible holism allowed for many of the concerns of more "speculative" historians without going overboard. As noted, contemporary authors smitten by Logical Positivism, Ordinary Language, and continental Idealism had trouble cleaving apart the relativism of knowledge from the reality of the historical subject. Mandelbaum, trained in realism by Marshall Urban, had access to a classical realist understanding of the world and was saved from the errors of the mid-twentieth century.

In any case, under the warning of Mandelbaum and others, the consequences of affirming the relativity of history were shown to be perilous by undermining any grounds for deciding truth. Once the apparently epistemic claim became an ontological claim about reality itself, a real issue was exposed: not just *knowledge* of history but the *being* of history itself was in question. Henceforth, there was a great caution over the imputation of bias to a historian (along with repression in a Freudian vein, or "false consciousness" in a Marxian vein) because it had been shown that the imputation must return reflexively to the speaker. Their own biases would be under scrutiny as well. They would be examples of the "self-excepting fallacy," and because that created a conundrum (and performative contradiction), it was better—so it was concluded—to abandon such blanket sources of bias as explanations of the genesis of historical viewpoints.

For a time, the coincidence of realism and the methodological consistency demanded by historical writing were well observed. Writing in 1955, Mandelbaum noted that relativism still had a charm among practicing historians, but while some older philosophers (Croce, Collingwood, Cassirer, and Dewey) continued to draw out the relativist implications of their thought, "those who have recently written on the question seem far less impressed

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by the philosophic arguments for the relativity of historical knowledge than were philosophers of the last generation."[22] This was the situation well into the 1960s.

THE RETURN OF HISTORIOGRAPHIC RELATIVISM

Given Mandelbaum's statement, it is perhaps not an exaggeration to follow Novick, who notes that by the mid-1960s "the article on cultural relativism in the International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences treated it as anachronistic."[23] While a dialectical account of the rise of relativism might suggest that in times of anti-relativist hegemony it would appear again, this is not satisfactory as an explanation. It is to ignore the fact that in the philosophy of history, anti-relativism had remained a continuous option throughout this period. Also, it is misleading to suggest that the importance of Carl Hempel's discussion of historical explanation via the covering-law model signifies the domination of realism in the 1950s and 1960s because Hempel and his followers were positivists and empiricists and precisely *did not* affirm the reality of history, even though of course each was *scientistic*.[24]

Nevertheless, it is at least *prima facie* strange that anti-realism of a strong form would reappear when it did because for many the rise of Fascism, Hitler, and Stalin occurred in living memory. With them came the self-reflexive attention to potential self-refutation that relativist explanation brought with it (note that Hayden White graduated college in 1951, when the aftermath of World War II was extremely vivid). The new anti-realism, however, appeared under a different guise, perhaps suggesting its novelty and possible defensibility as a form of relativism. Where before philosophers had ascribed historical beliefs to the subjective factors of interests, attitudes, and biases, now they doubted the reality of the history because of the basic *literary nature* of the historical text.

This was accomplished primarily through the increasing influence of French structuralism and semiotics, based on Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics and reinterpreted by Roman Jakobson and Claude Lévi-Strauss.[25] At least in this Saussurean guise, relativism is implied in the practice of structuralism and semiotics. Its internal binarism is purposively a-referential, so the potential of relativism was built into these models. But once again in the beginning these efforts were used in the classical sense as instruments of erasing false consciousness or exposing the fetish character of commodities. However, this would be superseded shortly.

Roland Barthes downplayed the role of representational communication in language in favor of opaque "material" signification, that is, a kind of signification without a referent.[26] The effect was the leveling of all communication

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into a single mass or signaling, without one kind claiming more value than another. The next step was the discovery of tropology within *every* historical document. In his influential "The Discourse of History," Barthes's reflections ultimately led him to suspend the distinction between fiction and non-fiction, an apparently daring but tantalizing affirmation.[27] Following Barthes, Hayden White in the United States, and others still in France like Paul Veyne and Michel de Certeau, sought to blur the lines between history and literature through a recognition of rhetorical, tropological, and poetic elements.[28]

In an Anglo-American environment, the most important text here is of course White's *Metahistory*, a study of nineteenth-century historiography, written by an intellectual historian but with philosophical aspirations.[29] Its basic premise is that historians, like fiction writers, have to use modes of emplotment (romance, tragedy, comedy, and satire) in order to organize their narratives, and therefore the resulting products have a complex relationship to reality because they are manifestly literary artifacts.[30] The influence of the text was tremendous. In art history, for example, Whitean metahistory was rapidly adopted by writers like Mark Roskill and David Carrier.[31] There, too, the hope emerged of unlocking the deep-seated tropological elements of writing that betrayed some kind of submerged presumptions unknown even to the writer. Again, as in general history, the role of the reader versed in metahistory was to uncover ideological elements, but the assumption was that *everything* is ideological.

Metahistory seems to possess some of the same relativism as the writers of the 1930s. Multiple kinds of genres lay out various plots, and one is able to classify various kinds of historical texts. But the obvious problem is that one has also neglected the referential function of the selfsame documents. Mandelbaum, living long enough to endure the second wave of relativism, noted that White had mixed historians and theorists and purposively ignored the referential function of the texts produced by historians.[32] Of course, since White himself would be subject to emplotment, his points are potentially undermined by self-refutation.[33]

Ironically, all of these relativistic claims were being made at the height of the expansion of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society and the welfare state, well before the privatization initiatives of Ronald Reagan. The access to education and fair working conditions, all the results of the war on poverty, represented the biggest social net in American history. Although the Vietnam War was escalating, the United States was expanding and enjoying a remarkable era of prosperity. One almost thinks that, tacitly, promoters of historical anti-realism were presuming the social stability of life at the time, against which their writings were not rigid philosophical positions but correctives, meant to nuance a generally conventional realist understanding of historiography.

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Turning to education, the building of new regional colleges and universities, federal resources like the GI Bill and Higher Education Act allowed more students—the baby boomers—to go to college. For that matter, college was inexpensive, and the great availability of national, regional, state, and county-wide schools reduced unemployment. The prosperity of humanistic fields allowed for the proliferation of professors espousing theories of the relativity of historical knowledge. Yet the very social democratic ethos that had created the safe space for skepticism was already being destroyed because the rise of relativism accompanied the decline of Marxism as the default position of left humanism. This is a somewhat paradoxical point to make, as the influence of both traditional and neo-Marxist thinking was never stronger among left-leaning Western academics—and never have there been more of them—than during the late 1960s and 1970s. But as I shall explain, the understanding of Marx was changing significantly, and the prospects of adopting its positions had also changed, such that this period represented a short, sometimes violent, last gasp of traditional revolutionary concerns.

THE END OF MARX AS MASTER SIGNIFIER

Because historiographic relativism became a species of mere explanatory critique unhinged from any values greater than liberalism, it was unthinkable without the concurrent decline of Marx and communism as the master signifier among leftist thinkers. The story of the decline of Marxism, the conviction that new types of labor and political arrangement (the post-state) had rendered it obsolete, and the winning over of former Marxists to new, appeasing positions like democratic socialism is long and complicated.[34] To tell the story fully, one would have to deal with the New Left and various forms of neo-Marxist, Leninist, Trotskyite, and Maoist strands. Suffice it to say that in any number of arenas in the 1960s and 1970s, the prestige of Marxism and with it the utopian goal of communism or socialism had eroded.

We very well know the end result of this in Jean-François Lyotard's famous rejection of grand narratives, or Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's heralding the end of the "era of universal discourses."[35] More important were the consequences to Marxist analysis. Already Louis Althusser had pushed for an anti-teleological research program based on functionalist premises.[36] The ideological subject, he argued in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," was a product of the ideological structure.[37] Ideological analysis did not allow for historical ("teleological") ends; rather, the goals were to de-program them. Geoff Boucher explains,

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> At a stroke, Althusser's essay opened a non-reductive conception of ideology and transformed the Structural Marxist problematic, from a deterministic one dominated by structurally necessary social reproduction (Althusser and Balibar's "structural eternity"), to a probabilistic universe in which social reproduction becomes something contested by politicised social subjects.[38]

It was left to Laclau and Mouffe to sever ideology completely from social class, leading to the idealist, culturalist bent of post-Althusserian philosophy (in fact, the birth of post-Marxism).

If Althusser sped the destruction of Marxist analysis, he at least remained a member of the French Communist Party. This was not true of many others of the post-Marxist left. The history of the 1970s is one of the weakening of the communist parties in Europe and the accommodation of encroaching neoliberalism. Eurocommunism and its variants promised more power for parties within a parliamentary democratic model but was contingent on the abandonment of the Leninist proletariat of the left.[39] While Marx was neglected, other figures more amenable to cultural analysis like Gramsci replaced him.

Concurrent with the denial of the enduring efficacy of Marxist analysis was the belief that the latest phases of the post-Fordist economy required a new theory, a new ontology even. Beginning with Gilles Deleuze, leftists had convinced others that a different kind of ontology characterized late modernism. This was a globalized, networked model that moved past the labor party and the state; labor had become "immaterial." The result was the notions of Toni Negri and Michael Hardt, Maurizio Lazzaratto, and others that led the way to conceive the now widespread idea of political struggle as organic, immanent, and spontaneous—autonomous from central control and oversight.[40]

Significantly, the very instrument that Althusser had introduced to explain the reproduction of the ideological state apparatus—interpellation, the mechanism by which society's values address us and we then reproduce them—was developed from tools that were structural (linguistic) and psychoanalytic (Lacan). It was akin to the approach to historical textuality being developed at the same time by Barthes, Veyne, and de Certeau. In fact, they are important parallel actions marking the shift of structural social positionality into discursivity, and both displacing classic Marxist analysis. In effect, with Althusser and his followers Nicos Poulantzas, Laclau, and Mouffe, there merged a semiotics of society and subject construction.[41]

Given that the proletariat was no longer the privileged vanguard of history, it is not surprising that intellectuals became the group most equipped to "be political." The work of the post-Marxists continued with the toolkit of Marxism, but it was not causal anymore. The base–superstructure and so forth became merely fecund ideas. The functionalism that Althusser had

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proposed made ideology concurrent with culture, and so it was enough simply to decode texts and lay bare their ideological machinations.

Increasingly, as we saw with the rise of post-revolutionary or "Jacobin" political strategies, these exercises were sufficient on their own. The endism of parliamentary democracy—the acceptance of a Fukuyama-like liberal "end of history"—was assumed to be final and a limiting horizon. One could not argue for a particular ideological narrative of history—that was suspect. Therefore, one could only deconstruct those in other writers. That itself was a form of politics. Or rather politics had become "post-politics." The point of politics is not antagonism but plural, inclusive "democracy" and this precludes traditional politics.[42] Now, Marxism was merely a left identity, not a set of beliefs.

HISTORICAL ANTI-REALISM AS A POLITICAL VIRTUE

In this new environment, structuralism and semiotics would continue to be important. But more important would be those poststructuralist, deconstructivist trends that presumed the autonomy—that is the a-referentiality—of the text. Surprisingly, the larger task of cultural studies and the narrower task of the philosopher of history became similar to the Cold Warrior—to expose ideology—though now without a preferred liberal narrative. Since *everything* was ideological and nothing could escape it (and political ends could only be treated ironically, anyway), there was increasingly no difference between "right" and "left." Indeed, as we have seen, the Marxists could be the most violently targeted by postmodernists, and in fact critiques of Marxist universalism fueled the very articulation of poststructuralist platforms.

The connection between historical endism and the triumph of capitalist realism (the idea that policy solutions must be accomplished through market proposals) meant that a purely critical project undertaken by intellectuals remained in a realm of commodities. Ideas were exchanged within a closed system of exchange, the university. Historians had thus accepted the logic of neoliberalism where politics could be promoted by ideas, not action outside the classroom. Relativism or anti-realism was just the result of the politicization of epistemology within a shrunken horizon of activity of politics; as belief was the primary vehicle to effect change, the only way to do it was through disavowal of affirmation, hence anti-realism.

Needless to say, after Barthes and White, relativism was presumed by almost all left historiographic theory. A number of works were published that continued to explore the rhetoric, tropics, and genre-boundedness of history, including by Stephen Bann, Hans Kellner, Dominick LaCapra, and others.[43] Most importantly, Frank Ankersmit and his school carried on in many ways

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the work of Hayden White, which is still influential today.[44] In each case, there was again some argument that the ignorance of the narrated, emplotted, or rhetorical nature of a work of history naturalized its contents, and exposing this was a politically virtuous act.

Art history was also tasked with critique. Keith Moxey wrote in 1994 that "an insistence on historical circumstance as the ultimate ground of both theorization and empirical investigation in historical interpretation opens the door to a consideration of politics."[45] Moxey clearly demonstrates the self-sufficient politicization of relativist history writing itself. By taking a dominant narrative, say Panofsky's account of Netherlandish painting, and subjecting it to contextual critique, one is able to challenge the lasting conclusions of the historian. Concurrently, the aim was to deny any determinate (ontological) qualities to reality. So, Hal Foster sought to "deontologize" surrealism, and so on.[46]

After the Second World War, the weight of the atrocities of the twentieth century challenged relativism, and the same thing happened again. The greatest challenge to relativism came in Holocaust studies, catching people like White in troubling contradictions. In his contribution to the symposium of 1989, "History, Event, and Discourse," White affirmed his evolving tropological position, with special attention to the ethical challenge to the truth of the Holocaust using a genre-based model. He had uneasily concluded both that narratives "can be assessed, criticized, and ranked on the basis of their fidelity to the factual record, their comprehensiveness, and the coherence of whatever arguments they may contain" and that "narrative accounts do not consist only of factual statements (singular existential propositions) and arguments: they consist as well of poetic and rhetorical elements."[47]

Because the Holocaust was a multi-year event, constituted by a number of acts and actors, and is precisely not a simple "fact" like "George Washington was born in 1739," he has no grounds to decide between the larger event and the "poetic" elements that bind it together. The Holocaust put pressure on his system and exposed its weak points, just as the stress of reality always does on a system formed ostensibly on a poetics but based on tacit historical realism. It shows, because it cannot be literally true, that White depended on realist elements all along, or else his theory is simply wrong.

