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Are Anti-Realists for Real? A Response to Eugen Zeleňák, Michal Hubálek and Piotr Kowalewski Jahromi¹

[abstract] The December 2025 issue of JPH included a series of articles that attack realism in philosophy of history. My response presented here describes three major philosophical misconceptions and failures in reasoning that dominate contemporary anti-realist philosophy of history:

- (1) The naïve faith that discussions of problems in the philosophy of history can easily avoid metaphysical (and especially ontological) commitments—for instance, that existential claims such as “there are no events without descriptions” can be made without ontological implications.
- (2) The tendency to rely on the assumptions that (a) all thinking is language-based and (b) that all perception is concept-dependent (that there are no non-conceptualized perceptual contents). Both views were fashionable in the 1960s, today they are generally rejected, but are still widely relied on by anti-realist philosophers of history.
- (3) It is not uncommon that postmodernist and anti-realist philosophers rely on Stove’s Gem—famously, the argument that in 1985 won the competition for the worst argument in the history of philosophy organized by David Stove. This is the argument that because our cognition depends on our cognitive capacities, therefore we cannot know things as they are. **[abstract ends]**

Papers from the international conference “Analytical Philosophy of History and the Challenges of the Future,” (Poznań, 7-8 March 2024) published in the latest issue of the *Journal of the Philosophy of History* (19.3) present a wide spectrum of misconceptions about realist positions in philosophy of history. This is especially true when it comes the articles by Eugen Zeleňák, Michal Hubálek and Piotr Kowalewski Jahromi.² I should clearly state that I am grateful to these authors for reasonably accurate presentations of my own *statements*. The same applies to Zeleňák’s recent fine summary of my *statements* in *História da Historiografia*.³ Unfortunately, citing statements and presenting what they entail is not the same and these authors have been much less successful when it comes to the consideration of the logical consequences and the analysis of the implications of what I have said. The same lack of analytic effort marks

¹ My special gratitude to Tor Egil Førland for his help and advice in the preparation of this article.

² Eugen Zeleňák, “On the Realist-Constructivist Controversy in Contemporary Philosophy of History,” *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 19 (2025), 281-301. Michal Hubálek and Piotr Kowalewski Jahromi, “Naturalizing the Past(s): Three Rothian Steps Toward a Future Philosophy of History,” *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 19 (2025), 319-344.

³ E. Zeleňák, “Mapping Theory of History after the Linguistic Turn: New Realism and the Epistemic Approach,” *História da Historiografia* 18 (2025), 1-24.

and mars their presentations of both realist and anti-realist positions in general, resulting in incoherent criticisms and misrepresentations that need to be corrected. Philosophical positions do not exist in an argumentational vacuum and criticisms that bluntly disregard what they entail can hardly be regarded as valid or fair.

Consider, for instance, Hubálek's and Kowalewski Jahromi's accurate observation that realists differentiate between the past that happened and the story about it; the former is single, the latter can be plural—the way there can be many ways to describe a cat crossing the street, while the cat is still one and the same.⁴ This is a valuable point to make, since it is not rare that realism about the past is misunderstood as the view that there can be only one correct description of what happened in the past. Only eight pages later, however, they come up with the claim that in realists' view once the past is fixed, historical knowledge must be fixed as well.⁵ This clearly cannot be the case since insofar as historical realism allows for diverse descriptions of singular events (as they previously correctly stated), it should be possible to know or ignore different propositions about the same historical event. The same misunderstanding or misrepresentation of the realist position re-emerges nine pages later. We read that "the realists of course readily insist" on "postulating that there is just one right (or the most accurate) way of classifying and/or explaining given empirical data and contextual details."⁶ But certainly, if realists believe that there is more than one way to describe a cat crossing the street or Caesar crossing the Rubicon, then they have to assume that there is more than one way to classify and explain that crossing.

What is the debate about?

From the realist point of view past occurrences (events, things, people, institutions and so on) happened in the past independently of what we know or believe about them. Historians discover and describe past occurrences, whereby these occurrences are unaffected by their discoveries or descriptions. Historians acquire knowledge about the past on the basis of evidence and assumptions about the dependence (e.g. causal) of evidence on past occurrences. They have to assume that a piece of evidence could not be the way it is had the past been different. Historians' knowledge about the past does not depend on witnessing directly past events so it is pointless to argue—as has been done *ad nauseam*—that past occurrences as they happened on their own cannot be known because they cannot be perceived.⁷ Also, historians' representations of the past are typically textual (not analogue) and certainly cannot resemble the past occurrences that they describe. Nevertheless, they can be true or false on the basis of correspondence to these occurrences because their content defines conditions of satisfaction that are

⁴ Hubálek and Kowalewski Jahromi, "Naturalizing," 324.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 332.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 341.

