

Branko Mitrović

Polemic with Frank Ankersmit, Jouni-Matti Kukkanen and Paul Roth on the Reality of the Past: My Contributions

In this file I include the original versions of my articles that were published in the *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 18 (2024) as part of a polemic about the implications of historical anti-realism. In the first article I argued that prominent formulations of historical anti-realism entail the view that no past events ever happened. The responses to this thesis by Frank Ankersmit, Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen and Paul Roth were published in the same issue. Obviously, I cannot include here these articles that I have not authored, but they can be obtained at <https://brill.com/view/journals/jph/18/2/jph.18.issue-2.xml> . My second article analyses their responses, and shows that they fail to refute the *reductio* to the absurd view that no past events ever happened.

Branko Mitrović

What is historical anti-realism and how to define it?¹

(This is the originally submitted version of the article published in the *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 18 (2024), 113-124.)

[ABSTRACT] Authors who advocate historical anti-realism have often insisted that they do not claim that no past events happened or that the past did not happen. In this paper I show that in spite of such protestations, the core arguments presented by Leon Goldstein, Paul Roth, Frank Ankersmit and Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen preclude the possibility that the past or past events happened. [ABSTRACT ENDS]

Historical anti-realism encompasses a number of diverse theoretical perspectives on human history, on historians' work and the past in general. Insofar as one wants to discuss these perspectives jointly, and to refer to them using a single phrase such as "historical anti-realism", it is reasonable to expect that one should be able to state some joint criterion by which such perspectives are identified. What is it that they have in common, and that differentiates them from other perspectives on history and historians' work? In the Introduction to a book that we have recently co-edited together (*The Poverty of Anti-Realism*, Lanham: Lexington, 2023) Tor Egil Førland and I have proposed that this distinction should pertain to the way the knowledge of the past is conceived of. From the anti-realist point of view, we have suggested, historians cannot provide accounts of the past that are "true on the basis of correspondence to a stable past that is independent of their beliefs".² I want to propose here, for the purpose of discussion, a different common denominator for anti-realist perspectives on the past, and a different way to state their common definition.

Historical anti-realism, I submit here, *entails* that the past, including singular past events and situations, did not happen at all—more precisely, that no past event ever happened. The definition I propose here says that

Historical anti-realism is a position that entails that no past events, or the past (understood as the sum of all past events until now) have happened.

Since I am proposing a definition, my job here is to show that this characterization is indeed satisfied by prominent and well-known theories of history that reject historiographical realism. This is certainly a challenge, since the theorists whose views are typically and commonly described as anti-realist have repeatedly insisted that they do not deny that the past, or individual historical events happened. Leon Goldstein, for instance, explicitly differentiated between the real past, that happened, and the

¹ I owe gratitude to Tor Egil Førland, Adam Timmins and Veli Virmajoki for help and advice in the preparation of this paper. I became aware of the problems of finding a joint definition of historical anti-realism while working with Tor on the book *The Poverty of Realism* that we co-edited together.

² Tor Egil Førland and Branko Mitrović, "Introduction" in Tor Egil Førland and Branko Mitrović (eds), *The Poverty of Anti-Realism*, Lanham: Lexington, 2023, vii-xxiv, vii.

historical past, that is constructed by historians.³ He did not deny the real past, but insisted that it is irrelevant for historians' work.⁴ Historians' work, he insists, generates the historical past but provides no insights into the real past—this historical past is an arbitrary construct generated by the community of historians “for whatever reason”, independently of the real past.⁵ Similarly, authors such as Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, Hayden White, Keith Jenkins, and Frank Ankersmit in their writings have allowed that individual statements about singular events in the past (such as “Stalin owned a gun”) can be true or false on the basis of correspondence to the past.⁶ The core thesis of Paul Roth's Irrealism is that past events exist only under description—so he is certainly not saying that no past or past events happened, but rather that what happened depends on how it is described. All this may sound very reasonable, and as Adam Timmins pointed out, “[t]o 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.”⁷ Indeed, I do not know of a theorist or a philosopher of history who explicitly endorsed the view that the past did not happen.

My point, however, does not pertain to what these authors say, or to their declarative endorsements of the past reality, but to what their arguments entail. The important word in the definition that I have proposed is *entail*. The aim is to show that the main thrust of anti-realists' arguments makes it impossible for them to sustain the view that the past or past events happened. In order to show this, I will analyze here three prominent positions: Ankersmit's and Kuukkanen's view that colligatory statements have no counterparts in the past, Goldstein's separation of the historical past from the real past and Roth's Irrealism. I will argue that none of them can sustain the claim that at least some events happened in the past, nor that the past, understood as the sum of all events until now, has happened. I will start with Roth's Irrealism, because in this case the analysis is straightforward. Then I will address Ankersmit's and Kuukkanen's views, and they require a longer analysis. I have placed the analysis of Goldstein's position at the end because it is quite simple and results from the way Goldstein phrased it.

Paul Roth's Irrealism

The important thesis of Roth's Irrealism is the assumption that events exist only under description.⁸ It may therefore seem wrong to say that in his view past events (or the past that they constitute) did not happen at all. His view seems to be rather that they did happen, but that this happening depends on their descriptions that often came about

³ Goldstein, Leon. “History and the Primacy of Knowing” *History and Theory* 16, (1977): 29-52, 30, 32.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵ As he put it, “[f]or 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.” Goldstein, “History”, 42.

⁶ Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of History*. Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 173. Hayden White, *Metahistory. Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1973, 6, note 5. Keith Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History*, London: Routledge, 1991, 40. Frank Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic. A Semantic Analysis of the Historian's Language*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983. 70 and 101, 103. The example about Stalin's gun is Kuukkanen's, *Postnarrativist*, 173.

⁷ Adam Timmins, “Idealism in Historical Theory 1970-2020” in Førlund and Mitrović eds, *The Poverty of Anti-Realism*, 3-24, 5.