Not surprisingly, Marxists like Alex Callinicos, Terry Eagleton, or David Harvey—concerned with the fate of the working class—resisted many postmodern aims, precisely because of the self-refuting nature of these aims. This is not surprising, as self-professed Marxists (not post-Marxists) still held to the revolutionary aims of social transformation inherent in the sociopolitical exposure of the (real) inequity of the capitalistic system. Having a belief in a goal, they asserted the reality of the worldly resources present in the world that would have to be transformed for eventual social change.[48]

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It is a sticky subject, but there is a case to be made for the connection between postmodern relativism and some forms of revisionist relativism appropriated by the political right. I don't mean to take a strong stance on this question, as done by Daniel Dennett, except to point out that the political right coopted the stance of political interestedness and constructedness of theory.[49] The extreme relativism promoted by the most extreme forms of postmodernism (convenient foils are Stanley Fish, Richard Rorty, Jean-François Lyotard, and Jean Baudrillard), naturalized the idea that there is no arbiter of truth beyond language.[50] At least one recent commentator argues that Rorty, in failing to condemn post-truth politics, did not *cause* but was *complacent* about its rise.[51] There is a predictable defensiveness about a left source of "post-truth" politics, but the fact that the public cannot make hair splitting distinctions regarding the phrase "the Gulf War did not take place" is at least part of the problem.[52]

White's attempted way to deal with the Holocaust would portend future developments. He admitted that it could be "unrepresentable," sublime, and therefore resistant to narration. In this way, he sidestepped the self-refutation that a couple decades of his writing had risked. Others were quick to pick up on a similar tactic. Memory and trauma gave historical access to history, still not rational but now "sublime." In general metaphysics, the way that authors moved past post-positivism was through experience, a shifty foothold to regain certainty on top of a mountain of postmodern uncertainty. Frank Ankersmit with his theory of the historical sublime, and then Eelco Runia with his discussions of historical presence, sought a ground of direct access to the past, to move past the opacity of language.[53] In any case, this approach makes historical research again a radical instrument of political thinking. One can point to the moments of "presence" in historical writing, identifying events of deep existential import. History continues to be contained in the same post-Althusserian logic of self-sufficiency.

This experiential method of avoiding self-refutation, however, is extremely unreliable. How is history true or false, and according to whom? Rather than the ground of realism—whether rational or naturalistic—to decide questions, presence shifts the problem to *who* may experience this presence. This becomes a question of *authority* that history cannot solve. Nothing, then, has changed in this latest turn, because historians and theorists continued to invoke kinds of relativism under a different name and there is no means to decide historical questions.

Even today "realism" and "ontology" have been embraced, but only half-heartedly.[54] This ontology is inspired by Spinoza—flat and monistic. It is always a weak ontology, amorphous, with no purchase on reality. While a new materialism has brought forth many aspects of realism, there is not much interest in traditional subjects like the structure of society, the relation

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of base and superstructure, the nature of class. For this reason, we are still in a relativist/anti-realist phase of historiographic thought in spite of contrary messages (to the degree that this is true, then, this "new materialism" is not a fundamental change but the latest iteration of postmodernism).

CONCLUSION

Even today there seems to be a tacit assumption that anti-realism in regard to historical knowledge is somehow "progressive." But as I have shown, the gesture of imputing relativity to a historical account is a cheap way of obtaining political traction. It undermines the historical enterprise itself. Granting the referential detachment of historical events from our conceptual schemes—observing the Bhaskarian distinction between the intransitive and transitive realms—allows us to judge the truth or falsity of a history. Once epistemology is no longer politicized, we may turn our attention to the scope and facet of historical inquiries, that is, the question of *why* we are interested in one point of view rather than another.[55] That is a properly political question.

Because of a persistent ignorance of the basics of ontological realism and confusion of it with epistemic realism, the philosophy of history has been misled by new systems of thought (e.g., positivism, poststructuralism). These systems have been promoted as timely solutions to new realities and have therefore been especially fit—especially of late—for the commodification of ideas. But realism about historical writing calls for realism about political aims. And for this reason, I questioned the meaningfulness of progressiveness, when it actually is supportive of limited liberal values.

Historiography is today an unhealthy mix of relativism and merely apparent realism (sublimity, presence). If once history directed itself outward to historical events and their interpretation, today it allows privileged narratives but has no say as to who may author or approve these narratives. In other words, relativism and anti-realism are still with us. This chapter asks us to reexamine what we mean when we tacitly accept questionable philosophical assumptions, seeking a way to soften or modify what one thinks a historical "realism" actually entails.

What tacit assumptions do we hold today? What is the background to our acceptance of historical sublime or presence? What is therefore being submerged by not being discussed? What therefore cannot stand up to scrutiny because it is inconsistent or self-refuting? Historical realism lets us judge the strength of historical narratives on their merits and ask secondarily whether that viewpoint is profound, liberating, or has any prospect of leading us to a better society.

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NOTES

1. Tor Egil Førland offered comments that significantly improved the paper.
2. Verstegen, "Mandelbaum's Noble Dream."
3. Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism*, 73.
4. For a discussion, see Creaven, *Marxism and Realism*.
5. In Verstegen, *A Realist Theory of Art History*, I discuss the "politicization of epistemology."
6. See Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear."
7. See Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*.
8. See White, *Sustaining Affirmation*.
9. On anti-racism, see Michaels, "The Political Economy of Anti-Racism"; on misogyny, see Dean, "Against Gyno-pessimism."
10. On equality, see Michaels, *The Trouble with Diversity*; on flourishing from a realist-Bhaskarian point of view, see Norrie, *Dialectic and Difference*.
11. Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*, 106–7; for a critique see Mitrović, *Materialist Philosophy of History*, 191–95.
12. Mandelbaum, "Some Instances of the Self-Excepting Fallacy."
13. Dilthey, *Introduction to the Human Sciences*; Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*; Beard, "Written History as an Act of Faith"; Beard, "That Noble Dream"; Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian."
14. Croce, *History, Its Theory and Practice*.
15. Mandelbaum, "Historical Relativism in Recent Philosophy of History."
16. Mandelbaum, *The Problem of Historical Knowledge*. This is not to minimize Stalin's mass starvation of Ukraine, the full extent of which took much time to come to full attention.
17. Novick, *That Noble Dream*.
18. Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 400–6.
19. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*.
20. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*.
21. Mandelbaum, *The Anatomy of Historical Knowledge*; and applications in art history, Verstegen, "Arnheim and Gombrich in Social Scientific Perspective"; Verstegen, "Revisiting Arnheim and Gombrich in Social Scientific Perspective."
22. Mandelbaum, "Concerning Recent Trends in the Theory of Historiography," 508–9.
23. Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 285.
24. Hempel, "The Function of General Laws in History."
25. Posner, "Post-Modernism, Post-Structuralism, Post-Semiotics?"
26. Barthes, *S/Z*.
27. Barthes, "The Discourse of History."
28. Veyne, *Comment on écrit l'histoire*; de Certeau, *L'écriture de l'histoire*.
29. White, *Metahistory*.
30. Contemporary writing that explored similar dimensions as *vehicles* for the truth of histories include Jörn Rüsen in Germany and Peter Gay in the United States.

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31. Roskill, *The Interpretation of Pictures*; Carrier, *The Principles of Art History Writing*.

32. Mandelbaum, "The Presuppositions of Metahistory." For later critiques, see Kansteiner, "Hayden White's Critique of the Writing of History"; Callinicos, *Theories and Narratives*, ch. 2; Iggers, "Historiography between Scholarship and Poetry."

33. For an analysis of the ways in which White handles his own criteria in *Metahistory* qua history of nineteenth-century intellectual history, see Wilson, "The Reflexive Test of Hayden White's *Metahistory*."

34. See, for example, Thompson, *The Communist Movement Since 1945*.

35. Lyotard, *The Post-Modern Condition*; Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

36. For Althusser, see Benton, *The Rise and Fall of Structural Marxism*; Resch, *Althusser and the Renewal of Marxist Social Theory*.

37. Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses."

38. Boucher, *The Charmed Circle of Ideology*, 8.

39. Ross, "The PCF and the End of the Bolshevik Dream."

40. Negri, *Dall'operaio massa all'operaio sociale*; Lazzaratto, *Lavoro immateriale*.

41. Bergesen, "The Rise of Semiotic Marxism."

42. McGee, "Post-Marxism."

43. See Bann, *The Clothing of Clio*; Bann, *The Inventions of History*; Kellner, *Language and Historical Representation*; LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History*.

44. See Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic*; Ankersmit, *Historical Representation*. For critical reviews, see Zammito, "Ankersmit's Postmodern Historiography"; Icke, *Ankersmit's Lost Historical Cause*. Of the school, see Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*.

45. Moxey, *The Practice of Theory*, xii.

46. Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*.

47. White, "Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth," 38.

48. See Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism*; Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*; Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*.

49. Dennett, "Postmodernism and Truth."

50. For a balanced and non-reactionary though still Marxist account of this development, see Norris, *Uncritical Theory*.

51. Forstenzer, *Something Has Cracked*.

52. It can be argued that Baudrillard (*The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*) was being ironic and that one should not read his comment "prima facie." But that is the point—words have consequences.

53. Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*; Runia, "Presence."

54. For one example, see Gunnarsson, "The Naturalistic Turn in Feminist Theory."

55. "Scale" and "facet" are central concepts of Mandelbaum's theory of historiography (*The Anatomy of Historical Knowledge*). They are descriptive specifications of the framework of historical inquiries, allowing for apples to be compared to apples. It is discussed further in Verstegen, *A Realist Theory of Art History*.

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Chapter 8

Postmodern Frankenstein; or, the Alternative Facts Monster

Tor Egil Førland

In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* from 1818, the scientist after whom the book is named creates a monster so ugly its creator disowns his own creation.[1] Spoiler alert: Rejected by everyone including its progenitor, the monster kills the scientist's bride, leaving Frankenstein utterly bereft and desperate but unable to track down his monstrous creation and put an end to it. The desolate scientist chases the monster into the polar ice only to die there, unsuccessful in his efforts to rein in what he has let loose.

Some two hundred years later the parable unfolds in the United States. Having worked for decades to establish the concept of truth as situated and facts as theory-dependent, poststructuralists at universities and beyond watched—in horror—their notions coming to life in the pronouncements of spokespersons for the man who became the forty-fifth U.S. president. On Donald Trump's second full day in office, his advisor Kellyanne Conway coined the infamous but apt phrase "alternative facts"—and the president's political team went on to spread such alternative facts in utter disregard of truth and of the values that overwhelmingly left-leaning poststructuralists held dear. Aghast, the latter tried to contain the monster of right-wing populist, postmodernist discourse but to no avail. Failing to be reelected in 2020, President Trump had to leave office, but one term in the White House and a commanding position in the Republican Party were enough to gravely undermine belief in facts as a common ground where left and right could come together, if only to fight out their disagreements.

This chapter has four parts. In the first part, I depict the monster of right-wing populist postmodernist discourse. It is a familiar and to most readers probably unwelcome reminder of Trump's remarkably successful campaign

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to collapse the walls between truth and falsehood, facts and fiction. The second part is devoted to adjusting our conceptual lens by taking a closer look at the notion of facts, followed by an analysis of the circumstances under which "alternative facts" might be something else than a contradiction in terms. In the third part I offer a critique of the postmodernist treatment of notions such as truth and facts and argue that destabilizing or relativizing these notions is problematic and even dangerous. In the fourth part we see how left-wing scholars react when faced with the monster into which anti-positivists and poststructuralists have breathed life: namely by taking recourse to long-despised notions of truth, facts, reality, and so forth. Seeing relativist epistemological theories converted to propagandist praxis by a president who threatens their political values, these scholars become as disgusted and horrified as was Frankenstein. Their reactions suggest that they are positivists or at least realists at heart.

THE DISCOURSE MONSTER

We should give Donald J. Trump the following: he surely increased interest in U.S. politics. During his term as president of the United States from 2017 through 2020 it seemed the whole world was watching while Trump shed ever more of his veneer of appreciation of democracy, culminating in the botched attempt on January 6, 2021, to prevent the confirmation of President-Elect Joe Biden as his successor by instigating a march on Capitol Hill. The dramatic end of his presidency confirmed and exceeded the fears of all but his steadfast supporters, who admittedly were more numerous, and more loyal, than mainstream pundits had expected. The vast majority of educated Europeans had long been put off by Trump's avowed "America First" protectionism and what academics would term his misogynism (the very employment of such a term is, incidentally, sufficient to put its users squarely in the despised liberal camp).[2] But the ambition to protect U.S. producers against foreign competition was popular enough to give Trump victory in 2016 over a Hilary Clinton who was seen—and probably rightly so—as more supportive of untrammeled international trade. And consistency demands that if we accept Bill (and Hilary) Clinton's insistence that political acumen and sexual ethics are two strictly separate domains, and that deficiency in the latter therefore should not be allowed to devalue our assessment of the former, we should grant Trump the same pardon.

Notwithstanding President Trump's desperate attempts to cling to power after the 2020 election was lost (or, as he insists, stolen), posterity arguably needs further distance to judge a presidency that was as unpresidential as it was unprecedented. In particular Trump's foreign policy easily disappears

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behind his smoke-and-mirror show designed to distract allies and adversaries alike. After all, Trump was the first U.S. president since—since who?—not to launch special military operations abroad. He took his country out of wars in Iraq and Syria (and left the inhabitants there to their own fate and at the mercy of Russian, Turkish, and extreme Islamist forces); began to take it out of the protracted war in Afghanistan (though his successor got the blame for the hasty final retreat and the Taliban's astonishingly rapid takeover); threatened to take it out of NATO if the European allies would not pay more for their own defense (which they soon committed to do); and tried to make friends with Putin's Russia (in retrospect not very successfully or wisely). He also polarized the United States to a degree not seen since—since when? Since the stalemate between secessionist slave states and unionists in the mid-nineteenth century? Since the deadlock between internationalists and isolationists in the 1920s and 1930s, extremely bitter at the time, though more or less receded from memory today and overshadowed by the towering figure of four-term-president Franklin D. Roosevelt?[3] The lesson that it took two devastating wars—the American Civil War and the Second World War, respectively—to end these uncompromising struggles should be lost on no one.

Those who were hoping Trump's electoral defeat in 2020—or was it a steal, as the majority of Republicans still seem to think?—or his supporters' storming of the Capitol Building would loosen his grip on the Republican Party and swing the pendulum back toward the middle have so far been sadly disappointed. The dialogue between left and right appears to be conducted between parties that are increasingly deaf to each other's arguments—or more pointedly, to assertions from people unworthy of being dignified with serious attention—as each echo chamber seems ever more strongly insulated against signals from the opposite camp.