⁷ See for instance L. Goldstein, *Historical Knowing* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976), xiii, 136; F. Pataut, "Anti-Realism about the Past," in A. Tucker (ed.) *A Companion to the Philosophy of History and Historiography* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 190-198, 190; M. Murphey, "Realism about the Past," in A. Tucker (ed.), *A Companion*, 181-189, 186.

satisfied or not satisfied by the past occurrences they are about—the way the equation $y=ax^2+bx+k$ can be satisfied or not by a specific parabolic line, although the equation and the line look differently, have different morphologies and do not resemble each other.⁸ Contrary to the argument that Zeleňák imports in his article from Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, correspondence does not require similarity.⁹ “*Morphological or structural difference between the historian’s presentation and historical reality*” (Kuukkanen’s phrase) does not preclude correspondence-based understanding of truth.¹⁰ Hubálek and Kowalewski Jahromi similarly cite Arthur Danto’s description of the urge to “suppose that there can be a description of the world only if there is some structural feature in common between language and the world.”¹¹ I do not know of a single historian or a realist philosopher of history who has ever confused textual descriptions and the world this way.

Anti-realism is a rejection of such a realist perspective on the past, but it is much less clear how to define it. Generally speaking, anti-realism can be understood as the view that the past (or past occurrences) did not happen or that it (they) cannot be known. Zeleňák is certainly right when he points out that these are two different positions.¹² In the *Poverty of Anti-Realism* Tor Egil Følrand and I tried to overcome potential confusion by explicitly including both positions under the title “anti-realism”—a solution that worked well for the purposes of the book. Nevertheless, as we were well aware of, the claim that the past (or past occurrences) did not happen is so counterintuitive that even few anti-realists would openly endorse it.¹³ My 2024 article “What is Historical Anti-Realism and How to Define It?” presented a *reductio ad absurdum* of anti-realism by showing that prominent anti-realist positions in contemporary philosophy of history entail that no past or past occurrences happened.¹⁴ Consider, for instance, Paul Roth’s claim that past events exist only under description.¹⁵ If Roth were right, for the existence of any past event it would be necessary that its description comes into existence, and since this coming into existence would itself be an event, new description would be required for it to happen, whereby this new description would have to come into existence which would require a new description

⁸ For the explanation of the concept of satisfaction in this context, see J. Searle, *Intentionality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 10-13.

⁹ Zeleňák, “Controversy”, 288, cites J. M. Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of History* (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 42.

¹⁰ Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy*, 42. For a refutation of this argument see B. Mitrović, “A Refutation of (Post-) Narrativism, or: Why Postmodernists Love Austro-Hungary. A review of Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist philosophy of historiography*, Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015,” *Journal of Art Historiography*, 15/BM1 (2016).

¹¹ Hubálek and Kowalewski Jahromi, “Naturalizing the Past(s),” 344.

¹² Zeleňák, “Controversy”, 287.

¹³ Zeleňák in his article cites Rik Peters’ view that “No one in his right mind denies that past events happened” and Adam Timmins’ view that even the most radical opponents of realism, would not dare to “deny the existence of a past.” *Ibid.*, 289.

¹⁴ B. Mitrović, “What is Historical Anti-Realism and How to Define It?,” *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 18 (2024), 113-124.

¹⁵ P. Roth, “Narrative Explanations: The Case of History,” *History and Theory* 27 (1988), 1-13, especially 8-9. P. Roth, *The Philosophical Structure of Historical Explanation* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2020), 29-30.

... and an infinite regress would follow, that would block the possibility that any event (including past events) ever happen(ed). Or consider Kuukkanen's and Frank Ankersmit's claim that colligatory concepts (such as "the Renaissance" or "the French Revolution") "have no counterparts" in the past.¹⁶ At the same time "the past" is itself a colligatory concept, as Kuukkanen admitted himself in the exchange that followed.¹⁷ Clearly then, if "the past" "has no counterpart," then this can only mean that the past has never happened. The fact that no convincing counter-arguments were presented in the discussion that followed suggests that the *reductio* was successful.¹⁸ In fact, in his response, Ankersmit explicitly stated that "[t]he phrase 'past reality' is an oxymoron. The noun 'reality' can only be related meaningfully to what is *present*."¹⁹