⁸ Paul Roth, “Narrative Explanations: The Case of History”, *History and Theory*, 27 (1988), 1-13, 9. The relevant section is reprinted verbatim in his *The Philosophical Structure of Historical Explanation*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2020, 29-30.

much later. The formulation that “events exist only under description” implies that past events come into existence only when their descriptions are formulated, but they do come into existence. Roth’s critique of Arthur Danto’s Ideal Chronicler precisely targets Danto’s endorsement of the existence of “events ... apart from our theoretical specification of them”, since this “realist inference” in Roth’s view is both “unjustified” and “patently unjustifiable”.⁹ Roth’s point, one should also bear in mind, is not the mere platitude that the *identification* of events depends on our descriptions.¹⁰ His is not the view that events are somehow there in the past and pre-exist our identification of them, but that we need descriptions to identify them. This would be a mere truism—it can hardly be controversial that in order to identify something we need its description. In his view, events cannot happen before or independently of their descriptions’ coming into existence—or, as he puts it: “Events simpliciter cannot be shown to exist; they are not known to be of nature’s making rather than of ours. Events exist only by proxy”.¹¹

Like other authors discussed here, Roth does not explicitly say that past events, and thus the past itself understood as the sum of all past events, did not happen. As I have just explained, from what he says, his view seems to be that the past and the past events that make it up did happen, but that these events happened in the past only after they acquired their descriptions. However, here is the rub. The thesis that events exist only under description results in a number of difficulties, that I have analyzed in another paper.¹² One of these difficulties is that the thesis entails infinite regress. The description of an event, that is necessary for the event to happen, also needs to come about, and this coming about of the description is itself an event that further requires its own description. Obviously, this description needs to come about too, its coming about is also an event that requires a further description and so on. In other words, Roth’s view that events exist only under description entails that no event in the past, present or future can or could have ever happened, because this would require an infinite list of descriptions to come about for it to happen. Assuming even minimal necessary time needed to produce a description of a single event, historians will still need infinite time to produce an infinite number of descriptions that are necessary for a single past event to happen. But historians have not yet had infinite time to do it. Therefore Roth’s view that “events exist only under description” necessarily entails that no past events or the past have happened.

Frank Ankersmit, Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen and colligatory concepts

It was W. H. Walsh who drew attention to the historiographical role of colligatory concepts such as “the Renaissance”, “the French Revolution” or “the Cold War” and to the ways historians use them in order to deal with large amounts of material by identifying common trends and themes.¹³ Such concepts subsume large sets of events with general common characteristics. Walsh subscribed to the realist perspective on colligatory concepts and insisted that they “must have a firm foundation in fact”.¹⁴ In later decades, however, theorists such as Frank Ankersmit and Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen

⁹ Roth, “Narrative explanations”, 8.

¹⁰ He makes this observation earlier in the text (*ibid.*, 8).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹² Branko Mitrović, “A Naïve Realist Ruminations on the Roth-and-Dewulf versus Currie-and-Swaim Exchange”, *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 16 (2022), 295-307.

¹³ W. H. Walsh, “Colligatory Concepts in History” in Patrick Gardiner ed., *The Philosophy of History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974, 127-144.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 137.

have rejected this realist perspective and argued that colligatory concepts (or the phrases that express them) “do *not* refer to things in or aspects of the past”, 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.”¹⁵ More specifically, for instance, according to Ankersmit, “the Renaissance is a purely representational term that has no counterpart in the past itself”.¹⁶ Kuukkanen similarly states that expressions such as “Cold War” do not refer, since they “do not seem to correspond to any singular object in the historical world.”¹⁷ (The mentioning of a “singular object” in this context pertains to his and Ankersmit’s assumption that words and phrases can only refer to singular things and events, including past events described by historians.¹⁸) At the same time, as mentioned above, both Ankersmit and Kuukkanen allow that singular past events did happen in the past and that historians’ statements about these events refer to them. The point I want to make here is that this later view is not compatible with their claim that colligatory concepts have no counterparts in the past.

Let us start with a seemingly unrelated example. Consider cats. In biological classification, cats as a species are referred to as *felis catus*. There are two ways to conceive of the reference of this Latin phrase. One possibility—let me call it the *individualist* view—is that the Latin phrase refers to all individual cats that ever existed or will ever exist. We classify some animals as cats on the basis of their common characteristics, and *felis catus* is a joint name for all of them. In opposition to this individualist view, the *holist* understanding would postulate the species cat as an abstract entity, over and above all individual cats. In that case *felis catus* as a name of the species refers to this abstract entity. Now, imagine that someone says that *felis catus* does not exist, or that this Latin phrase “has no counterpart in reality”. From the point of view of ontological individualism that person is saying that no cats ever existed or will exist—if the set of all cats does not exist, then there can be no individual cats, because they make up that set. As Aristotle put it, “there is no whole over and above the parts of a thing”.¹⁹ But if we adopt the holist understanding of *felis catus*, then saying that *felis catus* does not exist means that there is no such an abstract entity that would exist over and above individual cats. *De facto*, this is precisely what ontological individualists would say: that there are only individual cats, but no abstract, immaterial Form of Cathood, over and above the set of all cats. Consequently, if *felis catus* is understood to be an abstract entity, then saying that it does not exist still leaves the possibility that the phrase could refer to and be the joint name of all cats taken together. In that case, *felis catus* will have a clear counterpart in the animal world.

Closer to our topic, one needs to take into account the equivalent dilemma between ontological individualism and ontological holism in the philosophy of social

¹⁵ Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic*, 100. Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist*, 128, 116. Or, as he put it, “On the level of colligatory concepts, anti-realism rules.” *Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁶ Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic*, 83.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁸ Both Ankersmit and Kuukkanen insist on this view, see Frank Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth, and Reference in Historical Representation*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012, 65, 145, Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist*, 106. The claim entails that, for instance, phrases such as “the Venetian ships in the battle of Lepanto” do not refer to anything although we can refer individually to every single ship of that Venetian ship by its name. For a discussion this highly counterintuitive view, see Branko Mitrović, “Arguments, Partisanship, Politics. Is Anti-Realism in the Philosophy of History a Right-Wing Ideology?” in Førlund and Mitrović, *The Poverty of Anti-Realism*, 283-208, 186-189.

¹⁹ Aristotle, *Physics*, 210a16.

sciences. This dilemma pertains to the nature of social entities such as banks or courts, social phenomena such as economic crises, or events such as soccer matches. Are they to be understood as large sets of individuals and their interactions or as abstract entities over and above such sets? It is important to point out that the dilemma that is relevant for us here pertains to the *ontology* of social entities, phenomena and events. It should not be confused with the debate about *methodological* individualism, which concerns their reducibility to individuals and their interactions. Methodological individualism is a controversial idea that has often been contested, while ontological individualism is the dominant view among social scientists.²⁰ For our discussion here it is important to note that the colligatory concepts discussed by authors such as Ankersmit and Kuukkanen (“the Renaissance”, “the French Revolution”, “the Cold War”) refer to social phenomena that, in the sense of their ontology, can be understood as large clusters of actions of individuals and interactions between them, or as abstract entities over and above such actions and interactions. An ontological individualist will thus assume that the Renaissance was a very large cluster of actions and interactions of *quattrocento* and *cinquecento* Italians (Leonardo da Vinci painting *The Last Supper*, Daniele Barbaro translating Vitruvius, Leon Battista Alberti writing the first Italian grammar and so on). If the Renaissance is all these actions taken together, as individualists understand it, then saying that “the Renaissance” has no counterpart in the past means that none of these events²¹ happened, plain and simple. The alternative holist view would be to understand the Renaissance as an abstract entity, over and above Renaissance-type actions and interactions of *quattrocento* and *cinquecento* Italians. In that case, saying that “the Renaissance” has no counterpart in the past merely means that no such abstract entity existed over and above actions and interactions of individuals. The same as in the case of cats, this boils down to the endorsement of the individualist position. Realists can then say that the Renaissance still has its counterpart in the past, which is the cluster of all events, actions and interactions of individuals that make it up.