The evolvement of U.S. politics into a shouting match between two parties unwilling to accept the worldview of the other as legitimate has deep historical roots, reaching back to the nineteenth century and arguably beyond. But the 2016 election campaign and Trump's ensuing presidency took disbelief and disillusionment to new levels. Seldom has a neologism spread with greater speed than "post-truth" did in 2016. Of course, politicians twisting facts, sometimes so much so that what they say is obviously and demonstrably false, have been around much longer than democracy. Trump just did it more unscrupulously, and perhaps more overtly, than what has normally been the case, at least in Western democracies after the Second World War. In the late 1980s, the Japanese automobile company Isuzu ran a series of self-ironical TV commercials in the United States featuring the slick car salesman "Joe Isuzu." One of them shows him on top of a steep, snow-covered mountain. "How did you get up there?" a voice asks. "I drove up," he replies smilingly,

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as the camera pans to a car in the background. Then appears the subtitle "He's lying." Watching the man that would go on to become the forty-fifth president of the United States felt like watching that ad—only that we waited in vain for the subtitle to appear.

On one interpretation, the monster of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was the incarnation of modernity. The monster of this essay is that of postmodernist theory. It never incarnated in either a person or an other-than-human but came alive as a way of referring to and describing things (broadly conceived): a discourse, to borrow a famed concept from the postmodernist lexicon. And Donald Trump and his spin doctors piggybacked on this monster, in the process giving it Promethean wings and hence unprecedented range. Crudely put, they gave its progenitors one hell of a ride.

In this chapter I will leave political issues aside and focus on the discourse of post-truth in its various aspects. The twisting of facts to win an election is one thing; most presidential candidates are sinners in this respect. Nor have they repented and turned to living a pious life once elected. Every U.S. president has a pragmatic relationship to truth. But not even Kennedy or Nixon had such an *openly* pragmatic relationship to truth as Trump exhibited. Also, let us grant that the room for different but reconcilable descriptions is vast.[4] One man's ceiling is another man's floor. Perspective is king, and I'm not referring just to physical location. What was extraordinary with the forty-fifth president was how, from the very first day of his presidency, he insisted on a description of reality that not only contrasted with reality as described by his opponents, but that also ran directly counter to evidence available for all to see. The occasion was the aftermath of the inauguration, and the evidence was press photos—taken at the exact same moment at the beginning of the respective inauguration ceremonies in 2009 and 2017—that gave the lie to Trump's insistent assertion that the number of people attending his inauguration was the biggest in history. For Trump, the thought that more people had wanted to celebrate the inauguration of Barack Obama in January 2009 than his own triumphant moment eight years later apparently was too repulsive to digest.[5]

In this example, the president and his pursuers—the pundits of mainstream media—are far apart and see things differently but at least they describe the same event and the same assembly of people and also agree on what counts as the truth criteria, namely, that one or the other congregation comprises the larger number of attendees. They just seem to disagree on whose count is more accurate. Watching the photos gives reason to laugh at Trump's expense, since he insists on a conclusion that runs completely counter to evidence that is there for everyone to see.[6] But there is no reason to cry yet—except for Trump's poor press spokesman Sean Spicer, who the day after the inauguration had to vigorously defend the president's peculiar way of counting, and who even insisted there had been more Washington Metro

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passengers during the 2017 inauguration than in 2009, despite the official traffic numbers confirming the opposite.

But at one point, the laughter sticks in the throat. That moment is not when Jack describes a heavenly relationship and Jill reports a hellish one: perhaps her hell was what made his heaven. And when the crowd at the photo of my birthday party looks bigger than the one on yours, you are entitled to insist that in fact the numbers are the other way around without being ridiculed by my pointing at the larger empty spaces on the ground on your photo: perhaps if we counted the heads it would turn out you were right due to the more intense cramming of the partygoers at your place. In January 2017, however, the laughter was indeed choking. Lest readers have forgotten, it happened the day after Spicer had been thrown to the media wolves to educate the pack on presidential counting. Counselor to the President Kellyanne Conway appeared on NBC's Sunday morning program *Meet the Press* to defend the hapless spokesman. Confronted with the press photos showing that Obama's 2009 inauguration crowd far outnumbered Trump's, Conway refused to admit that Spicer had presented "a falsehood." She did not present any counter-evidence, however, nor did she make any arguments based on the evidence at hand. Instead, she merely said the spokesman "gave alternative facts."[7] This is our choking moment, the gestation (or perhaps more accurately: the manifestation) of the monster of poststructuralist Frankenstein. Once Conway coined that phrase, the postmodern monster sprang to life.

Never was the peculiarity of the Trump presidency—or better, the Trump movement—formulated more succinctly (if perhaps unwittingly so) than in Conway's now infamous phrase. It not only defines the forty-fifth U.S. president's attitude to veracity as a norm that could be discarded at will, and to rating factual statements not by their accuracy but by their usefulness to his agenda. It also epitomizes a republic in which the crack down the middle of its polity and society was (and still is) widening at a pace and to a degree that might tear it apart before long if this crack develops much further. Conway's newspeak bodes ill for U.S. democracy because the democratic form of governance, unlike its alternatives, requires basic agreement on facts. Lacking this foundation upon which discussion and disagreement can build, discourse between opponents will be tantamount to a dialogue between deaf people. At best it will degenerate into a shouting match between different camps, each with their own news networks and their own social media, unable to accept the legitimacy of the positions of their opponents, who due to this process turn into adversaries and enemies rather than fellow citizens.

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FACTS? WHAT FACTS?

Merely bemoaning Trump and his advisors is not the same as analyzing the situation. To see what is happening, we need a clearer conceptual lens than what the president and his team were using. Critical is the notion of "facts." This concept sometimes refers to things and sometimes to statements; I stick to the latter, but since statements normally are propositions about things (widely conceived), the difference between defining facts as things and as statements is less significant here. "Facts" in my conception are statements that everyone of a sound mind would agree to or accept provided the persons are cognizant of the language and terms used and seriously and thoroughly investigate the phenomenon in question.[8] That is why the concept "alternative facts" is either a bad joke, a contradiction in terms, or a sign of the breakdown of epistemological community. I shall return to the latter below. At this point let us just notice that facts, as defined here, are not necessarily true in a correspondence sense, although we sincerely believe they are. Consensus on a statement among everyone in the know does not guarantee its veracity. For a statement to be true in a correspondence sense—which is what is salient in our context—it must correspond to or correlate with reality.

Given that facts are determined by what we might call expert consensus, those in the minority cannot claim factual status for their alternative opinions. Since truth, unlike facts, pertains to the relationship between a statement and reality irrespective of the number or standing of the statement's adherents, minority opinions can still be true. The problem is that we have no definitive way of assessing the veracity of a statement. We can only assess its factual status, which therefore must act as a stand-in for its veracity. This provides the paradox that whereas the truth of a matter is immutable (as long as the underlying reality does not change), facts can change with the prevailing epistemological winds. But let us not lose perspective and a sense of proportion. There are myriads of facts that hardly anyone in their sound mind would ever think of calling in doubt. We just take their truth for granted, and millions of historical statements belong to these undisputed facts. No historian doubts that the Second World War is over or that Nazi Germany lost. Conversely, there is serious historical debate not only on whether Jesus of the New Testament died on the cross (to say nothing of his resurrection) but also whether he ever lived, which means that his historicity is not a fact;[9] the existence and expansion of the Christian church, however, is undeniable. Or to return to President Trump: that he was succeeded in the office by Joe Biden is an indisputable fact, no matter whether the 2020 election was legitimate or, as Trump claims, stolen from him. And to clarify matters: I am not saying it was stolen; I am just distinguishing between facts on the one hand

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and statements that can be doubted by others than lunatics or ignoramuses on the other. My impression is that a considerable number of university professors in the United States would argue that only lunatics or ignoramuses can believe in earnest that the 2020 election was stolen from Trump. But since tens of millions of Republican voters apparently think so, the disputed factual status of the statement "the 2020 election was legitimate" merely illustrates the present predicament of the U.S. polity.

Let us complicate matters a little. The concept of facts and the concomitant dismissal of "alternative facts" is premised on the notion of some common ground of observation, interpretation, and communication on which facts can be established. In the absence of such ground, factions will be unable to reach consensus on anything. Some would say, echoing Kuhn, that in a sense they live in different worlds. Since the material world is one and the same, this terminology in my opinion gives rise to unnecessary confusion, as illustrated by Kuhn's own admission that he is "unable to explicate further [the sense in which] the proponents of competing paradigms practice their trades in different worlds."[10] I suggest we say they live not in different worlds but with widely divergent worldviews, each with their own secluded consensus on how to understand what is going on in the world. When competing worldviews are sufficiently separate and impermeable, it would perhaps be meaningful to speak of alternative facts in this way. Conway did not use the term to illustrate this kind of cognitive ravine. But since the beginning of the Trump presidency, the crack within the United States has widened, with mainstream media—including mainstream social media—and the urban, more or less liberal establishment on one side and alternative media serving rural, conservative-populist factions that adhere to the forty-fifth president on the other. The integrating institutions still hold the country together, but the strains are becoming more evident as the tissues of the societal fabric are being torn. This is written in the aftermath of the 2022 midterm elections that indicated that the center is still holding. The electoral success of the more or less moderate mainstream forces should not blind us, however, to the increasing insulation of groups within the U.S. population who trust neither mainstream politicians, mainstream media, mainstream institutions and officials, nor mainstream professors.

For the sake of balance and historical perspective we should remember that what we in the postwar Western world have become accustomed to and more or less take for granted, namely, some sort of ontological consensus encompassing all but the most eccentric groups and individuals, has not come about naturally or automatically but is the result of more than two hundred years of integrative efforts by modern, national institutions such as public schools, conscription, governments, and mass media. In several Western countries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including the United States,

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sizeable groups held religious or ideological convictions that made them utterly distrustful of any information from the national authorities. Some such groups had an institutional network, complete with educational institutions, civic organizations, and mass media, as well as a leadership, that to a large extent represented an alternative to the worldview of national institutions, media, and authorities. The history of Western countries over the last two hundred years is the history of these alternatives being defeated or integrated into the national consensus, in part by means of centripetal technological developments within transportation and other forms of communication such as national radio and eventually TV. In the last few decades things have taken a centrifugal turn, as legal and technological developments have enabled alternative groups to establish their own communicative communities in competition with national institutions. In most countries the latter institutions still hold the upper hand due to their overwhelming political, financial, and technological resources. But in countries with a more dispersed power structure and alternative centers and networks of cultural and epistemic authority, such as the United States, national/mainstream control can be disputed and alternative epistemic communities can form.

FRANKENSTEIN: A CRITIQUE

Is it possible ever to know for sure what is true? Much of what was considered true in other times, or is regarded as certainties at other places or in other cultures today, is considered false by us. The indelible epistemological uncertainty and the observable changes and differences in worldview have combined to undermine the conviction that our present firm beliefs surely are true. (There is also the question of how firm and consistent our ontology is. We often operate on the assumption that among Western academics born in the second half of the twentieth century the materialist worldview of modern physics is hegemonic. Most readers probably regard the belief in evil spirits with the power to influence the workings of matter as a thing of the past. But some will observe that Satan seems to fit the definition of such an evil spirit. Belief in his existence in some form or other seems quite widespread even among university professors. Many academics display an impressive ability and willingness to shift apparently without friction between seemingly contradictory or conflicting worldviews as they move from campus to church—or for some, from the office to the chapel on campus. I have discussed this fascinating conundrum elsewhere, and this is not the place to pursue it further.[11] But let us note that far from all twenty-first-century academics seem to have converted fully to a materialist worldview.)

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Some radical poststructuralists have suggested that the notion of truth itself should be relativized to take into account the basic situatedness of all truth claims. This was the point of departure for the so-called truth debate among Norwegian historians 1998–2000, centered around the concept of "situated truths" forwarded by the late cultural historian Erling Sandmo.[12] I was among those who argued against this relativization of the truth concept, basically for two reasons. First, to assert the truth of two or more contradictory statements is logically inconsistent, irrespective of them being forwarded by different people at different times or places. Second, we cannot do without the notion of unrelativized truth in our language, so if we change our concept of truth to allow for the possibility of several, situated truths that are contradictory to each other, we would need a substitute concept for objective or unsituated truth in order to describe correspondence with (unchanging) reality: we would need the conventional truth concept only with a new name, such as "truth*." Instead of attempting to change the conventional truth concept, it is much preferable to stick with the old definition and accept that not all truth claims are true. I readily consent, however, that the idea of truth as situated is appealing. Knowing how transient many former "truths" have been, who are we to believe that our convictions, no matter how firm, can escape the corrosion of time? What would enable us to evade history, securing a privileged position for ourselves and galvanizing our truths? This is the epistemological challenge to what poststructuralists see as our naïvely self-assured and unreflective trust in our own worldview. It is accompanied by a methodological challenge: How can we properly understand the beliefs of distant societies, whether the distance is created by time or by space, if we insist that we are right and they were or are wrong? Is not belief in our own epistemological superiority an obstacle to understanding and respecting others?

It is probably no coincidence that the social science that has been most sympathetic or susceptible to these twin challenges is anthropology, whose main objects of study are cultures very much different from the modern West. Anthropologists have made epistemological humility a central aspect of their discipline and methodology, insisting on trying to understand and respect customs and ways of behavior and thinking that seem at best foreign to the observer. And indeed, unshakable and unquestioning belief in one's own convictions should always be cautioned against. Time may prove us wrong. Yet we cannot fool ourselves or others into thinking we don't believe our own convictions: it is impossible both by definition and psychologically. For our convictions to be convictions we must be convinced of their truth, or else they are just hypotheses. Being firmly convinced the earth revolves around the sun, we cannot pretend we are open to a Ptolemaic worldview. Such is the nature of firm conviction. What we can and must do is bracket our own beliefs—including those so firm they have entered the level of deeply held

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convictions—thoroughly enough to study respectfully and empathetically the belief systems of others even if they cannot be reconciled with ours. This is what good historians (and anthropologists) do. Ancient geocentrists should not be ridiculed. And why would we denigrate their cosmology, when they were living in a culture that lacked the tools for observation and measurement that could show that the earth rotates around the sun? Likewise, with conspiracy theories galore, we should be able to understand how cultures ingrained with a belief in supranatural forces of good and evil—in itself no illogical idea—could come up with the conviction that some people in their midst were secret agents of such forces. But we need not and should not—indeed we cannot—erase, forget, or put on hold our own belief system in order to study those of others. No contemporary academic historian believes in witches or takes for granted the moral right of some people to enslave other persons. Likewise, the conviction that wives should be subservient to their husbands is mostly a thing of the past in educated Western societies. Must we (pretend to) entertain such and much more outlandish notions in order to enter sympathetically into the mindset of people for whom these ideas had the status of convictions? Since we cannot believe what we don't believe, this cannot be our hermeneutic condition.