It does not help here to point out that for anti-realists the past did happen, but it was not mind-independent, or that in anti-realists' view past occurrences happened but only insofar as they are subsequently constructed e.g. by historians. This still cannot successfully respond to problems resulting from Roth's claim that past events exist only under description or Kukkanen's and Ankersmit's thesis that colligatory concepts such as "the past" have no counterparts. There is a massive difference between saying that something happened independently of any description and that it happened as a result of being described. Also, contrary to what Hubálek and Kowalowski Jahromi suggest, it is irrelevant whether one is talking about "past events" or "past *physical* events."²⁰ Roth's, Kuukkanen's and Ankersmit's views simply entail that no events whatsoever happened, physical or not. Zeleňák's complaint that realists "accept only their very limited notion of knowledge" and approach constructivists' views "with a prior presupposition that only knowledge based on correspondence or a certain type of representation counts as knowledge" simply misses the point.²¹ As we shall see below, for realists it is important to differentiate between a belief (knowledge) that is true on the basis of correspondence to mind-independent reality and one that is not, but is merely called "true" because anti-realists appropriate the word "true" to qualify statements that are endorsed by the community, favored by the authorities, politically correct and so on. Realists insist on clear differentiation between a true belief about what indeed happened in the past and a belief about the past that is called "true" *regardless* of what happened in the past. Similarly, Zeleňák complains that constructionists' rejection of "ready made past" "is sometimes strengthened into bluntly

¹⁶ F. Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic. A Semantic Analysis of the Historian's Language* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983). 83, 100. Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy*, 128, 116.

¹⁷ "I agree that the past can be conceived of as a massive colligatory notion..." J. M. Kuukkanen, "Intuition is Not Enough," *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 18 (2024), 125-134, 131.

¹⁸ F. Ankersmit, "Being Realistic about Anti-realism," *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 18 (2024), 135-151. Kuukkanen, "Intuition". P. Roth, "Speaking of Facts: or, Reality without Realism," *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 18 (2024), 152-172. B. Mitrović, "Response to Frank Ankersmit, Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen and Paul Roth," *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 18 (2024), 173-186.

¹⁹ Ankersmit, "Being Realistic," 147.

²⁰ Hubálek and Kowalewski Jahromi, "Naturalizing the Past(s)," 322, note 11. They talk about some "confusion" but fail to specify it.

²¹ Zeleňák, "Controversy", 296-297.

claiming ‘the (alleged) nonexistence of the past.’”²² However, different things do not become things of one and the same kind merely because we name them the same way. It is certainly problematic to use the word “past” for something that comes into existence only now, as contemporary historians construct it (describe it) and that did not happen before and independently of its construction at the present moment.

It is, however, not quite accurate to think that anti-realist’s rejection of a link (e.g. correspondence) between a historical account and the description-independent past obscures the distinction between fiction and historiography. In the case of fiction, both the author and the reader are still aware that accounts they are reading are not true: when Vergil describes how Aeneas met Dido, we are certainly not expected to take this as a true account. In the anti-realist understanding of historiography, however, accounts about the past are supposed to be taken as true independently and regardless of what really happened in the past. Taking a belief for *true* independently of what it refers to is characteristic of *delusions* and not of fiction. When Zeleňák says that Roth and Kuukkanen “assume that history provides us with knowledge” and admits that anti-realists’ “reject the view that the past itself constrains historical accounts” then certainly the standard English term for such “knowledge” is “delusion.”²³ Similarly, when he points out that anti-realist positions are unaffected by skepticism, this is certainly so, because once knowledge is equated with delusions, skeptical doubts become pointless.²⁴

Primacy of ontology

Both articles that I discuss here emphasize anti-realists’ interest in epistemology as opposed to ontology. Hubálek and Kowalewski Jahromi agree with Roth that “[t]he main quarrel between metaphysical realists and anti-realists can be ultimately stripped down to the understanding of historical events, namely the sources of their ‘ontological integrity.’”²⁵ According to Zeleňák, realists’ “wrong emphasis on ontology” is one of the main sources of their “misguided interpretations of constructivism,” while “the focus of a relevant and fruitful debate between realists and constructivists” should be on epistemology.²⁶ He also emphasizes that (on his interpretation) Kuukkanen’s postnarrativism is “epistemological all the way through” and cites Rik Peters for the view that difference between the two positions could be viewed as a distinction between “primacy of knowing” versus “primacy of reals.”²⁷

These observations are then marred by the bizarre denial that anti-realists’ existential claims are ontological claims—clearly a lame effort to save Roth’s, Ankersmit’s and Kuukkanen’s statements from the implication that no past (or past

²² Ibid., 286.