We thus come to the question of how the proponents of the view that colligatory concepts have no counterparts in the past understand the social-historical phenomena whose existence they deny. Are they ontological individualists or ontological holists? What do they mean when they say that “the Renaissance ... has no counterpart in the past itself” (Ankersmit) or that “colligatory concepts are constructions without counterparts in historical reality” (Kuukkanen).²² What are they actually denying when they make such claims? The important point is that ontological holism about social phenomena is not very helpful for the claims they want to make. Imagine that they understand the Renaissance or the Cold War as abstract entities, over and above actions and interactions of individuals. In that case, when they deny that the phrases “the Renaissance” or “the Cold War” have counterparts in the past, they are merely saying that there are no abstract entities to which these phrases refer. In that case, they would be endorsing ontological individualism—as mentioned, a position that is the majority view

²⁰ Lars Udehn, *Methodological Individualism*, London: Routledge, 2001, 2: “Today, it is fairly common to accept ontological individualism, but deny methodological individualism”. Brian Epstein, “Ontological Individualism Reconsidered”, *Synthese*, 166 (2009) 187-213, 187: “ontological individualism thus is almost universally accepted”. Keith Sawyer, *Social Emergence. Societies as Complex Systems*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 66: “Most sociologists, both individualists and collectivists, try to avoid hypostatizing or reifying social groups; they accept that the only real entities are individuals. This position is called *ontological individualism*: the ontological position that only individuals exist”.

²¹ I assume here that actions of individuals and their interactions count as events.

²² Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic*, 83. Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist*, 116.

in the social sciences anyhow. However, if this is all, and if their position is mere rejection of ontological holism, then it will follow that “The Renaissance” or “the Cold War” *do have* their counterparts in the past, and that these counterparts are large clusters of individuals’ actions and interactions. Consequently, the only way to say that colligatory concepts such as “the Renaissance” or “the Cold War” have no counterparts in the past is to also deny that *understood individualistically* such concepts have counterparts in the past—and this will entail that no events, such as actions and interactions of individuals, that are subsumed under these concepts ever happened.

Consider, for instance, Kuukkanen’s statement that colligatory expressions “do not seem to correspond to any singular object in the historical world”.²³ This can be taken to suggest that in his view colligatory expressions should not be taken to refer to holistically understood social phenomena, over and above individuals and their interactions—for instance, to the Cold War understood as a single abstract entity, over and above actions and interactions of individuals who participated in it. But by saying that no such singular object exists, Kuukkanen is seemingly agreeing with the proponents of ontological individualism who also think that the Cold War as a singular abstract entity, over and above actions and interactions of individuals never existed. The rub is, however, that individualists will then insist that a the Cold War was not a single entity but a cluster of actions and interactions of individuals and that the phrase “the Cold War” refers to this set. So, insofar as Kuukkanen wants to say, with Ankersmit, that the Cold War has no counterpart in the past, he also has to claim that the actions of individuals and their interactions, i.e. the events that we subsume under the concept of the Cold War, did not happen. If he merely said that there was no Cold War as a single abstract entity over and above what individuals did and how they interacted, this would not be enough to establish that such colligatory expressions have no counterparts in the past. To do this, one has to deny also that the actions of individuals and their interactions that (from the individualist point of view) constituted these phenomena, happened.

All this admitted, this still does not mean that Ankersmit’s or Kuukkanen’s views entail that no past events, or the past in general ever happened. So far, we have seen that if they want to say that colligatory concepts have no counterparts in the past, they have to deny that the social-historical phenomena these concepts refer to, and ultimately the events that constitute these phenomena, happened. It is nevertheless conceivable that there may be past events, actions of individuals and their interactions, that are not subsumable under any colligatory concepts. The discussion so far merely indicates that they have to deny that the events that are encompassed by colligatory concepts happened—they need not claim that no past events whatsoever or no past itself happened. Arguably, this is all already controversial enough: if events such as Leonardo painting *The Last Supper* and Palladio designing the Rotonda are parts of the Renaissance, then saying that “the Renaissance” has no counterpart in the past means saying that Leonardo did not paint *The Last Supper* and Palladio did not design the Rotonda—in spite of all extensive the evidence to the opposite. Even worse, if the events that constituted the Renaissance, the French Revolution or the Cold War, did not happen, then other events that causally depend on these events could not have happened either—and we are indeed seriously left to wonder whether anything has happened since the Renaissance at all. Vice-versa, if we assume that the events that constituted the Renaissance, the French Revolution, or the Cold War did happen, then

²³ Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist*, 107.

social individualists will be able to say that such events taken together are precisely the past counterparts of “the Renaissance”, “the French Revolution” or “the Cold War”.

Problems are thus massive, but strictly speaking, none of this still entails that no past event whatsoever (or the past as the sum of all past events) happened, since, as mentioned, there may be some past events that no colligatory concepts subsume and that do not causally depend on the events that are subsumed under colligatory concepts. However, here is the rub. The important point is that “the past”, understood as everything that happened until now, is itself a colligatory concept. It neatly fits Walsh’s explanation of the nature of such concepts. “Colligation[s]”, Walsh explains, “cover the activity by which the historian groups different events together ‘under appropriate conceptions’”, they result from the historian’s confrontation with what looks a largely unconnected mass of material, and “to colligate is broadly to organize”.²⁴ Since this all applies to “the past”—“the past” clearly organizes and groups together the totality of diverse events that happened before now under a single concept—it follows that “the past” itself is an exceptionally wide colligatory concept. It is very hard to deny that it is not—and any attempt to deny this would be heavily marred by the fact that the advocates of the view that colligatory concepts have no counterpart in the past have failed to provide definitions of colligatory concepts or formally deduce from the characteristics of these concepts that they do not have counterparts in the past.²⁵ Consequently, since “the past” is itself a colligatory concept, Ankersmit’s and Kuukkanen’s view that colligatory concepts have no counterpart in the past entails that “the past” and the events that constitute it (i.e. all past events before now) have no counterpart in the past, i.e. that they did not happen.

Leon Goldstein and the real past

Goldstein’s differentiation between the real past and the historical past seems to make the definition that I have proposed inapplicable. As mentioned above, Goldstein assumed that there was the real past and real past events that happened on their own, independently of the historical past, which is what historians know about.²⁶ Historians’

²⁴ W. H. Walsh, “Colligatory Concepts in History” in Patrick Gardiner ed., *The Philosophy of History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974, 127-144, 133, 136, 137.