Another element from the truth debate is perhaps more pertinent to the present state of U.S. politics. This is the resolution to dismiss factual statements from political adversaries, not due to an analysis of the content of the statements, but because they are forwarded by people whom one deems morally unfit to produce salient facts. The case in point in the Norwegian truth debate was Holocaust revisionists whose assertions, according to Sandmo, could not be true *for him and other non-revisionists* even if they "were to correspond to 'factual matters.'"[13] Of course, skepticism to descriptions put forward by people whose observations and judgments we distrust is both natural and wise. *A priori* dismissal of the possibility that persons considered morally deficient can formulate veridically valid statements, however, insulates one's own convictions and worldview from being altered or modified by opponents considered unworthy. The effect is a sort of conceptual apartheid in which two or more groups share the same environment but are living parallel lives, never in communicative contact with each other. Those who cross the borders exclude themselves *ipso facto* from their former interpretative community. They are considered traitors and treated accordingly, like Liz Cheney and other Republican lawmakers who denied that the 2020 presidential election had been stolen from Trump, and who consequently lost favor with the former president and were branded RINOs (Republicans in Name Only). Later, coming up against the ex-president's vengeance and his endorsement of primary election rivals who pleaded loyalty to him, most of them lost their seats in Congress.

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It is worth pausing here to consider the effect of a situation in which nothing adversaries say or do will affect what one believes about reality. Historical examples are close at hand, and ought to be chilling. Having insulated themselves from what they saw as hostile interventions from enemies of the German race and National Socialist ideology, the Nazis were able to consolidate an immutable worldview within which Jews were seen as the cause of all evil. In similar ways, by fencing off their party from what they regarded as anti-Bolshevik enemies of the Soviet state, Soviet communists cultivated a worldview within which capitalists and their allies—great and small, domestic and foreign, overt and covert—were the villains. The Trump followers in the United States of the 2020s are perhaps less galvanized in their beliefs than were the Nazis and the Soviet communists. But when the walls between the factions become insurmountable and impenetrable, to the degree that not only arguments but also facts are barred from reaching the other side, there is every reason to worry. And when people in power close their gates and raise their drawbridges at the sight of outsiders whom they consider unworthy of presenting truths, alarm bells should ring.

Let us take a minute to remind ourselves of the significance of facts. Even a seemingly innocuous question such as whose inauguration crowd was the bigger bears political import. A smaller crowd made it more difficult for Trump to claim he was at the head of a popular avalanche. This illustrates how simple facts can play a role. It also explains Trump's need to dispute and thereby undermine plain facts by insisting on alternatives to them even though it made him and his spokesman appear ridiculous in the eyes of the detractors of the new president.

Sometimes facts can (and should!) be decisive for our evaluations. Today, it is established as a fact that in spring 1940 the Soviet secret police NKVD, in what has become known as the Katyn massacre, liquidated close to 22,000 Polish officers, policemen, and other leaders who had been placed in concentration camps in Belarus and Ukraine after the Soviet invasion of Poland in the fall of 1939. In 1943 the German invasion forces found mass graves in Katyn, and the Nazis tried to use this to drive a wedge between the leaders in Moscow and their Polish and Western allies. The Kremlin response was to assert that it was the Germans who were behind the massacres. Despite increasing evidence that Stalin and others at the top of the Communist Party had signed the orders for the atrocities, the Soviet leadership stuck to its version until the Communist regime fell in 1990.[14] The political significance of facts in the Katyn case is evident: the truth about the massacre—that many thousand members of the Polish elite were killed on the Kremlin's order—is clearly damaging to the reputation of the Communist leadership. It is nevertheless true—at least it is a fact considering the overwhelming evidence—and it was true even though it was the Nazis who first claimed it was true. Or to

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put it a bit more pointedly: it is true—or at least it is a fact, allowing us to believe firmly that it is true—irrespective of who claimed it, since truth as correspondence is a relation between a statement and the world. Who asserts the statement is external to this relationship and therefore irrelevant to the truth of the assertion.

ENCOUNTER WITH REALITY

Re-enter the forty-fifth president of the United States and the scholars. "Donald Trump seems completely uninterested in truth and facts," Toril Moi, professor of literature and philosophy at Duke University, wrote in an essay after the presidential election of 2016. To her this was "a fateful election without precedent." Moi, a leading literary theorist and feminist scholar, feared that Trump, who had "developed the ability to mix facts and fiction" during his time as reality TV host, would use his resources as president to "create a false reality." Therefore, she wanted to encourage U.S. intellectuals to "turn the attention to reality and insist on telling the truth."[15]

Lest the philosophical import of Moi's formulations go unnoticed, I repeat them as general exhortations, slightly rephrased to fit the format:

- Maintain a keen interest in truth and facts.
- Distinguish between facts and fiction.
- Beware of false realities.
- Insist on telling the truth.

I agree with each and every one of these commandments. Students of the humanities and social sciences should be required to write them on their virtual walls one hundred times each semester. The ironic thing about the formulations is, of course, that they signal an attitude to science and scholarship that has been derided and defamed by the academic left of which Moi has been a prominent representative during the last decades, not least by the poststructuralists she herself made accessible to students of literature and feminism (and feminist literature) and later criticized for being obsessed with language as a self-contained system.[16]

The much-maligned approach so forcefully formulated in Moi's essay and rephrased in my general commandments above was labeled "positivist." From the 1960s onward it was heavily criticized by structuralists, (neo-)Marxists, and hermeneuticists whose combined assaults succeeded in destroying the academic respectability of the belief in facts as a highway to reliable knowledge. The belief itself was kept alive among laypeople as well as among less theoretically inclined scholars and scientists, but if such views were detected

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in journals or at conferences, the witch hunt would begin. For social scientists and humanities scholars, the positivist stamp was about as destructive to their career and as difficult to erase as the label "socialist" had been when branded by zealous McCarthyists in 1950s America.

Both the lookout for positivist heresy, including anything smacking of essentialism, objectivism, or scientism, and the hounding of more or less naïve positivists of various kinds have been going on ever since the 1960s. The roles as guards and correctional officers were taken over by poststructuralists of various kinds. The distinction between facts and fiction, true and false, was the baby flushed out with the contaminated bath water of positivism. In the end each man could have his own truth to himself. Women would have their own "situated knowledges," to use Donna Haraway's influential term.[17] This essay is not the place to enter into a lengthy discussion of the concept "situated knowledges." Let me just observe that whatever its merits and problems—and it has both—its introduction and dissemination herald the dissolution of the monist conception of "truth" as correspondence and of the objectivist connotations of "facts."

Perhaps the pinnacle of the relativist consensus that came to engulf the academic and theoretically self-conscious left at the end of the twentieth century is the notion of the theory-dependence of facts or data. It builds on philosopher W. V. O. Quine and science historian Thomas Kuhn, two men not known for leftist political sympathies.[18] The gist of the idea is the assertion that what we regard as empirical facts depend on a theoretical foundation without which such facts would be void of meaning. A theory is needed to provide a meaningful context for the observations and make sense of them.[19] The idea is less dominant among scientists than many scholars from social science and the humanities think, since a given set of data often is meaningful within several competing theories. Moreover, it is hard to see why historical facts such as the size of the inauguration crowds in 2009 and 2017, or who were the perpetrators of the Katyn massacres in 1940, would need certain higher-order theories to be valid or meaningful. I have criticized the belief in the theory-dependence of data elsewhere.[20] My point here is that by accepting this postulate, one has no defense against alternative facts, whether proposed by Donald Trump or others. Once facts get their meaning from within a certain theoretical complex, adherents of that construct can live happily ever after within their own web of belief,[21] insulating these beliefs inside the safe confines of their own notions of how the world works. There would be no reason to take in the views or arguments of outsiders because they have the "wrong theory," as Marxist-Leninists loyal to Mao's China used to say in the 1970s to dismiss non-communist (or Moscow communist) assailants.

Moi waved goodbye to poststructuralism when she chose Wittgenstein and ordinary language philosophy over Derrida. Her recoil when confronted with

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the ugly reality of a ruthless political opponent practicing poststructuralist philosophy is nonetheless typical also of her former allies among left-leaning academics. Experiencing the practical consequences of their postmodern theoretical convictions, they join their philosophical opponents so fast they don't even realize what they have done. In an interview after Trump's election in 2016, leading poststructuralist feminist and literary scholar Judith Butler lamented his "cavalier relation to truth" and complained that "Trump seems to me to attack the truth" and refuses to "submit to evidence and logic."[22] In another interview after Trump had left office following the 2020 electoral defeat which he never admitted, she observed that "this form of denial would rather destroy reality, to hallucinate reality, than register the verdict of a loss that reality has to deliver." Apparently, Butler the political commentator has no problem with concepts such as truth or reality, including historical accounts of past reality: "White supremacy is a political fantasy, but also a historical reality."[23]

If she ever adhered to deconstructionism, Moi had left it long before Trump was elected president. We might perhaps have expected Butler, influenced by Foucault's notions of "regimes of truth,"[24] to think twice before applying such standard realist (some would say positivist) concepts as truth, evidence, and reality in an apparently unquestioning, conventional way as exhibited in the quotations above, but interviews, even with Verso and *The Guardian*, may not be a good place for Foucauldian or deconstructive destabilizing. Tempting as it may be, however, I am not on the hunt for poststructuralists who make a U-turn and crash head-on with their former ideas in their attempts to escape the monster of rightwing-populist postmodernist discourse. My point is that without recourse to time-worn concepts such as truth, facts, and reality, conventionally understood and derided by anti-positivists and their successors for more than fifty years, Moi, Butler, and other left-wing academics—whatever their theoretical convictions—have no weapons with which to fight the alternative facts monster. The only effective defense against poststructuralism in the hands of political opponents is realism. And once you raze the arsenal of good old realist armory, you cannot repel an unscrupulous adversary armed with a discourse taken from the poststructuralist weapons factory.

The real-life realism of postmodernist theoreticians in moments of desperation should come as no surprise. It is consistent with the performative contradictions that characterize the reaction of their predecessors on the academic left wing, politically radical anti-positivists, when suddenly faced with the consequences of their theories. A tenet of anti-positivism is the refusal to treat facts separate from the persons who produce them. The notion of the neutral scholar was derided by anti-positivists. They maintained that there is no such thing as neutral research and that all description is—and must be—subjective. As E. H. Carr famously advised, "Study the historian before you begin

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to study the facts." By and large, Carr maintained, "the historian will get the kind of facts he wants."[25] In an earlier work I have analyzed the discomfort exhibited by mainstream center–left Danish Cold War historians in the late 1990s when the center–right government of Anders Fogh Rasmussen, aided by its few allies among historians, discarded the established consensus on postwar Danish–Soviet relations and insisted that policymakers and historians alike have every right and even a duty to take a moral stand. Mainstream historians, many of whom had a background as left-wing anti-positivists, tried to take refuge in their Rankean methodology without denouncing the ghosts of their own past. It was a bewildering effort, as the circle could not be squared. In 1998 the government implemented what anti-positivists and Carr had maintained and refused to accept the well-respected historian Søren Hein Rasmussen (no relation) as a member of the expert commission established to study the behavior of the Danish intelligence service during the Cold War. The authorities explained their decision by pointing to Hein Rasmussen's political views: he had been a card-carrying Moscow communist from 1977 until 1989. Rasmussen and his colleagues protested against what they saw as an abuse of political power. They argued that his scholarly work on the Cold War showed no sign of political bias, that there was nothing in his historical oeuvre to suggest he was a communist, and that as a scholar he was just a good historian.[26] Apparently, anti-positivism had left the building.

The surprised and negative reaction of Hein Rasmussen and his colleagues when the government did what anti-positivists had been insisting on for decades—namely, treat the historian's political convictions as relevant for his scholarship—and their attempt to take refuge in long-discarded notions of scholarly objectivity, indicate that consistency cannot be taken for granted even among university professors. It is an example of left-wing academics defecting from their theoretical positions once political opponents in power demonstrate the practical implications of the theories. The explanation I submit is that their attachment to the theories is merely skin deep and not a firmly held conviction. And when confronted with the consequences of their theories, left-wing anti-positivists and poststructuralists alike shed their skins. Beneath they turn out to be old-school positivists, or at least plain realists. Whatever their theoretical professions, deep down it seems they believe in facts, objectivity, and truth as correspondence.

Donald Trump's alternative facts discourse is the monster of Foucault, Barthes, Derrida, and other well-meaning, brilliant, poststructuralist Frankensteins. After the inauguration debacle, Quinta Jurecic in *The Washington Post* noticed the irony: "In a sense, Trump and his post-truth team have embraced the same post-structuralist critique of the notion of stable truth that the American right has railed against for the past 30 years."[27] Of course, poststructuralists never intended to create the monster that Trump and his

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cohorts unleashed when given the reins of U.S. superpower in January 2017. I shall not attempt to concoct a chain of direct causality from 1960s critique of positivism to Trump's false claims about everything from inauguration crowd sizes to electoral fraud to what he said on camera just the day before. Yet I submit that what we have observed is not just a president riding the poststructuralist Pegasus roughshod over the political values held dear by its creators. Shifting the metaphor from mythic animals to plants, we have seen a reactionary (how else to describe him?) and populist politician harvesting the epistemological relativization that prominent members of the academic left have been sowing for more than half a century. Or should we really grant the academic, anti-positivist and poststructuralist left such an epiphenomenal existence that their fifty-something years of denigrating the notion of objective facts have had no effect whatsoever on how pundits and people comprehend the concept? Likewise, are we to think that the insistence for several decades on linking the truth value of statements to their speaker or author has gone completely unnoticed by editors and the electorate? I believe the cultural and intellectual influence of university professors in shaping people's notions amounts to more than nil (though perhaps less than the professors sometimes—but not always—seem to think).