²³ Ibid., 296, 299. Unless the contents of such “knowledge” happen to be true on the basis of correspondence by accident.

²⁴ Ibid., 297.

²⁵ Hubálek and Kowalewski Jahromi, “Naturalizing the Past(s),” 334.

²⁶ Zeleňák, “Controversy,” 283, 300.

²⁷ Ibid., 295, 289.

occurrences) happened. In Zeleňák's article one thus reads, not without surprise, that when Roth states that events exist only under description—i.e. that there are no undescribed events—this is not to be taken as an ontological claim.²⁸ We are left to wonder how there can be existential claims without ontological import. According to Hubálek and Kowalowski Jahromi, Roth “is not denying any ‘reality’ or ‘factuality’ of the past.”²⁹ Indeed, he is not. However, as explained above, in his view events depend on descriptions in a way that ends up in infinite regress—and this infinite regress makes “reality” and “factuality” of events impossible. According to Zeleňák, when constructivists “talk about events under descriptions [i.e. Roth], about missing counterparts of colligatory concepts [i.e. Ankersmit and Kuukkanen], or the non-existence of preformed past events, they are in fact making points relevant for *epistemology*” and their “most important goal is to argue that history and historical works are not here to offer as faithful representations of the past as possible.”³⁰ However, the problem is that Roth *did state* that events *exist only* under descriptions, Ankersmit and Kuukkanen *did state* that colligatory concepts *have no* counterpart in the past—and these are clearly *ontological* claims about existence of events or counterparts of colligatory concepts. It is disparaging and disrespectful to defend these authors by saying that they did not know, or did not mean what they were saying.

More generally, there can be no epistemology without ontological assumptions. Insofar as epistemology is about knowledge and cognition it requires the ontological assumption of the existence of the cognitive subject whose knowledge and cognition are being discussed and the environment that sustains the cognitive subject's existence. It makes no sense to say that our knowledge and beliefs structure the universe into singular items, because a singular item (the cognitive subject) must be already there for this knowledge and beliefs to come into existence. Half a century ago, when idealism was fashionable, authors such as Hilary Putnam or Nelson Goodman were keen to insist that “we” structure reality and parcel it into individual items.³¹ Clearly, this “we” consists of human individuals who are themselves individual items—so the claim that “we” parcel reality into individual items assumes the existence of a reality that is already parceled into individual items. For the same reason it is quite preposterous to say (as Hubálek and Kowalewski Jahromi cite Roth with approval) that “[o]nly in a theory do things—for example, facts, events, kinds, actions—exist and have explanations.”³² The very existence of theories presupposes the existence of the *kind* of people called “theorists.” Without theorists no theories. Hubálek and Kowalewski Jahromi complain that they do not see how to prove the assumption that “events are ontologically *integral*” as a point of departure of theorizing.³³ They should rather

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 299.

²⁹ Hubálek and Kowalewski Jahromi, “Naturalizing the Past(s),” 334.

³⁰ Zeleňák, “Controversy”, 298.

³¹ H. Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 52. N. Goodman, “On Starmaking,” *Synthese*, 45 (1980), 211-215, 213. Similarly, N. Goodman, “Notes on the Well-Made World,” *Erkenntnis* 19 (1983), 99-107, 104.

³² Hubálek and Kowalewski Jahromi, “Naturalizing the Past(s),” 339.

³³ *Ibid.*, 339.

consider how they are going to engage in theorizing if they do not exist and if they did not come into existence (which was an event) prior to their theorizing. Their statement that “our metaphysical commitments follow our conceptual and methodological choices, and not vice versa” is misleading insofar as it assumes that we are free to choose our conceptual frameworks and make methodological choices in ways that would contradict the way the world works.³⁴ If I choose to endorse a method of understanding the world that rejects causation, or the principle of non-contradiction, or assumes that two physical objects can be at the same place at the same time, I am going to face problems in dealing with the world, because the world operates according to these principles, regardless of my “conceptual and methodological choices.” Insofar as metaphysics studies such principles, we cannot randomly choose our conceptual frameworks or methodology and then endorse whatever metaphysics results from this choice. We have to find and discover the conceptual frameworks and the methodology that give us the metaphysics that is true on the basis of its correspondence to the world.