²⁵ Kukkanen (*Postnarrativist*, 113) has come closest to providing such a definition, but what he says is unfortunately not very helpful. He says (his italics): “Colligatory concepts: (1) *organise* lower-order data into higher-order wholes; (2) categorize *without* any necessary *shared features* or resemblance among sub-ordinated entities; and (3) are *particular*, that is, deal with phenomena restricted to a specific time and place.” The formulation is marred by the fact that on the previous page he stated precisely the opposite from what is listed here as criterion (2) here—he said: “There is thus this one feature or principle that has to apply to all subsumed entities in order to the colligatory category to be meaningful.” (Ibid., 112.) An additional problem is that criterion (3), the restriction “to a specific time and place”, seems to preclude that “the Renaissance”, “the French Revolution” or “the Cold War” could be colligatory concepts, since for all three of them it is impossible to specify the exact moment when they started or finished. Most importantly, it is not at all clear that (or why) *all* the concepts that do satisfy these three criteria cannot have counterpart in the past. No proof of this universal claim has been provided. As for the “the past” as a colligatory concept, it should be noted that it satisfies the first two criteria: it organizes data into wholes and since it encompasses all events until now, the set of events it subsumes could hardly be more diverse. However, the end-limit of the events it subsumes is “now” and it may be pointed out that its duration is not specific (criterion 3). In this sense “the past” is as much a colligatory concept as this is the case with “the Renaissance”, “the French Revolution” or “the Cold War”.

²⁶ I say “assumed” because he clearly implied that unlike historical past, the real past happened. Although I could not find a citation where he explicitly stated that “the real past happened” he does say, for instance that “I also believe that we had ancestors who lived and acted in some sort of real past time” Goldstein, “History and the Primacy of Knowing”, 20. He built his description of the historical past precisely on the

knowledge, in his view, pertains to the historical past that is unrelated to the real past, and is constructed by historians. There is no correspondence between the real past and the historical past.

The problem is, however, that Goldstein's introduction of the real past begs the question of how he knows about it. How can Goldstein know that there is the real past that is different from the historical past? If all that can be known about the past is the historical past, and the historical past has no correspondence to what happened once, then insofar he knows about the "the real past", this "real past" has to be part of the historical past and cannot not correspond to what happened in the past either. If historical knowledge is constructed by historians on the basis of their consensus, "for whatever reason" as he says, then this will also pertain to any knowledge about the real past, including the knowledge that it happened. The real past in that case did not happen, it is merely something that historians such as Goldstein talk about. Insofar as all historical knowledge is only constructed by historians, and has no correspondence to anything that happened, Goldstein's "real past" cannot be any more real than any other historical event or phenomenon described within historical past. In other words, like the rest of the historical past, it did not happen, though there is widespread historians' consensus that makes them say that it did.

It does not help to answer here that there are actually two types of knowledge about the past: historical knowledge (constructed by historians) and knowledge about the real past, whereby that the former has no correspondence to the past while the latter does. This would indeed enable Goldstein to say that unlike historical past, the real past really happened, but this would then mean that knowledge about the real past is the true historical knowledge justified by correspondence to the real past, whereas what he calls "historical knowledge" is merely a large cluster of false beliefs shared by historians, without correspondence to what happened in the past. In that case, it is reasonable to say that according to the standard use of the phrase, knowledge about the real past is actually historical knowledge, while Goldstein's use of the phrase "historical knowledge" for false historians' beliefs is mere play with words. Historical knowledge is, it will be pointed out, not what historians falsely believe, but what it true about the past on the basis of correspondence to it.

Conclusion

People can be anti-realists about various things and in a variety of ways. As a materialist, for instance, I am an anti-realist about abstract entities. This commits me to the rejection of externalism in the philosophy of language and makes me endorse some less common views about mathematical objects. In other words, it is normal that people believe in the existence of some things and do not believe in the existence of others. Philosophical problems start, however, when one endorses contradictory claims about the things that there are and that there are not.

I believe it should be clear by now that such contradictions systematically mar discussions about historical anti-realism. Roth's view that events exist only under descriptions generates infinite regress that precludes the possibility that any events happened at all. If one denies that colligatory concepts have counterparts in the past, then insofar as these concepts subsume various past events, it becomes necessary to say that these events did not happen. At the same time, "the past" itself expresses a

opposition to the real past. See Leon Goldstein, *Historical Knowing*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976, 38, 61, 136, 195 and Goldstein, "History and the Primacy of Knowing", 32, 34, 35.

colligatory concept, so if one denies that such concepts have counterparts in the past, this will pertain to “the past” too. Goldstein’s claim that there is the real past cannot be sustained once his view of the historical past is endorsed because any statement about this real past necessarily pertains to the historical past. It is hard to avoid the impression that these contradictions derive from the effort to endorse fashionable constructionist perspectives, useful for one’s career and publication record on the one hand and still appear reasonable on the other. As it turns out, this is not possible. Middle-ground positions rarely work in philosophy.

Branko Mitrović

Response to Frank Ankersmit, Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen and Paul Roth

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[ABSTRACT] In this text I analyze Frank Ankersmit's, Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen's and Paul Roth's responses to my claim that anti-realism in the philosophy of history entails that the past did not happen. I conclude that Ankersmit has failed to understand the argument I presented, Kuukkanen agrees with my view, while Roth has addressed my earlier criticism of the view that the past can be changed. [ABSTRACT ENDS]

I am very grateful to Chiel van den Akker for having invited Frank Ankersmit, Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen and Paul Roth to comment on my article and for allowing me respond to their comments. From their responses, I gather that Kuukkanen actually agrees with me (at least implicitly) while Ankersmit has failed to understand the problem I have presented. Roth has simply refused to address the argument that pertained to his work, and instead he discussed my earlier critique of the idea that the past can be changed. The responses are unfortunately marred by unnecessary meandering, unproductive evasions and in Ankersmit's case salted with distinctly entertaining rudeness. Consequently, in all three cases it takes some interpretative effort to extract the actual kernel of their response to my original article. In what follows I will first discuss Ankersmit's and Kuukkanen's contributions together (since they were responding to the same argument) and then Roth's response.