When he realized what he had created and what his creation had done, Mary Shelley's Frankenstein despaired and tried to hunt down the creature and prevent it from causing more death and destruction. Moi similarly exhorts her U.S. colleagues to "talk truth to power" to prevent the harmful effects of the alternative-fact disease of conceit.[28] But like Frankenstein, Moi has come too late. "One thing that has been interesting this entire campaign season to watch, is that people that say facts are facts—they're not really facts," Trump supporter and news director in the Tea Party movement Scottie Nell Hughes remarked, perhaps not very elegantly, in an interview with Fox News on December 1, 2016. Then he put his finger on the postmodernists' sore toe: "Everybody has a way of interpreting them to be the truth, or not truth. There is no such thing, unfortunately, anymore as facts." This interview was conducted weeks before Conway conjured her notion of alternative facts, so Hughes must be forgiven for pronouncing the demise of facts when what was happening was their transmogrification. Referring to Trump's Twitter claims that Hilary Clinton received millions of illegal votes in 2016, Hughes observed that to many it did not matter whether Trump's assertions were backed by evidence. "Amongst a certain crowd—a large part of the population—they are truth."[29] Or in the poststructuralist idiom: they are situated truth.

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NOTES

1. This is a much-revised version of an essay originally written in Norwegian and published as "'(He's Lying)': Presidenten, poststrukturalistene og behovet for aktive henvisninger," *Historisk tidsskrift* 96, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 495–506, https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.1504-2944-2017-03-06. Having intended just to translate it, I ended up rewriting it completely.

2. Gross, *Why Are Professors Liberal*.

3. For the bitterness of this fight, see Cole, *Roosevelt and the Isolationists*.

4. Førland, "Objectivity."

5. Bump, "On Day 2 of His Presidency."

6. Hunt, "Trump's Inauguration Crowd."

7. Abrahamson, "Sorry, Kellyanne Conway."

8. Førland, *Values, Objectivity, and Explanation*, 87.

9. Carrier, *On the Historicity of Jesus*.

10. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 150, cf. vi, 120, 141, 193.

11. Førland, *Values*, *Objectivity, and Explanation*, ch. 7, 150–67.

12. A slightly updated English version of my own side of the debate, with references to other contributions, are found in Førland, *Values*, ch. 3, 65–85.

13. Sandmo, "Mer og mindre sannhet," 397. The passage in Norwegian is " . . . skulle stemme overens med 'faktiske forhold.'"

14. Sanford, *Katyn and the Soviet Massacre of 1940*; Cienciala, Lebedeva, and Materski, *Katyn*; Etkind, Finnin, et al., *Remembering Katyn*; Petrov, "Katyń: The Kremlin's Double Game."

15. Moi, Toril. "For meg er dette valget et skjebnevalg uten sidestykke."

16. The pinnacle of Moi's dissemination work is Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*. For her turn to ordinary language philosophy, see Moi, "They Practice Their Trades in Different Worlds"; and Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary*.

17. Haraway, "Situated Knowledges."

18. Quine was known as a conservative. Kuhn seems to have kept his political sympathies to himself, although one source claims he was a "typical left-wing Democrat professor." See Kindi, "Kuhn's Conservatism," 214n16.

19. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism"; Kuhn: *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*; for an overview, see Zammito, *A Nice Derangement of Epistemes*.

20. See my chapter "Historiography Beyond Partisanship" in this volume.

21. For this concept, see Quine and Ullian, *The Web of Belief*.

22. Salmon, "Trump, Fascism, and the Construction of 'the People.'"

23. Butler, "Why Donald Trump Will Never Admit Defeat."

24. Cabrera, "From Subjection to Dispossession."

25. Carr, *What Is History*, 23.

26. Førland, *Values*, *Objectivity, and Explanation*, ch. 1, 19–49.

27. Jurecic, "Lies Have a Relationship to the Truth."

28. Moi, "For meg er dette valget et skjebnevalg."

29. Holmes, "A Trump Surrogate Drops the Mic."

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Chapter 9

Arguments, Partisanship, and Politics

Is Anti-realism in the Philosophy of History a Right-wing Ideology?

Branko Mitrović

In memoriam Robert Nola

The aim of this chapter is to analyze three types of reasons for the rejection of anti-realism in the philosophy of history.[1] Although anti-realism about the past is a common position among philosophers of history, it is widely rejected among practicing historians, and it is certainly interesting to ask what motivates their rejection. Obviously, different people are likely to reject anti-realism on different grounds, and the aim here is to present an extensive, though certainly incomplete, survey of possible reasons for this rejection. The chapter is therefore, one could say, two-edged. The critics of anti-realism may see in it an extensive collection of reasons in favor of their views and arguments that support their position. Conversely, the advocates of anti-realism may understand it as a list of recommendations regarding counterarguments they need to respond to, the ways of arguing they need to avoid, and the implications of their views they need to explain in order to make their position more credible and/or acceptable to those who disagree with them.

I divide the possible reasons for rejecting historical anti-realism into three groups:

a. *Unpersuasive arguments:* Arguments that have been offered in favor of historical anti-realism are often unconvincing, or phrased in

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unconvincing ways, and it is not hard to find counterarguments. These counterarguments would have to be answered (rather than avoided) in order to make the anti-realist position credible. Moreover, anti-realists often seek to establish that the past cannot be known by introducing cognitive criteria that do not apply in other fields of human intellectual endeavor such as science because they are unrealistic and would make research in these fields impossible.

b. *Off-putting partisanship:* The advocacy of historical anti-realism is often marked by strong partisanship that tends to undermine its credibility. Philosophers of history who argue in favor of anti-realism make very little effort to answer counterarguments. If some anti-realist arguments are refuted by critics, these refutations tend to be ignored and the same unpersuasive arguments, that have already been refuted, are repeated in subsequent publications. The very possibility that some people may disagree with anti-realism is often dismissed with rude or disparaging comments.

c. *Political implications:* Historical anti-realism entails support for very distinct political agendas that many historians and academics typically oppose. Many academics endorse left-wing political views and if they think consistently through various implications of anti-realism, they are likely to find these implications unpalatable. It is not easy to see how one could, without falling into self-contradiction, advocate anti-realism and reject the political positions that it entails. Obviously, people easily overlook or choose to overlook inconsistencies between their political and theoretical views—but a contradiction overlooked by one person can be noticed and regarded as important by someone else.

The aim of the chapter is to stimulate an open debate and invite the advocates of anti-realism to respond to counterarguments, concerns and doubts of those who do not share their views. I will start by discussing a series of unconvincing arguments that are commonly presented in favor of anti-realism (the second and third sections), then analyze how partisan strategies employed in the advocacy of anti-realism undermine its credibility (the fourth section), and finally review a number of political implications of anti-realism that many people are likely to find unacceptable (the fifth section).

ARGUMENTS

Probably the most widely stated argument in favor of historical anti-realism is the one that insists on the non-observability of the past.[2] The idea is that

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since past events are not available for observation in the present, so statements about them cannot be verified and that consequently the past cannot be known—as Louis Mink put it, the "past is inaccessible to any direct inspection."[3] Strictly speaking, the starting premise of the argument is plainly false. The observability of an event depends on the position of the observer in space-time and it is possible that while I am writing these lines astronomers on a planet 211 light years away are observing the Battle of Borodino, provided that their telescopes are good enough, and that the sky was clear on the day of the battle. This is not a mere science fiction scenario: the point is that the Battle of Borodino is a real event somewhere in space-time and it can be observed now from certain points in space-time. The important problem with the argument, however, pertains to the assumption that *only* things and events that are currently accessible to direct observation can be known. In all sciences and the humanities, as well as in everyday life, there are numerous things and events that one cannot observe, but one nevertheless knows that they exist, on the basis of evidence. Likewise, historians often study, on the basis of evidence, processes that cannot be observed by a single observer, such as evolutions of institutions through history, courses of wars or economic declines. No observer could have observed all the details of a medieval battle. In all such cases it is irrelevant whether the things historians write about can be observed or could have been observed in their time. Rather, the important question is whether the available evidence is sufficient to confirm the claims that historians make. In this sense, historical work does not differ from work in sciences or other humanities. Knowledge depends on evidence and not on direct observation.

Another typical argument pertains to the biases that presumably affect historians' research and judgments.[4] The obvious response is that biases plague research in all fields. Possibly, scientists who work for the biomedical industry may experience greater pressure to generate results that conform to their employer's interests than would typically be the case for historians and there is no reason to believe that scientists are less prone to succumb to such pressures than historians. However, there is also a difficulty with the argument that dismisses historical knowledge because of the biases of historians. (This also pertains to similar claims about knowledge in other fields.) In order to argue that historians' biases make historical knowledge impossible, one has to assume that these biases affect human reasoning capacities in ways that are irreparable and uncontrollable. It is not merely enough to say that historians make mistakes, but that biases affect reasoning in such ways that these mistakes cannot be corrected and that historians cannot realize when they make them. Such biases that would refute claims of historical knowledge would have to be so strong that they would refute the very claim that "historical

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knowledge is affected by biases and therefore impossible." The claim clearly pertains to historical knowledge and could be biased, too.

The fact that historians' works have the form of texts (narratives), while historical reality is not pre-packed into story-like conglomerates of events, has been a notorious breeding ground of anti-realist arguments. The argument goes back at least to the 1930s, when Maurice Mandelbaum observed that the continuity and structure of historical works are different from the continuity and structure of historical events.[5] As David Carr described it, this is the view that "real events do not hang together in a narrative way . . . in virtue of its form any narrative account will present us with a distorted picture of the events it relates."[6] Another good formulation of the argument is by Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen:

> There is a *morphological* or *structural* difference between the historian's presentation and historical reality, which explains why any idea of copying or matching between the two is fundamentally misconceived. One simply cannot make two structurally different entities correspond with each other. Elephants cannot be made to correspond with butterflies due to the obvious structural difficulties. The historian's narrative is verbal and textual, while historical reality is non-narrative and non-verbal in nature.[7]

The obvious response is that some representations are analogous and resemble the things they represent and others are not. Historical works are texts, and as such they certainly cannot *resemble* the physical events that they describe. This can hardly be a reason to claim that historical works cannot accurately describe past events. The sentence "the cat is on the mat" does not look like a cat on a mat, and there is no reason why it should. The fact that the sentence does not look like a cat on a mat does not mean that it is false or that it does not state accurately the fact that the cat is on the mat. Likewise, physical equations that describe the behavior of bodies under the influence of gravity do not look like bodies whose movements are caused by gravity. But that does not mean that if I drop a book it will not fall the way the equations predict it or that physicists *construct* gravity. A difference in shape between texts and the events they describe cannot be taken to prove that larger textual compositions and historical narratives cannot accurately describe events that happened without looking like these events.

In developing their anti-realist positions, both Kuukkanen and Frank Ankersmit insist on the claim that words and their combinations can be taken to refer only to singular objects, that reference is to be understood as "picking out uniquely."[8] This claim is particularly counterintuitive: words can certainly refer to sets of things. It is almost hard to believe that such an unusual view could have been advocated seriously, but (as I will explain shortly)

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the view is also a necessary assumption for other claims that Ankersmit and Kuukkanen want to make. Ankersmit thus insists that this is "the common usage" of the term "reference" in the philosophy of language.[9] Reference, he says, can be performed by personal names (e.g., "Louis XIV") or uniquely identifying descriptions (e.g., "the first man on the moon").[10] He insists that "picking out uniquely is crucial for a description's being capable of being either true or false."[11] He then claims that "the logic of the true statement (or description) implies a specific ontology: the ontology of a world made up of identifiable unique objects, to which we can ascribe certain properties using the predicates of true statements whose subject terms refer to those objects."[12] At the same time, in the case of the Renaissance, "it is impossible to individuate this particular thing."[13] In his view, "the Renaissance is a purely representational term that has no counterpart in the past itself."[14] Kuukkanen similarly says that "reference" is understood "as in the case of proper names, which refer to individuals, and thus provides a kind of default understanding also in discussions that focus on theoretical terms in the philosophy of science."[15] From this he infers that expressions such as "Cold War" do not refer, since they "do not seem to correspond to any singular object in the historical world."[16] (By "individuals" that can be referred to he seems to mean strictly individual material things, since four pages later in the same book he admits that "the 'Renaissance' and the 'Cold War' name two unique periods in history."[17] So time periods, even if they are unique, cannot be objects of reference, in his view.) It should be mentioned that the very claims that reference can be performed only by (a) individual names, (b) identifying descriptions (Ankersmit), or (c) that one can only refer to individuals (Kuukkanen) are self-contradictory. The claims refer to something called "reference," while this word is neither a name nor an identifying description, and it does not refer to a singular object. If Ankersmit's and Kuukkanen's theory of language were consistent, the very word "reference" could not refer to anything, and they simply could not make the claims they make.

Neither Ankersmit nor Kuukkanen provide citations from the works of the philosophers of language or science who believed that it is possible to refer only to unique, singular (material) objects. Thus, we cannot know who their authorities are nor whether they misunderstood them, nor why Ankersmit thinks that his is "the common usage" of the term "reference." Without doubting Kuukkanen's competence when it comes to the philosophy of science, the implications of his claim are highly improbable when it comes to the history of science. If Kuukkanen were right, it would follow that a statement such as "Galileo discovered four moons of Jupiter" cannot be true on the basis of what happened in the past because the phrase "four moons" does not refer to a unique object. Or to respond to Ankersmit: something must be wrong with "the common usage" of the term "reference" if it assumes that plural nouns

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or collective nouns do not refer and that consequently the sets of objects do not exist because they cannot be referred to. If this were so, then why would nouns have plural forms? Imagine that I point to five cars that are wrongly parked across the street and say, "These five cars are wrongly parked." If Kuukkanen and Ankersmit are right, it would follow that:

a. The phrase "these five cars" does not refer since only unique, singular objects can be referred to.
b. My statement "These five cars are wrongly parked" cannot be true on the basis of correspondence to physical reality because the phrase "these five cars" cannot refer to anything.
c. The five cars across the street actually do not exist, because it is impossible to refer to them (the phrase "these five cars" has no counterpart in physical reality, the same way "the Renaissance" in their view has no counterpart in historical reality). The same applies to collective nouns and phrases such as "the Venetian fleet that participated in the Battle of Lepanto." Since the fleet consisted of more than one ship it would follow that according to Ankersmit and Kuukkanen we cannot refer to it, and no statements about it can be true or false and since it cannot be an object of reference, the fleet actually did not exist.