Ideal Chronicler and Stove’s Gem

Hubálek and Kowalewski Jahromi suggest that Danto’s discussion of the Ideal Chronicler (IC) challenges the realist view that the past is stable and cannot be changed.³⁵ It is therefore important to point out that this “challenge” is not a particularly convincing one.³⁶ To recapitulate Danto’s mental experiment: the Ideal Chronicler is conceived of as a device that knows and writes down whatever happens at the moment it happens, even in other minds.³⁷ The device thus produces the ideal chronicle, but it can write down only descriptions of events as they were witnessed at the time. Descriptions that were not available at the time are systematically excluded—for instance, in 1618 the Ideal Chronicler could not write “Thirty-years war starts now” because nobody knew for how long the war would go on. Danto points out that it would be impossible to construct an Ideal Chronicler that would write down such narrative sentences in advance (descriptions of events “under which” the events could not have been witnessed at their time)³⁸, because this would mean that we would know what future historians would write about our time and could falsify their accounts by acting differently.³⁹

None of this presents a serious challenge to the view that the past is fixed nor does it suggest that the past changes depending on the availability of descriptions. To argue that it does would mean to confuse properties and relations of things and events. Things and events, including past occurrences, do not change merely because we

³⁴ Ibid., 338.

³⁵ Ibid., 329. For Danto’s discussion of the Ideal Chronicle see A. Danto: *Narration and Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 143-182.

³⁶ Danto himself was much more cautious about deriving anti-realist implications from his mental experiment: “The Past does not change, perhaps, but our manner of organizing it does.” Ibid., 166-167.

³⁷ Ibid., 151.

³⁸ Ibid., xii.

³⁹ Ibid., 161.

describe them differently—rather, they change if their properties change, but not necessarily if their relations change. When Napoleon crossed the Niemen on 24 June 1812 his geographical relation to the river changed in the sense that before the crossing he was on the west bank of the river, and after on the east bank, but he did not change. As Veli Virmajoki has recently described very precisely, Danto’s mental experiment with the Ideal Chronicler merely shows that with time past events enter into new and new relationships, not that they change.⁴⁰ The Battle of Borodino has not changed due to the fact that in 2022 it was 210 years ago, while as I am writing these lines it came to be 213 years ago. Different descriptions of past occurrences become available with time, historians use them as they need in order to answer the historical questions they are addressing, but none of this means that past occurrences change because they become describable in new ways. What changes is the pool of available descriptions and not the happenings that happened in the past.

Hubálek and Kowalewski Jahromi also seem to suggest (or at least I understand them so) that by pointing out that our knowledge of the past is perspective-dependent, Danto’s discussion of the Ideal Chronicler refutes the realist view that historians can know about past occurrences as they were themselves (independently of how they are described). They thus endorse Roth’s interpretation that without a point of view, Danto’s Ideal Chronicler cannot even start, that there is no “ideal” or “natural” perspective and that “[w]ithout a time-anchored perspective, there cannot be historical events in any comprehensive shape or form.”⁴¹ They also approve of Roth’s rejection of “Universal History” (i.e. history written with the assumption that “everything that has happened belongs to a single and determinate realm of unchanging actuality”) because it “can be constructed *only* via the point of view from nowhere.”⁴²

It is useful to analyze here this argument—that we cannot know things the way they are or events as they really happened because our knowledge is always perspectival— since it is often used or implied by anti-realists. The argument is a variation of “Stove’s Gem,” the argument that famously won the competition for the worst argument in the history of philosophy that was organized by David Stove in 1985.⁴³ Here is Stove’s own formulation of the argument:

“We can know things only:
-as they are related to us

⁴⁰ V. Virmajoki, “Defeating the Ideal Chronicler: The Problem with the Thought Experiment,” *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 19 (2025), 1-6.

⁴¹ Hubálek and Kowalewski Jahromi, “Naturalizing the Past(s)”, 334. I take that they use “comprehensive” here in its archaic meaning as “pertaining to understanding” and therefore “cognizable”. Otherwise the sentence is either meaningless or plainly wrong.

⁴² Hubálek and Kowalewski Jahromi, “Naturalizing the Past(s),” 334. The definition of “Universal History” is from L. Mink’s “Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument,” *Historical Understanding*, ed. B. Fay, E.O. Golob, and R.T. Vann (Cornell University Press, 1987), 194. Roth cites the same definition in his contribution to the volume, P. Roth, “Curbing Narrative Anxiety: Analytical Philosophy of History and the Norming Narrative” *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 19 (2025), 302-318, 312-313.