Ankersmit and Kuukkanen: the argument

Let me start by presenting once again the argument to which Ankersmit and Kuukkanen were responding. This time I will start from the assumption that the past and past events indeed happened. Events such as Julius II's interdict on Venice, Leon Battista Alberti meeting Filippo Brunelleschi, the execution of Savonarola, Veronese painting frescoes in Villa Barbaro, and numerous others, are standardly subsumed under the concept expressed using the word "Renaissance". In other words, "the Renaissance" is the joint name for these and many other similar events. Now, consider Ankersmit's and Kuukkanen's claim that colligatory concepts such as "the Renaissance" have no counterpart in the past.²⁷ The obvious understanding of this statement is that the events

²⁷ "... the Renaissance is a purely representational term that has no counterpart in the past itself." F. Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth and Reference in Historical Representation*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012, 83. See also *ibid.* 13 where he endorses with approval the rejection of the view that the past contains counterparts to ideas as conceived by proponents of German historicism. "... colligatory concepts

such as those I have just listed, and numerous others that are taken to constitute the Renaissance, did not happen. I say “constitute” because after thirty years of working in various fields of Renaissance studies I have never met a colleague who thought that the Renaissance is something else than all the events, people, social phenomena and so on that made it up.²⁸ This is indeed in line with Walsh’s original explanation that by using colligations the historian “sums the individual events”.²⁹ For those who share this view stating that “the Renaissance” has no counterpart in the past necessarily means that the events that made it up did not happen. The statement is similar to the claim that “the Karakoram” (a mountain range in Asia that includes the mountain peaks K2, Broad Peak, Distaghil Sar and so on) has no counterpart in reality. It is unclear how one could make this claim but still assert that these the peaks that make it up exist.³⁰ Or consider the phrase “Gothic architecture” that refers either to Gothic-style buildings or to Gothic-era building practices or to both. It makes little sense to say that Gothic buildings were built in the old times but that the phrase “Gothic architecture” has no counterpart in the past.

It is, however, possible to conceive of the Renaissance differently, and believe that it was some kind of an abstract immaterial entity (or force) that existed over and above these events, people, social phenomena and so on. In my experience, this view is rare among Renaissance scholars today, but it was widespread in German scholarship in the first half of the twentieth century. At the time I wrote the article that has motivated the present discussion I was not sure whether this may be Ankersmit’s or Kuukkanen’s view—and one important result of the current exchange is the clarification that they explicitly reject it by endorsing the nominalist position.³¹ Clearly, someone who believes that the Renaissance was an abstract entity over and above individual events that happened during the era, while maintaining that the concept “the Renaissance” had no counterpart in the past, is denying the Renaissance as an abstract immaterial entity. However, such a person still leaves to the critics the possibility to respond that although there is no abstract entity that would be the counterpart of “the Renaissance”, this counterpart is actually the events, individuals, phenomena and so on that made up the Renaissance. So, if the claim that the Renaissance has no counterpart in the past is going

are constructions without counterparts in historical reality.” J. M. Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of History*, Houndmills: Palgrave, 2015, 116.

²⁸ Clearly, in addition to a general agreement about a great number of such events that are subsumed under the concept of “the Renaissance” there is going to be a significant spectrum of disagreement, depending on various criteria and disciplinary emphasis. Some architectural historians say that the Renaissance started with Brunelleschi’s departure for Rome in 1401 and while literary historians may say that it started with Petrarch’s ascent to Mt Ventoux. Ankersmit has argued that colligatory concepts have no counterpart in the past because historians disagree about the criteria by which events would be subsumed under concepts such as “the Renaissance” or “the French Revolution”. F. Ankersmit, *Historical Representation*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001, 40; F. Ankersmit, “Reply to Professor Saari”, *Rethinking History* 9 (2005) 23-33, 25. However, such disagreements are equivalent to the way geographers may discuss whether a certain mountain range should count as part of the Alps—while this disagreement does not entail that “the Alps” has no counterpart in reality.

²⁹ W. H. Walsh, “Colligatory Concepts in History”, in P. Gardiner, ed., *The Philosophy of History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978, 127-144, 136.

³⁰ One may say that the Karakoram as described by geographers has no counterpart in reality though *some* of the peaks that geographers subsume under this mountain range still exist. But saying that the Karakoram has no counterpart in reality plain and simple entails that the mountain peaks that constitute it do not exist.

³¹ Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy*, 55, also expressed dilemmas about possible interpretations of Ankersmit’s ontology.

to be true in this case too, it will still be necessary to say that the past events subsumed under “the Renaissance” did not happen.

Finally, “the past” understood as a cluster of all events that have happened until now is itself a colligatory concept, so if colligatory concepts have no counterpart in the past, it will follow that no past event, or the past that these events constituted, ever happened.

Ankersmit’s and Kuukkanen’s responses

Both Ankersmit and Kuukkanen have associated this argument with the medieval scholastic debate between realism and nominalism. Ankersmit starts his article with an effort to place the argument in the context of this debate. Having worked on late scholastics for some decades, I’ve precisely avoided this contextualization since I know that the translation of modern debates into scholastic framework is often a slippery slope. Contrary to what Ankersmit suggests, this often takes much more philosophical refinement than undergraduate knowledge about Occam’s razor. On the most elementary level, realism about universals or abstract entities is not the same as realism about individual events. (For some unexplainable reason both Ankersmit and Kuukkanen seem to confuse my realism about individual past events with realism about abstract universals.) Possibly, it was precisely the failure to make this distinction that has triggered Ankersmit’s irritations. His discussion starts with the presentation of medieval realism as the view that universals exist separately, along individuals. The opposing, nominalist, position would be that the rejection of the separate existence of such abstract universals need not entail the rejection of individuals in which they are manifested. In that case, universals will be the properties or conjunctions or properties that are in individual things; they need not exist separately from individual objects. This would be the view, for instance, that there are individual red things, but no abstract, immaterial redness over and above them—to state an example from Quine that Ankersmit cited elsewhere.³² All this should be uncontroversial. However, the rub that has escaped Ankersmit’s attention is that even if one endorses nominalism, one cannot say that properties such as “redness” have no counterpart in reality: such properties are still there, but in things. The only way to claim that redness has no counterpart in reality is then to say that there are no red things whatsoever. So this brings us back to my argument: the equivalent to the nominalist position would be the view that the Renaissance is instantiated in individual events that count as its constituents—that the term “Renaissance” is the joint name for all these events. In that case, when one says that the Renaissance had no counterpart in the past, this entails that these individual events did not happen. Ankersmit has completely failed to notice the problem. Instead, a little bit later we are told that the concept “the Renaissance” is used “to characterize a period”.³³ Again, in that case too, the claim that the Renaissance has no counterpart in the past necessarily entails that the period that this concept is said to characterize did not happen.

³² Ankersmit, “Response to Professor Saari”, 28.

³³ The word “period” can be understood in a number of ways. It can be, for instance, merely a calendar period, pure length of time, or it can be a temporally limited segment in the life of a nation, country or civilization. In this later case, it would have to include events. But whichever meaning we endorse, the same problem follows.