All this may seem absurd, but it necessarily follows from Ankersmit's and Kuukkanen's views cited above—from their shared view that words and phrases can only refer to singular objects and that reference is to be understood as "picking out uniquely."

It is important to stress here that this analysis of Ankersmit's and Kuukkanen's views is not an exaggeration or based on an uncharitable interpretation. Rather, there are very strong reasons why they have to defend the view that plural or collective nouns cannot refer. One may be tempted to try to save their position by assuming that when they talk about unique objects, they assume that sets of objects (or events) can be treated as such unique objects and can be referred to. This reasonable assumption would, however, introduce new problems, and Kuukkanen actually has good reasons to insist, as we have seen, that unique clusters of events (the Cold War) cannot be objects of reference. If he and Ankersmit allowed that sets of items can be referred to, then their opponents could argue that "the Renaissance," "the French Revolution," or "the Cold War" are joint names for large sets of events in which individuals and unique objects were involved. This is indeed how a materialist or a social-individualist historian, who believes that social phenomena are nothing more than biological individuals and their actions and interactions, is likely to understand the Renaissance, the French Revolution, or the Cold War.[18] The claim that one can refer only to unique objects and individuals is necessary in

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order to prevent this line of argument—but the price is the counter-intuitive consequences described earlier.

A number of particularly unconvincing arguments against historical realism pertain to so-called colligatory concepts. It was W. H. Walsh who drew attention to the ways historians deal with large, unconnected masses of material by finding common trends and themes of development.[19] This is often done by forming concepts such as "the Renaissance" or "the French Revolution" that cover large sets of events that have general common characteristics. To "colligate" is, broadly, to organize, and "it would be generally agreed that any acceptable scheme of organization must have a firm foundation in fact."[20] Walsh insisted that colligatory concepts "be well founded as opposed to arbitrary, tailored to fit the facts rather than a straitjacket into which the facts must be forced whatever their particular nature."[21] The account is reasonable, but it provided grounds for Ankersmit and Kuukkanen to insist that colligatory concepts (or the combinations of words that express them) do not refer to anything in the past. As Ankersmit stated, colligatory concepts "do *not* refer to things in or aspects of the past."[22] Similarly, Kuukkanen claims that "colligatory concepts cannot be true of historical reality in the sense of correspondence" and that "colligatory concepts are constructions without counterparts in historical reality."[23] Contrary to Walsh, he claims that "colligatory expressions do not emerge from the historical record; nor can they be uniquely correct regarding any given historical data."[24] From this follows his programmatic statement that "historiographical (re)presentation cannot be a faithful copy of historical reality" because

> (1) historiography cannot do without colligatory concepts; (2) colligatory concepts are not objectively given and do not refer to corresponding entities in historical reality; (3) the truth of a statement in the sense of correspondence requires reference; (4) therefore historiography cannot be true in the correspondence sense.[25]

It is interesting to see how he comes to form this position. As we have seen above, he first defined reference as a relationship between words and singular things. He thus ensured that words cannot refer to sets of things, periods of time or phenomena such as gravity, light, or blood circulation. Then he claimed that reference is necessary for a statement to be true in the sense of correspondence. As a result, we end up with the view that statements about sets of objects, periods of time, gravity, and similar phenomena cannot be true on the basis of correspondence to reality because they cannot refer—and we know that they cannot refer because reference was defined in a way that makes it impossible for them to refer.

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According to Ankersmit, colligatory concepts fail to refer because different historians disagree about their definition and limits. He claims that attempts to individuate the Renaissance can at most give us necessary, but never sufficient, conditions for fixing the reference of the term.[26] The reference of "Renaissance," Ankersmit points out, differs in Burckhardt, Michelet, Huizinga, Wölfflin, and so on.[27] He also claims that "as long as we cannot be sure what object in the world the statement is referring to, we cannot decide about propositional truth and falsity."[28] (This last claim is clearly false. We do not need to identify X in order to know that "All X are X" is true. The same applies to physical laws that pertain to all entities with some property—e.g., mass.) The obvious response is that although different individuals use a term with some variation, that does not mean that the things they refer to using that term do not exist. Geographers may disagree whether some specific mountain range should count as being part of the Alps, but that does not mean that the Alps do not exist or that the word "Alps" does not refer.

I believe that by this time it should be clear what I meant when I said that the polemic against historical realism is largely based on arguments that fail to convince. Indeed, some claims and arguments that one can read in anti-realists' writings seem so bewildering that readers may find themselves wondering whether they were proposed in earnest. Let alone what happens if we consider the implications of anti-realists' claims. A particularly salient case is the term "the past," which also expresses a colligatory concept, very much like "the Renaissance." So if there is nothing in the past that "the Renaissance" would refer to, the same has to apply to "the past," from which follows that nothing has ever happened in the history of the universe. Or consider Kuukkanen's view about events that are described using metaphors. He insists that "the absence of reference is common with colligatory and metaphorical concepts."[29] To take his example: "Khrushchev's Thaw" in Soviet politics and public life after Stalin's death manifested itself as the liberalization of public life, release of political prisoners from gulags, greater freedom in creative activities, somewhat increased openness in communication and intellectual exchange with "Western" countries.[30] Kuukkanen claims that a metaphor such as "Khrushchev's Thaw" could not refer, though he does not quite state the reasons for this view. All he says is that it cannot be true because the world was not literally frozen in Stalin's time.[31] He also points out that the "Khrushchev Thaw" metaphor covers such a great diversity of social and political phenomena that it would be impossible for a historian to "stumble upon a unifying link between phenomena in the source material itself."[32] However, if metaphors do not refer, then considering that the name of our galaxy, "Milky Way," is itself chosen as a metaphor, Kuukkanen's claim also implies that our galaxy does not exist. (Just as the world was not frozen during the Stalin era, so there is not real milk between the stars of the

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Milky Way.) The fact that the *phrase* "Khrushchev's Thaw" is a metaphor merely means that the *phrase* used to express the concept has been chosen as a metaphor. It is true that the world was not literally frozen during the Stalin era, but this has no relevance for the content of the concept expressed by the phrase "Khrushchev's Thaw." At most, it can be used to doubt the appropriateness of the metaphor used to express the concept. Also, it is simply not true that the events and the phenomena subsumed under "Khrushchev's Thaw" have nothing in common: they all manifest the Soviet government's more liberal attitudes after Khrushchev came to power. If Kuukkanen were right, and if these events and phenomena really had nothing in common, he would not be able to identify the events or phenomena that belong under the concept that the metaphor expresses—while we have seen that he is in fact able to list them.

ARGUMENTS ABOUT CHANGING THE PAST

There is an entire family of poor and unconvincing arguments that seek to show that the past is not fixed and determinate, and that it can be changed. Their aim is to undermine the realist assumption that the past consists of stable clusters of events that historians merely discover and describe. In another paper I have analyzed problems that such views and arguments that support them entail.[33] For our discussion here it is merely relevant to summarize some of these difficulties in order to illustrate further the poor quality of argumentation that is presented in favor of anti-realism. In principle, there are two approaches that authors who want to argue that the past can be changed can take. One can argue that whenever past events are described in new ways they change because they acquire new descriptions. Alternatively, one may follow the intuition that things do not change when they are named or described differently—that it is not enough for a past event to acquire a new description in order to change. This intuition is supported by the everyday experience with the use of language—it often happens that a verbal formulation suggests the change of one thing whereas it is really another thing that changes and acquires new properties. For instance, last year, in 2022, it was 210 years since the Battle of Borodino whereas this year (2023) the battle "became" an event that happened 211 years ago. The use of the word "became" may mislead one to think that the battle has changed. However, the battle itself has not changed, nor has it acquired new properties—what has changed is the period of time that separates us from the battle. Similarly, it may be pointed out that when historians provide new descriptions of past events, this does

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not mean that these past events change because they become describable in new ways—what changes is the pool of available descriptions of these events.

It is therefore not surprising that some authors will seek to show that past events can change in ways that are not mere changes of their descriptions. A credible change, from this point of view, has to be description-independent. Here is one such argument-example, presented recently by Adrian Currie and Daniel Swaim.[34] A flock of birds gets separated from the rest of its species, for instance by migrating to an island. Over hundreds of thousands or millions of years, these birds accumulate mutations and gradually evolve into a new species. Currie and Swaim claim that when the new species emerges, the original migration that separated the flock from the rest of their species changes and *retroactively becomes* a speciation event. This happens, they point out, regardless of whether biologists know about it, or how they describe it, if they ever came to do so.

However, problems start when we ask about the reasons to think that the original migration *became* a speciation event. Obviously, the answer has to be that without a speciation event the new species would not have evolved, and since a new species has evolved, therefore the migration must have been a speciation event. This response precisely reveals the weakness of Currie's and Swaim's argument: the migration had to be a speciation event from the beginning, otherwise the new species could not have evolved in the first place. Migration could not have *become* a speciation event only when the new species evolved, because no new species would have evolved without a speciation event that initiated the evolution process. If the migration became a speciation event only when the new species evolved, the evolution of the new species could not have happened at all.

Instead of trying to find examples of past events that retroactively change independently of how historians describe them, one may take the stance that the way events happen depends on available descriptions of these events. A variation of this position would be the view that events exist only under descriptions. This line of reasoning is advocated, for instance, by Paul Roth in his article "Narrative Explanations."[35] The view entails that no determinate events or actions happened in the past independently of the descriptions of these events formulated much later. In this case the argument is not that some events that happened on their own subsequently changed when they were (re-)described, but that past events come into existence only when they are described by historians. In other words, according to Roth there are no events by themselves, but only events-as-described, or events-with-descriptions. Without descriptions, no events. Past events existed (happened) only as, and insofar as, they are described by historians. Roth's article provides no justification for this assumption, while, at the same time, the assumption entails massive problems, and he has left them unaddressed.[36]

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In this case too, it is hard to believe that such a bizarre claim as the view that events exist only under descriptions could have been seriously proposed at all. The most obvious difficulty is that the view entails infinite regress. Descriptions of events have to be created or somehow come about. This creation or coming-about of descriptions will be an event, that cannot exist without its own description, and this description has to be created or somehow come about as well. Obviously, this requires further descriptions whose creation or coming about will require further descriptions and so on *ad infinitum*. In principle, it follows that nothing ever happened because the happening of any event would require an infinite number of descriptions to be created while no historian could create an infinite number of descriptions during his or her limited lifetime.

Another formidable difficulty of the view that the happening of past events depends on the available descriptions of these events—that past events are always events-cum-descriptions—is that what is normally thought to be a single historical event becomes as many events as there are descriptions of it. It follows that the battles of Austerlitz, Borodino or Waterloo happened as many times as they have been described. For instance, since historians still keep writing about it, the battle of Austerlitz that happened on December 2, 1805, still keeps happening anew, whenever some new historian writes about it. This is, actually, a well-known problem with perspectives that regard descriptions of events as constitutive of the events themselves—almost half a century ago, discussing a similar kind of view, Elizabeth Anscombe asked "How many battles were fought at Waterloo in 1815?"[37] At the same time, this multiplication of past events entails the multiplication of their material consequences as well. It is reasonable to assume that past events had causal impact on material reality and produced material objects, some of them existing even today. Since there are no singular events independent of descriptions but only series of events numerically different according to descriptions, these events will leave us with as many material results as there are descriptions. For instance, whenever an architectural historian describes the building history of the Pantheon in Rome, the building process thus described is a different set of events from those described by other historians. Consequently, it must produce a different physical result, yet another original Roman Pantheon built during Hadrian's era. All these new Pantheons have to share the same location in Rome in clear violation of the principle that there can be only one physical object at the same place at the same time.

I believe that the discussion so far is sufficient to explain why the arguments proposed by advocates of anti-realism are so unsuccessful in convincing practicing historians. It is, in fact, remarkable that they are taken seriously by philosophers of history who should be equipped to see through such failed arguments.

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PARTISANSHIP

Some years ago, a doctoral student from another university described to me her work on a dissertation about Michel Foucault. I recommended her to look at Robert Nola's articles, which articulate (in my view) a very systematic and penetrating analysis of the philosophical inadequacies of Foucault's relativism. "But why should I read Nola," she replied, "considering that he is critical of Foucault?" The response is appropriate for a partisan of a certain worldview: if you regard your own work as being part of a collective effort to promote that worldview, then taking into account opposing views, if only to criticize them, means giving them publicity—and this is a counterproductive thing to do. Obviously, for young academics it is important to show that they support and participate in this collective effort insofar as this determines their chances of getting published—an important career concern in a situation when the editors of major journals in the field are known to be promoters of the same worldview. At the same time, for those who lack a commitment to the worldview and do not participate in efforts to promote it, such an intellectual production will appear to be marked by a remarkable persistence that borders on blind obstinacy. Consider the argument that the historical past is unobservable and therefore cannot be known. As described above, the inadequacy of the argument has been pointed out numerous times since the 1970s. Nevertheless, even very recent literature contains the spurious link between observability and realism about historical past. This certainly does not strengthen the case of anti-realism in the eyes of those whom its advocates want to convince, and the persistent repetition of such a bad argument merely leaves the impression that no better argument is available.

The persistent refusal to consider counterarguments that have been repeatedly stated in the past significantly mars the debate about historical realism. The same as in the case of the doctoral student who refused to read the critics of Foucault, in such situations one cannot avoid the impression that we are dealing with a partisan attitude that has long ceased to be motivated by intellectual interests or scholarly desire for knowledge. Consider Roth's claim that events exist only under a description (discussed above). He originally published it in an article in 1988. In 1994 Michael Levine and Jeff Malpas criticized him for relying without justification on this assumption, which is at the core of his arguments in the article.[38] Subsequently, in his 2019 book *The Philosophical Structure of Historical Explanation* Roth simply reproduced the same sections of his article that Levine and Malpas criticized with no attempt to address their criticism.[39] Needless to say, Levine and Malpas's article with its extensive analysis of Roth's original 1988 article was not even mentioned in the bibliography of Roth's book. Or consider Ankersmit's view (discussed

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above) that only singular objects can be objects of reference. The claim was criticized in an article by John Zammito in 2005, but Ankersmit nevertheless repeated it in his book in 2012.[40] Then I pointed out the same problem in my review of that book.[41] Nevertheless, Kuukkanen repeated the same claim in his book in 2015, without addressing the criticisms.[42] Maybe Zammito and I are wrong, maybe for some reason words can indeed only refer to singular physical objects. However, the refusal to address counterarguments does undermine the credibility of Ankersmit's and Kuukkanen's position.