⁴³ See D. Stove “Judges Report on the Competition to Find the Worst Argument in the World” in D. Stove, *Cricket Versus Republicanism* (Sidney: Quackers Hill Press, 1995), 65-66.

- under our perception and understanding
- in so far as they fall under our conceptual schemes etc.

So

We cannot know things as they are in themselves."⁴⁴

For instance, our knowledge of past occurrences depends on our perspective so we can know the way they really occurred. As Stove points out, this *non sequitur* argument has enjoyed massive popularity in postmodernist theorizing. It is not unlike saying that we cannot see the way things are, because in order to see them we have to use our eyes, or that we cannot digest food as it is, because we need to use our stomachs to do that. Our cognition clearly depends on our cognitive capacities or cognitive situation, but this does not entail that we cannot know things the way they are.

Contrary to what Hubálek and Kowalewski Jahromi assume, there is thus no need for a “point of view from nowhere” in order to have knowledge about occurrences that belong to “a single and determinate realm of unchanging actuality.” Certainly, all our knowledge is knowledge from somewhere, and (as I have argued elsewhere) historical works are accurate or inaccurate depending on how they answer historical questions that are formulated in a certain context.⁴⁵ However, the fact that they are not disinterested does not mean that they cannot be accurate in the sense of correspondence to the past as it really happened. One does not need perspective-free point of view in order to know what happened in the past.

Through their article Hubálek’s and Kowalewski Jahromi’s arguments against realism repeatedly rely on or imply the use of Stove’s gem. When they say that many historians avoid philosophical problems by concentrating on “establishing and explaining facts,” while it is doubtful that such explanations can be provided in a theory-free way, then realists will certainly agree that such theory-free explanations are impossible.⁴⁶ But if theory-dependence is to be used to argue that it is impossible to provide accurate explanations that state what really happened and why, then this view relies on Stove’s Gem-type argument. Similarly, when they say that “under naturalism, what is considered as a plausible historical fact or explanation is, inter alia, relative to our empirical practices and paradigms,” this is something that realists can agree with as well.⁴⁷ However, paradigm-dependence of plausibility does not preclude that beliefs could be true on the basis of correspondence to what really happened in the past. If they want to say that true beliefs about what really happened in the past cannot be reached because ways to reach truth are paradigm-dependent, then they need to rely on Stove’s gem type of argument.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 65.

⁴⁵ See the discussion of historical questions and accuracy of historical works in B. Mitrović, “Historical Accuracy and Historians’ Objectivity” in T. E. Førlund and B. Mitrović (eds), *The Poverty of Anti-realism*, Lanham: Lexington, 2023, 53-72 esp. 60-66.

⁴⁶ Hubálek and Kowalewski Jahromi, “Naturalizing the Past(s),” 328.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 341.

Sometimes, Hubálek's and Kowalewski Jahromi's reliance on Stove's gem is obscured by their unclear use of the ambiguous term "fact" that can pertain to past happenings or true propositions about past happenings. Their statement "given the philosophical developments in the 20th century, it is very difficult to take these calls for theory-free or investigation-independent facts seriously" can be thus understood in two ways.⁴⁸ If "facts" are past happenings and they are saying that they could not have happened independently of subsequently formulated theories, then this claim results in the same regress as Roth's claim that events exist only under description. But if they are saying that true propositions about what really happened in the past cannot be known because this would require theory-free and investigation-independent approach, then they are relying on Stove's Gem type of argument. Similarly for their rejection of the "understanding of history as a 'collection of facts,' which is perspective-free"⁴⁹ If "facts" are past happenings, then the claim that they depend on perspectives will end up in a Roth-style regress.⁵⁰ But if "facts" are true propositions about the past then only if one relies on Stove's Gem can one infer that facts' dependence on perspective makes it impossible for them to be true on the basis of correspondence to the past and for history to be a collection of such facts.

Analytic philosophy and the scientific worldview

Hubálek and Kowalewski Jahromi insist that they place their perspective within the analytic philosophy of history and they emphasize the importance of understanding "our notions of historical reality and any other reality for that matter" "from within our sciences."⁵¹ I applaud the talk they talk, but I do not see that they are walking the walk.