Kuukkanen's reading of my piece is by far more attentive, so we come to agree and apparently we are both surprised by this.³⁴ All this happens after a lot of meandering in his paper. The important point is reached when Kuukkanen's states that "colligations are clusters of things without their own abstract reality" and then admits that according to his postnarrativist position "the phrase 'the Cold War', for instance, refers to the set of actions and interactions".³⁵ He also says that he is happy to endorse the view "that colligatory notions are in effect 'large clusters of actions of individuals and interactions between them'" and admits that "the past can be conceived of as a massive colligatory notion." Clearly, if this is so, then the statement that colligations have no counterpart in the past can only be true if the "things" that constitute them did not exist, and the "actions and interactions" to which the phrases that express them refer, did not happen. If the phrase "the Cold War" refers to a set of actions and interactions, then saying that "the Cold War" has no counterpart in the past can only mean that these actions and interactions did not happen. And once it is admitted that "the past" is itself a colligatory notion, saying that colligatory notions have no counterpart in the past entails that the events, things, or whatever else that made up the past did not happen. Finally, if no constitutive parts of the past happened because "the past" is a colligation and colligations have no counterparts in reality, then it is hard to see how one could say that the past itself happened.

Kuukkanen's admission that colligations refer to sets of events (actions and interactions) and not to abstract entities makes them much less mysterious.³⁶ Since it now transpires that he and I agree that colligatory phrases are merely joint names for the events that constitute such sets ("objects of the categories" as he puts it), it follows that "the Renaissance", "the Cold War" or "the French Revolution" are merely collective nouns (phrases), equivalent to "murder of crows" or "unkindness of ravens" that are used to refer to congregations of such birds.³⁷ This again confirms my point. Saying that such concepts have no counterpart in reality entails that the phrases expressing such concepts refer to empty sets—or, that the sets and their constituents that these phrases refer to do not exist. If I say that there is a murder of crows under my window, and my neighbor says that I am hallucinating and that my "murder of crows" has no counterpart in reality, then she is saying that there are no crows under my window.³⁸ When Kuukkanen agrees here that "Cold War" refers to a set of actions and interactions, but at the same time insists in his book that colligatory concepts "cannot be true in the sense of correspondence", this can only mean that the events (actions and interactions) that

³⁴ I admit that I am, and I take that the way he talks about the metamorphosis of my position (discussed below) indicates that he did not expect that materialist ontology can come so close to nominalism.

³⁵ This contradicts his statement in Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy*, 55, that "colligatory concepts are not objectively given and do not refer to corresponding entities in historical reality".

³⁶ It remains unclear how this view can be squared with Kuukkanen's statements in *Postnarrativist Philosophy*, 106-107.

³⁷ For collective concepts and phrases that express them see Scott M. Sullivan, *An Introduction to Traditional Logic* (North Charleston: Booksurge Publishing, 2006), 24 and William T. Parry and Edward A. Hacker, *Aristotelian Logic* (Albany: State University of New York, 1991), 56.

³⁸ Similarly to the mountain peaks in the case of Karakoram (see note 4 above), my neighbor could be saying that there are some crows, but not enough for a murder. In the case of Kuukkanen's example with the Cold War, the equivalent situation would be if some events subsumed under "Cold War" did happen, but not enough to say that the Cold War itself happened.

“Cold War” refers to did not happen—and the same will apply to “the past” as well, since it has been now agreed this is a colligatory concept too.³⁹

Kuukkanen’s only defense against these consequences is mere evasion. We are told that “without knowing what ‘true,’ ‘real,’ ‘fact,’ ‘counterpart in the past,’ ‘correspondence’ and so on mean, it is impossible to know what philosophical contribution these claims are supposed to make, if any.” However, the term “counterpart” that is used in the present discussion originates from his and Ankersmit’s writings.⁴⁰ (I could have also invoked their use of other terms such as “correspond” or “refer” to support my interpretation.⁴¹) Consequently, saying that “it is impossible to know what philosophical contribution these claims are supposed to make, if any” can only be a statement about his and Ankersmit’s philosophical claims, and amounts to an open admission that what they say should not be taken seriously. My fault in that case is merely that I have tried to make sense of their statements. If their understanding of the term “counterpart” differs from the one on which I rely in my interpretation of their views, they should explain this in their responses, since the present discussion precisely concentrates on the views they expressed using this term. Otherwise what they say is mere obfuscation: they claim that colligatory concepts “have no counterpart” but they would not tell us what they mean by the phrase.

Ankersmit and Kuukkanen: evasions, diversions and distractions

Similar efforts to re-direct the attention of the reader away from the actual argument unfortunately permeate Ankersmit’s and Kuukkanen’s responses. Kuukkanen thus complains that I focus on events, whereas historiography also deals “peoples, groups, nations, empires, states, structures, processes, acts, and so on”. Fair enough—but how is this relevant for the argument? First, had I listed all these items, this would make the reading of my article more tedious, but it would have no effect on the point it makes. Second, it is not clear how there could have been events in the past in which no peoples, groups, nations, empires, states and so on participated or that there could have been acts or processes that were not events or did not consist of events. Consequently, a discussion of events necessarily implies most of Kuukkanen’s list. And third, insofar as my argument demonstrates that according to Kuukkanen’s and Ankersmit’s view no

³⁹ Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy*, 106. In the case of “the past” the situation is not the same as in the Karakoram example. Saying that “the past” has no counterpart means that no past events happened—if any events happened, they would already count as “the past”.

⁴⁰ See note 1 of this paper.

⁴¹ Consider the following statements: “... colligatory concepts ... do not refer to corresponding entities in historical reality” Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy*, 55. “...colligatory concepts cannot be true of historical reality in the sense of correspondence.” Ibid., 128. “Colligation is an arrangement, a construction, which does not have an independently given corresponding object.” Ibid., 133. As mentioned, on one understanding the Renaissance, the French Revolution or the Cold War were large clusters of events, and we have seen above that Kuukkanen has endorsed this view. If so, then the only way in which these colligations could have no corresponding entities in the past is that these clusters are empty sets, i.e. that the events that they colligate did not happen. Alternatively, one may conceive of the Renaissance, the French Revolution or the Cold War as abstract entities over and above individual events. From their responses we have seen that Ankersmit’s and Kuukkanen’s nominalism prevents them from endorsing this view. If they endorsed it, however, they would be denying that there are abstract entities in the past that correspond to colligations—i.e. they would be denying that such abstract entities exist. But in that case, we are back to the response that colligations can correspond to clusters of individual events, and in order to prevent this response they would have to say that such clusters are empty sets.

past event ever happened, this certainly shows that their views are profoundly counter-intuitive.

A similar example of evasion is Kuukkanen's insistence that in addition to ontological there are other kinds of anti-realism: epistemological, semantic, axiological and so on. Fair enough. However, that does not change anything about the problem that his and Ankersmit's anti-realism entails that no past happened.

Ankersmit's claim that I invent arguments that make anti-realism compatible with the view that the past happened, attribute them to anti-realist philosophers and then demolish them in order to show that anti-realist philosophers are "totally wrong" is not only an evasion, but simply false. No such arguments are made in the original paper. Even if I wanted to do this, I wouldn't know how. The view that colligations such as "the Renaissance" or "the Cold War" have no counterpart in the past is so preposterous that I simply have no idea how to invent an argument in its favor—let alone build up further arguments that would show this view's compatibility with the belief that the past happened.