The weakness of anti-realists' theorizing is also indicated by their failure to consider what would happen if their views were applied to other fields that also use colligatory concepts. If "the Renaissance" is a colligatory concept, then "solar system" is too. Similarly to the Renaissance, it is not clear where it starts and ends. Are astronomers therefore wrong insofar as they believe that the phrase "the solar system" has a counterpart in the physical reality? Or consider the use of metaphors in everyday language use, such as "cloud data storage." If "Khrushchev's Thaw" did not happen because the world was not literally frozen during the Stalin era, then cloud data storage should be impossible because atmospheric clouds cannot store data. Similarly, in the philosophy of the social sciences there exists a long-standing debate about the nature of social institutions, such as banks—whether they are merely sums of individuals and their interactions or something more, over and above. One way or another, the word "bank" does not refer to a unique individual. It is, however, hard to imagine that someone would take seriously a philosopher of the social sciences who would argue that banks therefore cannot be referred to or that they do not exist, let alone the argument that banks do not exist or cannot be referred to because they are defined differently in different legislations (the way Ankersmit argued that the Renaissance has no counterpart in the past because different historians define it somewhat differently).

In order to argue that the past cannot be known the proponents of historical anti-realism often impose on historical research cognitive criteria that simply do not and could not apply in other fields—and if applied there, they would make cognitive claims impossible as well. Arguments about the unobservability of past events or phenomena are a particularly good example. As the critics of this argument have repeatedly pointed out, scientists normally study unobservable objects.[43] The subatomic phenomena are not observable, yet physicists study them on the basis of evidence. If the unobservability argument were valid, large sections of research in natural sciences would be impossible. Physics, for instance, deals with objects such as forces, fields, gravity, subatomic particles, and so on. Like historians, scientists also often infer what happened on the basis of evidence without being able to rely on direct observation. Or consider Ankersmit's and Kuukkanen's claim that words and phrases can only refer to unique objects. What about physicists'

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statements about time periods, gravity, laser beams, or electricity, or biologists' statements about blood circulation or immune systems? Are we also supposed to accept that these statements cannot be true or false on the basis of their correspondence to physical reality—or that because we can only refer to unique material things, and things we cannot refer to do not exist, time periods, gravity, laser beams, electricity, blood circulation, or immune systems cannot be referred to and do not exist?

A further example of the weakness of anti-realist theorizing is the problems with self-referentiality that notoriously plague relativist writings in general. Consider, for instance, Kuukkanen's claim that the correspondence theory of truth "is judged as unsuitable for providing the needed epistemic authority for the most important knowledge contributions of historiography, which are the synthesizing historical theses about the past."[44] The problem is that this very claim itself is a synthesizing historical thesis about historical theses written by historians in the past. Self-referentially, it says about itself that it cannot be true. If it were true, and if claims made by historians in the past were not true on the basis of their correspondence with the past, then it would itself be an example of a synthesizing historical thesis that is true on the basis of its own correspondence to the past. It would follow that it is false because it is true. It can be, however, false plain and simple, as it is perfectly reasonable that some historical claims about the past are true and others false on the basis of their correspondence to the past. So Kuukkanen's claim is either self-contradictory or false. Or consider Marek Tamm's claim that historians "still, quite unanimously and shamelessly, regard the pursuit of truth as a cornerstone of their professional work and don't feel the slightest inclination towards giving up debates over truth."[45] How does Tamm know that historians still "regard the pursuit of truth as a cornerstone of their professional work"? Either he has read their works in order to establish this or he has not. In the case he has not, the claim is ungrounded, since then he cannot know that historians "regard the pursuit of truth as a cornerstone of their professional work." But if he has read what historians wrote in the past in order to establish what they sought to achieve (i.e., truth about past), he is not better than the historians he is criticizing. To say that they shamelessly pursue truth means saying that it is true that they shamelessly pursue truth—and one has first to pursue truth about the way historians write history in order to say that they pursue truth. At the same time, Tamm's use of the word "shameless" is an example of a rude dismissal of alternative views that I have mentioned in the opening section of the chapter. Presumably Tamm would also consider as "shameless" the efforts of scientists to discover truth about the laws of nature, medical doctors to establish the true diagnosis for a patient, or of a police inspector who is trying to establish truth in a murder case. Other examples of similar derogatory dismissals of opposing views are not hard to find in the literature.[46]

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The point is that claims about historiography are themselves historical claims. Insofar as a philosopher wants to assert that the past cannot be known, he or she has to assume that past historiography cannot be known either. It is therefore not clear how anti-realists can discuss past historiographical practices at all, except by assuming that the works of past historians such as Tacitus or Gibbon are constructed at present. In that case, we are not really talking about past historiography at all. This applies to historical works that we regard as "contemporary" as well. The moment they are written and published, historical works are already written and published in the past. Consistent anti-realism in the philosophy of history must therefore preclude discussions of historiographical practices, historiographical assumptions or how historians do their work, since such claims can only be derived by studying what happened in the past. Consider the discussion between Herman Paul and Ethan Kleinberg about practicing historians' commitments to ontological realism.[47] Kleinberg's view in that debate was that historians are generally realists who take the past as a fixed and immutable object—whereas Paul challenged that view. The debate itself, however, is possible only if one assumes the reality of practicing historians and their past actions (writing history), as well as Kleinberg's and Paul's ability to know about it.[48] If Kleinberg and Paul were merely asserting their own constructs of past historiography, they would not be really answering the question of whether practicing historians take anti-realism seriously.

Problems with self-circularity also result from the lack of definition of colligatory concepts. A proper definition of colligatory concepts has never been proposed, let alone discussed. Does the phrase "the desk in my room" express a colligatory concept considering that the desk consists of a large number of molecules? The same as in the case of the Renaissance, it is not clear which molecules necessarily belong to it: if a couple thousand of molecules were removed, it would still be a desk. Does this mean that, following Ankersmit's views about the Renaissance, the phrase "my desk" has no counterpart in the reality? In fact, following Ankersmit's criteria—insofar as there is no proper definition of colligatory concepts (or no agreement about such a definition) and it is consequently not always clear which concepts count as a colligatory, colligatory concepts themselves cannot be real. Since he claims that because different historians disagree about their definitions, neither the Renaissance nor the French Revolution happened, the same must apply to the use of colligatory concepts by historians as well. Since various philosophers of history can define and describe in different ways what colligatory concepts are, it will follow that colligatory concepts themselves have never been real, and no historians have ever used them.

A further complication pertains to the question of whether the items subsumed under colligatory concepts have something in common that identifies

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them, a feature that identifies them, or not. In his *Postnarrativist Philosophy*, Kuukkanen claims on page 112 that there must exist a feature that applies to all subsumed entities if a colligatory category is to be meaningful, while on page 113 he claims that colligatory concepts categorize without any necessary shared features or resemblance among objects subsumed under the concept.[49] The dilemma is actually irresolvable if one needs to claim that phrases expressing colligatory concepts do not refer. If the items subsumed under a colligatory concept have no common features, then it is impossible to say which items belong under which colligatory concept—the decapitation of Louis XVI in that case may have been part of the October Revolution. But if the events subsumed under concepts such as "the Renaissance" or "the French Revolution" can be identified on the basis of some common features, then phrases "the Renaissance" or "the French Revolution" can be joint names for clusters of such events and jointly refer to them. In that case one cannot say that they do not refer.

POLITICS

The political views that historical anti-realism seems to support or align with can be seen as a strong reason for many people to reject it.[50] It may be pointed out that political implications should not matter in theoretical work: people should endorse or reject theoretical positions on the basis of rational arguments and not because these positions support or contradict one's political views or social concerns. This point is, however, difficult to sustain once one takes into account that the arguments stated in favor of anti-realism are unconvincing, while its advocacy is unpleasantly marked by partisanship that prevents genuine intellectual exchange. At the same time, it is hard to see that one would easily accept a consistent anti-realist position in the philosophy of history if one does not endorse the political consequences that it entails as well.

The important point here is that if it is not possible to *assert* that historical descriptions of events or clusters of events *do have* counterparts in the past—that they are true on the basis of correspondence to the past—then past acts of oppression cannot be condemned or redressed.[51] As Ian Verstegen put it once, "Ontology is not a philosophical pastime. It is the very basis of social emancipation."[52] How could one condemn something whose description does not have a counterpart in the past and therefore one cannot assert that it happened? How could one correct past wrongs whose description, what we know about them, is not true on the basis of correspondence to the past? Numerous contemporary political concerns and social issues cannot be articulated, let

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alone discussed, if one assumes that past events, and especially oppression, are merely historical constructs that have no counterparts in the past. Here are some examples.

In 1975, the New Zealand government created the Waitangi Tribunal, which seeks to establish and correct the historical injustices that New Zealand Maori suffered in the past.[53] This includes, for instance, settlements that redress land confiscations but also a wide range of discriminatory practices that happened in the past. In the period 1989–2014 about $1.5 billion was paid to redress such settlements.[54] All this required extensive historical research about what happened, for instance with land property. If anti-realism were correct, however—that is, if land confiscations that Maori suffered were mere historiographical constructs without counterparts in the past, and if the results of historical research about land confiscations were not true on the basis of their correspondence to actual past events—then there would be no settlements to be made. Obviously, this type of situation does not pertain merely to New Zealand, but to similar colonial-era land confiscations, injustices and acts of oppression in Australia, the Americas, or elsewhere in the world. If historical works that describe such processes are merely historiographical constructs that do not correspond to real events in the past, then governments have no obligations to redress the injustices described therein. Similarly, it becomes unnecessary to compensate the families of Africans who were brought to the American continent as slaves for the centuries of oppression that they and their families suffered if this oppression is regarded as a historiographical construct. Historians may describe systemic discrimination that some ethnic or racial groups suffered over long periods of time—but since for anti-realists this is going to be merely a historiographical construct that has no counterpart in the past, they can only say that there is no need to do anything about it. How can one condemn or redress past wrongs established, documented, and described by historians if one cannot assert that these descriptions correspond to what happened in the past? Why would one be obliged to do anything, if these descriptions were mere fictions and did not pertain to something that happened? Or consider what happens if historical research shows that the police force has, and has had for decades, a tendency to kill in its actions a disproportionately high percentage of people of a certain race. From the anti-realist point of view, this finding would be a historiographical construct like any other, with no counterpart in reality—so there would be no need to do anything about it. Or consider the efforts of the postwar German government to dissociate itself from the Third Reich. Can such efforts be credible, one may ask, as long as the families of prominent Nazis, who acquired wealth by exploiting slave labor of concentration camp inmates, retain their wealth? From the anti-realist point of view, what we know about the way families of prominent Nazis acquired their wealth is merely a historical construct based

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on historical evidence. Consequently, such historical knowledge about the way this wealth was acquired has no counterpart in the past, and there is nothing inappropriate about such families retaining it. Something similar applies to public monuments as well. Some people may think, for instance, that it is shameful and embarrassing for a city to have a monument to a king notorious for the cruel treatment of colonial subjects. But considering that our knowledge of these cruelties is based on historical evidence, the anti-realist perspective would be that it is nothing more than a narrative with no counterpart in the past. Consequently, there would be no reason to remove the monument. All these social and political concerns are meaningless if historians merely construct the past and do not discover what happened. It is therefore hard to be sympathetic to the views of those anti-realists who (as in the example cited above) dismiss as "shameless" those historians who regard "the pursuit of truth as a cornerstone of their professional work."

Anti-realism also aligns with a number of anti-science positions that are commonly associated with particular political agendas. Consider what the anti-realist view of the biological evolution of species could be. The phrase "the evolution of species" expresses a colligatory concept that encompasses the changes in biological species throughout the history of our planet, as described and studied by evolutionary biologists. Consequently, according to anti-realists, the term cannot refer to anything in the past. Ankersmit's and Kuukkanen's general arguments clearly apply in this case: the evolution of species was not a unique thing but a series of changes in biological species; it is not clear when it started nor when it will end; and the term was chosen as a metaphor (in Latin, *evolvo* means "unroll"). From this point of view, therefore, "the evolution of species"—just like "the Renaissance"—must be a phrase that cannot refer or correspond to something or have a counterpart in the past. At the same time divine creation, as described in the Bible, was clearly a unique event of clearly defined duration; moreover, the phrase is not a metaphor. Since "divine creation" does not express a colligatory concept, the phrase can, according to anti-realists, refer to an event that could have happened and it is thus a credible option when it comes to explaining the origin of species, whereas evolution is not.

Similarly, "global warming" or "corona virus pandemic" are phrases that do not refer to unique objects. It would be hard to say precisely which events should count as the starting moment of global warming or the corona virus pandemic; it is also unknown when they will end. It is possible to study historically how climate changed or how the epidemic evolved, and they express colligatory concepts. Following the criteria stated by Ankersmit and Kuukkanen, this means that (like "the Renaissance") phrases "global warming" or "corona virus pandemic" do not refer to anything in reality. If, as we have seen Ankersmit put it, "the Renaissance" has no counterpart in

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the past, then "global warming" as observed for the past three decades, or "the coronavirus pandemic" that has been observed since 2019 do not have counterpart in the past either. It becomes impossible to say that the climate is changing or that coronavirus has spread, since (like "the Renaissance") these are merely representational terms. Therefore, there can be nothing bad about global warming or the corona virus pandemic. Things that are not real cannot be good or bad. It is consequently pointless to seek to stop global warming or the corona virus pandemic by reducing CO_2 emission or by promoting vaccination among population. The anti-realist view has to be that these measures have no purpose since they are directed against something that is not happening.