When it comes to analytic philosophy, it is a widespread problem of contemporary historical anti-realism that its advocates (not only Hubálek and Kowalewski Jahromi) seem to read only works and know only of philosophical positions that are more than half a century old. I have complained elsewhere that Ankersmit refers to Sellars, Rorty, Quine, Davidson and Derrida as "contemporary philosophers" although they are all dead and published their most important works half a century before.⁵² In the opening article of this volume of the *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, Domańska and Brzechczyn similarly state Wittgenstein, Russell, Carnap, Quine, and Davidson as exemplary analytic philosophers.⁵³ When Hubálek and Kowalewski Jahromi come to discuss problems of perception, they refer to Quine, Wittgenstein, Sellars, Kuhn,

⁴⁸ Hubálek and Kowalewski Jahromi, "Naturalizing the Past(s)," 323.

⁴⁹ I.e. they claim with approval that Danto challenged "the plain (Aristotelian) understanding of history as a 'collection of facts,' which is perspective-free." Hubálek and Kowalewski Jahromi, "Naturalizing the Past(s)," 329.

⁵⁰ I.e. if events happened only depending on a perspective, then the event of this perspective coming into existence needs to happen in relation to another perspective, and so on.

⁵¹ Hubálek and Kowalewski Jahromi, "Naturalizing the Past(s)," 342.

⁵² B. Mitrović, "Objectivity and Transparency in Historical Representations," *History and Theory* 53 (2014), 277-294, 292.

⁵³ E. Domańska and K. Brzechczyn, "Expanding the Boundaries of the Analytical Philosophy of History," *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 19 (2025), 263-280, 267.

Rorty and Hacking—and we shall see below that when it comes to the psychology of perception these philosophers' views are *very* dated.⁵⁴ All this is marred by the dogmatic endorsement of the views of the “great masters” who are clearly selected because they can provide support for anti-realist positions—while prominent realist perspectives such as John Searle's are left unconsidered. The massive corpus of critical analyses of the works of these “great masters” is omitted and left undiscussed. For instance, there is thus no attempt to address critical reactions to Quine's underdetermination, such as Larry Laudan's.⁵⁵ Hubálek and Kowalewski Jahromi note Nelson Goodman's influence on Roth—and although Goodman's views are highly controversial (he claimed to have created stars and constellations) they fail to address, discuss or even mention criticisms of Goodman that do have important implications for Roth's views.⁵⁶ Such dogmatic worshipping of pre-1980s analytic philosophy that completely disregards the existing critical literature massively undermines the credibility of Hubálek's and Kowalewski Jahromi's commitment to analytic philosophy. It also cripples their efforts in philosophy of history, since two important dogmas of pre-1980s analytic philosophy have become obsolete in the meantime: the views that all thinking is language-dependent and that perception always depends on conceptual thinking.⁵⁷

The view that all thinking is verbal and that no thinking happens outside language was dominant among analytic philosophers in the 1960s and 1970s.⁵⁸ Michael Dummett even identified analytic philosophy with the rejection of the view that there are non-verbal thoughts.⁵⁹ Today, however, the view that all thinking happens in language is completely abandoned, as a result of research on visual imagination, thinking of pre-linguistic infants and other developments in cognitive science.⁶⁰ The important point here, however, is not merely that the dominant position in analytic philosophy has changed, but that the older view that has been abandoned presents serious problems when it comes to translation between languages and consequently

⁵⁴ Hubálek and Kowalewski Jahromi, “Naturalizing the Past(s),” 340.

⁵⁵ L. Laudan, “Demystifying Underdetermination,” in C. Wade Savage (ed.), *Scientific Theories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 267–297.

⁵⁶ Hubálek and Kowalewski Jahromi, “Naturalizing the Past(s),” 336. N. Goodman, “On Starmaking,” *Synthese* 45 (1980), 211–215, 213. Similarly, N. Goodman, “Notes on the Well-Made World,” *Erkenntnis* 19 (1983), 99–107, 104. For a realist response to such claims see for instance P. Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge. Against Relativism and Constructivism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006), 25–41.

⁵⁷ In relation to Hubálek's and Kowalewski Jahromi's endorsements of Roth, it should be mentioned that in P. Roth, “The Pasts,” *History and Theory* 51 (2012), 313–339 he takes these two dogmas for granted so it remains unclear whether his “irrealism” can survive their rejection. Roth completely overlooks the possibility that perception can be impenetrable for conceptual thinking or that massive part of human thinking (e.g. visual imagination) is language-independent. Rejection of these dogmas, however, is standard today (see below).