In addition to evasions, Ankersmit's and Kuukkanen's responses contain a number of chunky and unproductive digressions. Kukkanen's introduction of Frank Ramsey at the end of his paper is an example of such a red herring. The question that is being discussed is not whether the phrase "It is true" in a sentence such as "It is true that the Russian revolution took place in 1917" is redundant. The question is whether one can say that the assault on the Winter Palace, that was the part of the revolution, took place, if one says that "the Russian revolution" has no counterpart in the past.

Ankersmit dismisses my discussion of the debate between individualism and holism in the philosophy of social sciences as "unproductive in this context". However, it would be absurd to deny that the Renaissance, the Cold War or the French Revolution were social phenomena, that the battle of Borodino was a social event or that the Ottoman empire was a social institution. Discussing their ontology therefore means addressing questions of social ontology. His claim that the debate between social individualism and social holism "has no relevance for the historian" can only be taken to reflect his ignorance. The dilemma was extensively discussed by German historians in the first half of the twentieth century (see my book *Rage and Denials* for the history of this debate in the period 1890-1947). Erwin Panofsky's positioning against German right-wing historiography after 1938 was precisely phrased in terms of this dilemma, and so were Ernst Gombrich's attacks on postmodernists in the 1980s.⁴² (My use of the term *felis catus* actually originates from a related exchange between Panofsky and Gombrich—not from scholastic sources as Ankersmit and Kuukkanen seem to think.⁴³) If he does not believe me, and since he appreciates Arthur Danto so much, Ankersmit should read the latter's *Narration and Knowledge*. The book contains a substantial chapter on the individualism-holism dilemma and Danto certainly did not include it because he thought that the topic was irrelevant.⁴⁴

⁴² For Panofsky's discussion of the dilemma see B. Mitrović, "Humanist Art History and Its Enemies. Erwin Panofsky on the Individualism-Collectivism debate", *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift*, 78 (2009), 57-76. For the role of the dilemma in Gombrich's polemics with post-modernists see B. Mitrović, "A Defence of Light. Ernst Gombrich, the Innocent Eye and Seeing in Perspective", *Journal of Art Historiography*, 3 (2010) 3-BM2.

⁴³ For Panofsky's and Gombrich's debate about *felis catus* see E. Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art*, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1960, 3, note 1 and E. Gombrich in "I think art historians are the spokesmen of our civilisation; we want to know more about our Olympus" [interview], *The Art Newspaper*, 28 (1993), issue 19, 18-19.

⁴⁴ A. Danto, *Narration and Knowledge*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1985, 257-284.

I am unable to fathom wherefrom Kuukkanen got the idea that in order to be a realist about the past I need to believe that “specific *categorizations* [of past events] *are uniquely correct* and possibly also that the principles used to form these categories pick out the essences of the particulars subsumed”. Presumably, this would oblige me to believe that a colligatory concept such as “the Cold War” “carves out the uniquely correct structure or pattern of the past”. He even expects me to provide an “argument for independence and the uniqueness of categorization”. But how could I believe in the uniqueness of historical categorizations, considering that I have declared myself for a materialist who believes that things are clusters of physical particles and fields of force (or whatever else physics tells us the world consists of), while events are their dispositions or changes of dispositions (or whatever else physics tells us they are)? These things and events are described in various ways in everyday life, and historians also use various descriptions that suit their purposes, while it is unlikely that they will use anything similar to physical descriptions. Simply, as I have explained in an article in *The Poverty of Anti-realism*, things and events were what they were, while historians write about them using the descriptions that enable them to answer the historical questions that they seek to answer.⁴⁵ The assumption that past events happened and that their happening is independent of historians does not entail that their *descriptions* have to be independent of historians. (It should be also mentioned that, as I have explained elsewhere, materialism does not oblige me to endorse Putnam-style essentialism but rather to reject it.⁴⁶) To me all this seems obvious but it is apparently surprising to Kuukkanen, who further says: “Ironically, without an argument for independence and the uniqueness of categorization, Mitrović’s realism metamorphoses into a nominalist anti-realism in all but name and verbal prose ...” But clearly, there is no metamorphosis: the materialist rejection of abstract entities is not unlike the nominalist rejection of separately existing universals, and the two positions will often result in the same or very similar views.

Finally, there are rude and condescending comments that permeate Ankersmit’s contribution. Few readers will fail to recognize in them desperation over the inability to defend with arguments the position on which he has built his entire career. Since Kuukkanen advises against relying “too much ... on emotion spiced up with rhetorical excesses” he may want to have a word with his senior colleague. Offensive formulations merely undermine the credibility of the theoretical positions advocated by the side that uses such rhetoric.

Roth: prevarications

Although their papers include plenty of irrelevant distractions, both Ankersmit and Kuukkanen have made a genuine effort to address my argument that pertains to their work. Roth’s response is much longer than theirs (over 9000 words), but it does not address the dilemma of whether his view that events exist only under description entails that no past events happened. I have argued elsewhere that the view that events exist only under description ends up in infinite regress because these descriptions themselves need to come into existence, their coming into existence is itself an event

⁴⁵ “Historical Accuracy and Historians’ Objectivity” 53-72,

⁴⁶ See the chapter about essentialism in B. Mitrović, *Materialist Philosophy of History*, Lanham: Lexington, 2020, 127-142.

that requires new descriptions and so on *ad infinitum*.⁴⁷ In the paper under discussion here the argument is combined with the observation that every coming into existence of these descriptions will require at least minimal time, and since infinitely many of them are required for any past event to happen, no past event could have happened at all. Since Roth does not address this problem, but avoids it, one can only conclude that he has nothing to say against my conclusion.

For its largest part Roth's contribution reads rather as a review of the book *The Poverty of Anti-realism* that Tor Egil Førland and I have recently co-edited. His discussion of papers by Veli Virmajoki and David Weberman pertains to their papers from that book. Towards the end of his paper, however, he discusses my paper published in the *Journal of the Philosophy of History* in 2022, rather than my papers from the book mentioned. That paper actually included the original presentation of the argument about infinite regress, and since Roth leaves this argument unmentioned, this further confirms that he has nothing to add to my conclusion. Instead, he concentrates on the idea that the past can be changed, which was indeed the main topic of that paper. In the beginning of the paper I noted that the idea of changeable past is normally rejected because such a change would entail backward causation. Backward causation would clearly be necessary if something that happens later could change something that happened earlier. The only way to avoid this conclusion would be to postulate the possibility of uncaused changes. Roth, however, comments

Mitrović equates without argument the claim that the past can be open to change as entailing something akin to “backwards causation.” He imagines that the only possible way to add true statements to a past time would be for something that happens later to causally impact earlier states of affairs.