Additional unpleasant consequences follow from the claim that historical truth is constructed institutionally, that is, that historical truth is the majority view of professional historians or that it results from a methodology whose validity is underwritten by historians' consensus (and not because it yields accurate insights into the past). Leon Goldstein for instance suggested that "for whatever reasons some historical constructions will seem to the community of scholars better than others that have been proposed, and these latter will simply be dropped from consideration."[55] However, once correspondence-based truth is omitted from historians' considerations, their agreement will not merely happen "for whatever reason." The community of historians, their institutions or the profession, do not exist independently of their social and political environment. If there is no correspondence-based truth about the past, and if the job of historians is not to seek to find it, then one cannot object if the establishment (e.g., political or academic institutions or research-funding entities) takes the right to decide about historical truth. Once correspondence-based truth about the past is rejected, and historical truth is said to be constructed by professional historians, it becomes hard to reproach the political establishment that seeks to create the convenient past by deciding who is going to count as a professional historian. Politically motivated hiring and funding decisions, as well as dismissals of recalcitrant historians then become legitimate tools that the establishment can use in order to generate a community of historians that will construct the past in accordance with its needs. Imagine that a government decides to terminate the employment of all professional historians in a country on day X and to replace them with other historians who would write history in accordance with the government's political needs. According to constructionists, the historical past and truth about it would have changed on that day, and one cannot criticize the government for the suppression of historical truth. The government merely employed a new set of professional historians who would produce the alternative truth that better suits its current needs.[56] From the point of view of historical practice, the institutional theory of historical truth merely replaces

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the search for correspondence-based truth about the past with obsequiousness to institutions and the establishment.

CONCLUSION

Postmodernists love to talk about haunting, but I fear that the debate about anti-realism that we need to face nowadays is not haunted by Derrida, maybe not even by Marx, but by Lukács. It is not easy to avoid, at the end of this chapter, the conclusion that the most dominant trends in the philosophy of history for the past fifty years are merely material for another volume of his *Zerstörung der Vernunft*. When radically improbable ideas gain ascendency in spite of the unsatisfactory arguments used to support them, and when they are promoted and defended with a tenacity quite inappropriate for scholarly and academic discussions, any historian worth his or her salt will ask about the social causes that motivate their endorsement. For the past fifty years, the rejection of objectivity as a historiographical ideal in favor of political activism has been traditionally associated with historians on the political left—however, as Tor Egil Førland has argued in his *Values, Objectivity, and Explanation*, it is not clear that the rejection of objectivity may not be ultimately benefitting their opponents.[57] Indeed, in a recent paper Aviezer Tucker has convincingly described striking epistemological similarities between populist politics and philosophies of history that do not differentiate between historiography and fiction, or that follow poststructuralist or postmodernist approaches in their denial of truth outside the text.[58] Tucker's paper seems to assume that these coincidences are merely accidental, but personally, I am not sure I can believe that. When such intellectual coincidences are persistent and happen over a long period of time, it eventually becomes hard to believe that they do not reflect extra-theoretical motivations. This is not the place to open a debate about the phenomenon's underlying motivation—but I do hope that this chapter will at least encourage a debate about the possible interpretations of the consequences of anti-realism.

NOTES

1. I owe special gratitude to Adam Timmins, Tor Egil Førland, and Nick Zangwill for their help and advice in the preparation of this paper. An early version of the paper was presented for open discussion on www.academia.edu in 2021.

2. The argument has had an exceptionally wide circulation. See, for instance Murphy, "Realism about the Past," 186; Pataut, "Anti-Realism about the Past," 190; Goldstein, *Historical Knowing*, xxv; Kleinberg, *Haunting History*, 2.

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3. Mink, "Is Speculative Philosophy of History Possible," 153.

4. Meiland, *Scepticism and Historical Knowledge*, 85–92.

5. Mandelbaum, *The Problem of Historical Knowledge*, 30.

6. Carr, "Narrative and the Real World," 117.

7. Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*, 42.

8. Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth, and Reference,* 65; Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*, 106.

9. Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth, and Reference*, 65.

10. Ibid., 65.

11. Ibid., 65. The discussion on pages 65–66 and the way he takes "singular true statements" as paradigmatic for true statements in general makes it impossible to understand his use of the term "unique" to pertain to unique sets of objects. In that case, in his discussion of the French Revolution on p. 66 he would have to admit the possibility that "the French Revolution" could refer to a set of events and that a history book could state the true statement "the French Revolution started in 1789." The possibility of referring to sets of objects is clearly precluded by his statement on p. 92 that "although a representation does indeed uniquely pick out one presented, it does not pick out one unique individual object in the world (as it should if it were to refer)."

12. Ibid., 65.

13. Ibid., 145.

14. Ibid., 83.

15. Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*, 106.

16. Ibid, 107.

17. Ibid., 110. He also says that some philosophers allow for abstract entities as objects of reference, ibid., 174.

18. Problems of social ontology are difficult to avoid in these matters, though they are rarely addressed by advocates of historical anti-realism. For a materialist or a social (ontological) individualist, a social phenomenon such as a soccer match is the actions of and interactions between soccer players during the game. Similarly, "the Renaissance" would be the joint name for a large cluster of culturally-relevant actions of and interactions between Italians during *quattrocento* and *cinquecento* that are characteristically different from the activities of the same kind in the preceding and subsequent eras. (These characteristics are definable from one field to another. Renaissance painting used perspective and medieval did not; a 1400s Gothic structure clearly differs from a Renaissance one. See the discussion in the "Introduction" in Mitrović, *Rage and Denials*.) Obviously, if one accepts that such actions of and interactions between individuals did happen (Bramante designed the Tempietto, Lorenzo Medici died in 1492, etc.) and that "the Renaissance" is a joint name for such actions and interactions, then one cannot say that the term does not refer. In order to sustain their claim, anti-realists would have to show that the Renaissance was not actions of and interactions between individuals—which amounts to the rejection of ontological individualism in the philosophy of the social sciences. At the same time, they cannot endorse social holism and say that the Renaissance was something more, over and above individuals, their actions and interactions—for they would then have to refer to the Renaissance while they are saying that this is impossible.

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19. Walsh, "Colligatory Concepts in History."
20. Ibid., 137.
21. Ibid., 139.
22. Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic*, 100.
23. Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*, 128, 116. Similarly: "One way to express this conclusion is to say that if we identify colligatory concepts as potential truth-bearers, they do not have truth-makers in the historical past and cannot therefore be true or false." Ibid., 113. "On the level of colligatory concepts, anti-realism rules." Ibid., 114.
24. Ibid., 128.
25. Ibid., 105.
26. Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth, and Reference*, 145.
27. Ankersmit, *Historical Representation*, 40; Ankersmit, "Reply to Professor Saari," 26.
28. Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth, and Reference*, 65.
29. Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*, 174.
30. Ibid., 106.
31. Ibid., 106, similarly 174.
32. Ibid., 117.
33. Mitrović, "A Naïve Realist Rumination."
34. Currie and Swaim, "Past Facts," 193.
35. Roth, "Narrative Explanations."
36. Roth merely says that "on one standard account, events are identified only under description" and then later that "without some description or another, there are no specific events." (Roth, "Narrative Explanations," 8.) This later claim does not follow from the former: although events cannot indeed be identified without descriptions, this merely means that there can be no *specified* (identified) events without descriptions. It does not entail that there were no fixed and determinate events in the past independent of their descriptions. In any case, later in the article Roth describes the claim that events exist only under description as an assumption.
37. Anscombe, "Under Description," 223.
38. Levine and Malpas, "'Telling It Like It Was," 165.
39. Roth, *Philosophical Structure*, 29–30.
40. "To be sure, no one would wish to claim that the concept 'Renaissance' refers to a 'thing' of the same order as a table or a chair. But that hardly exhausts the possibilities of theoretical and historical reference (except, perhaps, by stipulation)." Zammito, "Ankersmit and Historical Representation," 161. For Ankersmit's repetition of the claim in his 2012 book *Meaning, Truth, and Reference in Historical Representation*, see citations above.
41. Mitrović, "Opacity and Transparency," 284.
42. Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*, 105. He also notes that "some philosophers also accept abstract entities as objects that can be referred to." (Ibid., 174.) The idea that words can refer to large clusters of interactions between human individuals—the Renaissance or the French Revolution were precisely such large clusters of interactions—is simply precluded by his assumptions about reference.

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43. McCullagh, *The Truth of History*, 44; Kosso, "Observation of the Past."

44. Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*, 142.

45. Tamm, "Truth, Objectivity and Evidence," 267.

46. An example is Zeleňák, "Two Versions." The author consistently and repeatedly refers to realism as "naïve" (210, 213, 218, 219) whereas he qualifies anti-realist representationalism as "refined" (218).

47. Paul and Kleinberg, "Are Historians Ontological Realists?"

48. Note that the debate does not pertain to the question of whether historians' works typically suggest realist assumptions or whether they need to be interpreted that way. This is a different question altogether—Paul and Kleinberg's discussion pertains to what historians think and believe.

49. Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*, 112: "It is reasonable to say that although members of a colligatory concept category are not kinds of that colligatory concept, they need to *exemplify* it or its sense. There is thus this one feature or principle that has to apply to all subsumed entities in order for the colligatory category to be meaningful." Ibid., 113: "Colligatory concepts (1) *organize* lower-order data into higher-order wholes; (2) categorize *without* any necessary *shared features* or resemblance among sub-ordinated entities; . . . "

50. When I say this, I am not referring to the well-known criticism that historical anti-realism entails Holocaust denial. As I have pointed out in *Materialist Philosophy of History*, 33, such criticism is unfair. Insofar as anti-realists claim that statements about the past that include colligatory terms such as the "Holocaust" cannot be true on the basis of their correspondence to the past, they are *equally* unable to assert or to deny that the past events subsumed under such concepts happened. Attributing to them the *denial* of past events thus misrepresents their position: since they reject correspondence to the past, they cannot *deny* anything about the past. At most, one can say that it is not clear how they can *assert* that the Holocaust happened and condemn it. At the same time, anti-realists' responses to the criticism about Holocaust denial sometimes rely on arguments that undermine their general theses. Ankersmit in *Meaning, Truth and Reference*, 82, says that "doubting the existence of the Holocaust would imply doubting that some six million Jews were brutally murdered by the Nazis—a doubt that can be refuted by an abundance of historical evidence." This is certainly true. However, if it is the historical evidence that matters, then it makes little sense to claim, as he does, that "this would not be the case of a denial that there ever was a Renaissance or a Cold War" and to conclude that "the Renaissance is a purely representational term that has no counterpart in the past itself" (ibid., 82, 83). Certainly, there is also overwhelming evidence that the Renaissance or the Cold War happened. More generally, if Ankersmit believes that colligatory terms can refer to past events in the case there is sufficient evidence that these events happened, then he is actually a realist who merely needs to read a little bit more on the Renaissance or the Cold War in order to learn that there is overwhelming evidence that they happened as well.

51. Obviously, those authors whose position enables them to assert that acts of oppression that are described and documented by historians did happen would qualify as realists.

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52. Verstegen, *Realist Philosophy of Art History*, xv.

53. See https://waitangitribunal.govt.nz/.

54. https://www.parliament.nz/en/pb/research-papers/document/00PlibC5191/historical-treaty-settlements.

55. Goldstein, "History and the Primacy of Knowing," 42. In the debate about this paper on www.academia.edu, David Černín accurately pointed out that Goldstein systematically differentiated between "the real past" and "the historical past" and regarded only the latter as constructed by historians. Goldstein indeed emphasized this distinction a number of times in his article that I cite here (see ibid., 30, 32, 37). He did not deny the real past, which happened independently of what historians write about it, nor did he claim that historians construct the real past. Rather, the point is that he took "the real past to be irrelevant to the practice of history" (ibid., 32). The citation presented here, as well as my discussion, obviously pertain to the "historical past," which he conceives as unrelated to "the real past."

56. Academic employment regulations typically make it impossible for the political establishment to replace all professional historians in a country in a single day. Nevertheless, efforts to achieve the same effect piecemeal, by terminating the employment of a few recalcitrant individuals and intimidating others are well known both in totalitarian and democratic systems. In such situations too, from the constructionist point of view, it is impossible to condemn the establishment for the suppression of historical truth, because truth is what is constructed by the community of professional historians. What counts as the dominant view among professional historians can always be legitimately changed by the establishment by changing who counts as a professional historian—for instance by providing funding for the hiring of historians who would be obsequious to the interests of the establishment.

57. Førland, *Values, Objectivity, and Explanation*.

58. Tucker, "Historical Evitability," 160–61.

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About the Editors and Contributors

Tor Egil Førland is professor of history and head of the Department of Philosophy, Classics, History of Art and Ideas at the University of Oslo, Norway. He has published books and articles on strategic export controls during the Cold War; the student revolt and lifestyle changes of the 1960s; and historical theory, as in his most recent monograph *Values, Explanation, and Objectivity in Historiography* (Routledge, 2017).

Branko Mitrović holds PhDs in both architecture and philosophy and is currently employed as professor of architectural history and theory at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) in Trondheim. He is the author or co-author of nine books including *Materialist Philosophy of History* (Lexington, 2020) and has been a recipient of the Humboldt Research Award.

Adam Timmins teaches philosophy at the University of York. His *Towards a Realist Philosophy of History* was published by Lexington in 2022. He is currently working on a monograph on Thomas Kuhn, as well as co-authoring a paper on the aesthetics of "guilty pleasures."

Ian Verstegen is associate director of visual studies at the University of Pennsylvania. Trained in early modern art history, he also works extensively on historiography, aesthetics, and philosophy of history. He is the author of *A Realist Theory of Art History* (Routledge, 2010) and the editor of *Maurice Mandelbaum and American Critical Realism* (Routledge, 2012).

Veli Virmajoki is postdoctoral researcher at the University of Turku, Finland. Virmajoki's work focuses on philosophy of science, philosophy of historiography, and futures research. He has published several articles about explanation in history, such as "What Should We Require from an Account of Explanation in Historiography?" (2020) and "Frameworks in Historiography:

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Explanation, Scenarios, and Futures" (forthcoming), both in the *Journal of the Philosophy of History*.

David Weberman is associate professor in the Department of Philosophy at Central European University in Vienna, Austria. After earning degrees in Germany and the United States, he taught at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Georgia State University. He has published widely on twentieth-century continental philosophy and the philosophy of history, including, most recently, "On the Compatibility of Competing Narratives" in the *Balkan Journal of Philosophy* (2021) and "Interpretation" in the *Routledge Companion to History and Theory* (2021).