However, the addition of new true statements about the past is not the same as the change of the past. Things or events do not change because we get to know new things about them or because someone tells us new true stories about them. Also, things and events can change independently of the true descriptions we have about them. Adding new true statements to our knowledge about things does not change those things, it changes our knowledge. Roth actually postulates something he calls “change by redescription”—but things do not change just because we redescribe them. What changes when we redescribe things is the pool of available descriptions of these things, not things themselves.

It should be also added that Roth's discussion of the problem of the multiplication of events from the same paper published in 2022 is mere evasion. The point was that if we assume that events do not exist independently of descriptions, then every single event will be as many events as there are descriptions of it. In that case, Napoleon's *Grande Armée* would have crossed the river Nemen on 24 June 1812 as many times as there are descriptions of this event made by historians. Here is what Roth says about this problem:

Understood as a claim that whatever there is can be described in multiple ways, the noted assumption is true but trivial. Indeed, differing descriptions may well

⁴⁷ B. Mitrović, “A Naïve Realist Ruminations on the Roth-and-Dewulf versus Currie-and-Swaim Exchange”, *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 16 (2022), 295-307, 300-301.

marshal different facts in their support. But from this trivial point, ontological multiplication simply fails to follow.

However, “the noted assumption” that he refers to is “that there are no such events independent of descriptions but only events-cum-descriptions”. This is not the same as the mere claim “that whatever there is can be described in multiple ways”. From the assumption mentioned ontological multiplication has to follow: “Napoleon’s army crossing the Nemen according to the historian A” will be a different entity or event from “Napoleon’s army crossing the Nemen according to the historian B”. This will entail that the *Grande Armée* crossed the Nemen as many times as there are descriptions of this event. To deny such multiplication, Roth would have to postulate that Napoleon’s army’s crossing of the Nemen was a singular event independent of its descriptions.

Conclusion

Years ago I was asked to evaluate to a doctoral dissertation in the philosophy of history. The dissertation was a fine piece of work, but its peculiar aspect was the thoroughness with which the candidate surveyed all arguments in favor of historical anti-realism that could be found in literature. The vast majority of these arguments were frankly awful. One certainly appreciated the candidate’s effort to collect them, but eventually the members of committee had to ask the candidate why he wasted his time on arguments that were not worth mentioning. “My advisor made a similar point”, said the candidate. Since the advisor, a prominent analytic philosopher, was absent from the proceeding in accordance with the local academic custom, we asked the candidate what his advisor told him. “He said that these arguments are so stupid that nobody would publish them”. “And what did you do then?”, we asked further. “I showed him the books and articles where they were published”, responded the candidate.

The anecdote illustrates the need for a caveat regarding Ankersmit’s view that “anti-realism presently is the mainstream position with regard to the relationship between the historian’s language and the past he discusses”. Being a *mainstream position* does not mean being a *philosophically relevant position*. To achieve the latter status anti-realists’ arguments should have some intellectual weight. As I have pointed out in a number of papers where I have reviewed writings by various anti-realist authors this is simply not the case.⁴⁸

This poor quality of arguments used to defend anti-realism should not come as a surprise. The present exchange clearly suggests that arguments and their implications have never mattered to advocates of anti-realism. Rather, what has mattered is the formulation of “the mainstream position” in a way that would reflect the postmodernist mainstream in other fields of the humanities. For one way to look at the outcome of the present exchange is that I should be very happy with it. I have managed to reduce anti-realism to the absurd view that the past did not happen. Admittedly, Ankersmit has failed to understand my point, but Kuukkanen who grasped it *de facto* admits that his

⁴⁸ See B. Mitrović “Opacity and Transparency in Historical Representations” [book review], *History and Theory*, 53 (2014), 277-294; B. Mitrović, “A refutation of (post-) narrativism, or: why postmodernists love Austro-Hungary” [book review], *Journal of Art Historiography*, 15 (2016), BM1; B. Mitrović, “Arguments, Partisanship, and Politics: Is Anti-realism in the Philosophy of History a Right-wing Ideology”, in T. E. Følrand and B. Mitrović (eds), *The Poverty of Anti-realism. Critical Perspectives on Postmodernist Philosophy of History*, Lanham: Lexington, 2023, 183-208, 184-191, and B. Mitrović, “A Naïve-realist Ruminations”.

and Ankersmit's view on colligatory concepts entails that no past events ever happened. Roth's evasion can only be taken as a silent admission that my analysis of his view that events exist only under description is correct, and that it entails that no past events ever happened. An additional bonus is that I have managed to make Ankersmit and Kuukkanen clarify their ontology and state that they reject abstract entities. (I have discussed Roth's ontological discombubulation in another article.⁴⁹) However, the really revealing aspect of this entire discussion is that for Ankersmit, Kuukkanen and Roth the fact that their views entail that no past events happened seems to be something new or something irrelevant—in any case, not something they have paid attention to so far. For a philosopher of history, the fact that his or her views entail that no past events ever happened ought to be a major issue. Admittedly, one may decide to endorse such a view, but it is hard to imagine how this massively counterintuitive implication could be systematically and repeatedly overlooked by someone genuinely committed to philosophical work in the philosophy of history. The fact that this has been the case with the authors of positions that Ankersmit describes as “mainstream” suggests that they are actually not interested in doing philosophy of history. Rather, for decades, their efforts seem to have been directed towards ensuring that they belong to the postmodernist “mainstream” by generating texts whose content is determined by current fashions. That is all; philosophical content or the quality of arguments has not been even secondary. The use of rudeness, insults, arguments *ad hominem*, or dismissive qualifications such as “naïve” or “shameless” clearly go hand in hand with efforts to avoid engagement with arguments.⁵⁰ My guess is that in the years to come we shall see more of such behaviour as many colleagues face the demise of postmodernist fashions in which they invested their careers. In many fields of the humanities this demise has already created the situation not unlike the one after the collapse of the Soviet Union when (I have read somewhere) 20,000 people with PhDs in Marxist philosophy had to re-narrativize themselves. And what we should learn from all this is not only that philosophy of history needs to move away from obsolete postmodernist fashions, but, more fundamentally, from the need to follow fashions at all.

⁴⁹ See Mitrović, “A Naïve-realist Ruminations”, 304.

⁵⁰ The tone of Ankersmit's contribution published here is hardly unusual in the field, and so is the use of phrases such as “naïve realism”. A fine example of an argument *ad hominem* is note 20 in Roth's contribution—where he declares me for “a *poseur*, not a practitioner”. (I could respond to this criticism also *ad hominem* by saying that if he thinks that historians unambiguously provide the sentences they write with logical connectives between propositions these sentences express, then he has read little history.)