⁵⁸ For a survey of these views see B. Mitrović, “Intentionalism, Intentionality and Reporting Beliefs,” *History and Theory*, 48 (2009), 180–198. For a survey of the subsequent debate see J. L. Bermúdez, *Thinking without Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁵⁹ M. Dummett, “What Do I Know When I Know a Language,” originally presented at Stockholm University in 1978, in M. Dummett, *The Seas of Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 94–105, 107.

⁶⁰ See Bermúdez, *Thinking*, for a survey of this research.

results in massive difficulties when it comes to understanding historical research based on documents in different languages.⁶¹

Since the 1980s philosophical and psychological views on perception have also massively changed and here too, loyalty to obsolete philosophical paradigms makes the views of contemporary analytic anti-realists irrelevant for historical practice. The major change that has occurred is the rejection of the view that perception is inseparable from conceptualization and classification—i.e. the rejection of the view that “all seeing is seeing-as” or that “there is no innocent eye.” This old view became influential in the psychology of perception in the 1950s as a result of so-called “New Look” psychology. Subsequently in the 1960s it came to exercise massive influence in the English-speaking humanities.⁶² The assumption that there are no unconceptualized perceptual contents, and that all perception is conceptualized *ab initio* (and thus culturally dependent) was crucial for both Danto and Kuhn.⁶³ Danto’s phrase “witnessing under description” thus really meant what it said, that one cannot witness events independently of how one classifies and describes them.⁶⁴ Gombrich’s *Art and Illusion* and Christian Norberg-Schulz’s *Intentions in Architecture* introduced this view in art- and architectural historiography with a massive impact that led to the demise of formalism-based research in these disciplines.⁶⁵ Kendall Walton’s paper “Categories of Art” similarly led to a disappearance of formalism from analytic aesthetics for almost thirty years.⁶⁶ In the 1960s and the 1970s opposition to the view that all perception is inseparable from conceptualization was rare among analytic philosophers—one can think of Fred Dretske and (in the early 1980s) Jerry Fodor.⁶⁷ It is this consensus of the 1960s and the 1970s that Hubálek and Kowalewski Jahromi rely on when they invoke Quine, the later Wittgenstein, Sellars, Kuhn, Rorty, Hacking “and others” to support their view that “prescription often precedes perception.”⁶⁸ What they overlook is that this view is generally rejected in contemporary psychology and philosophy of perception. The dominant view today is that perception is impenetrable for top-down conceptual influences.⁶⁹ In 2016, a particularly interesting and highly influential study by Chaz Firestone and Brian Scholl has actually managed to reduce the research that sought to

⁶¹ For a discussion of these problems see Mitrović, “Intentionalism.”

⁶² See B. Mitrović, *Materialist Philosophy of History* (Langham: Lexington, 2022), 219-232.

⁶³ See the analysis in Mitrović, *Materialist Philosophy*, 221-224.

⁶⁴ Danto is very explicit about his endorsement of “New Look” psychology, see Danto, *Narration*, x-xi.

⁶⁵ See B. Mitrović, “A Defence of Light. Ernst Gombrich, the Innocent Eye and Seeing in Perspective,” *Journal of Art Historiography*, 3 (2010) 3-BM2.

⁶⁶ For a discussion of the influence of New Look psychology on Walton see B. Mitrović, “Visuality and Aesthetic Formalism,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 58 (2018), 147-163.

⁶⁷ F. Dretske, *Seeing and Knowing* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969). J. Fodor, “Observation Reconsidered,” *Philosophy of Science*, 51 (1984), 23-43.

⁶⁸ Hubálek and Kowalewski Jahromi, “Naturalizing the Past(s),” 339.

⁶⁹ See the groundbreaking and highly influential paper by Z. Pylyshyn, “Is Vision Continuous with Cognition? The Case for Cognitive Impenetrability of Visual Perception,” *Behavioural and Brain Sciences*, 22 (1999), 341-423 as well as well as useful discussions in Gary Hatfield, *Perception and Cognition. Essays in the Philosophy of Psychology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2009), Zenon W. Pylyshyn, *Seeing and Visualizing. It’s not what you think* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006) and A. Raftopoulos, *Cognition and Perception* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2009).

establish the impact of conceptual thinking on perception to a small number of consistently repeated methodological pitfalls.⁷⁰

I agree with Hubálek and Kowalewski Jahromi that “our notions of historical reality, and any other reality for that matter, must be understood only from within our science(s).”⁷¹ It is, however, hard to see how this can be achieved within Roth-style anti-realism that they endorse. One should just try to think how Hubálek and Kowalewski Jahromi are going to make compatible with modern astrophysics Goodman’s claim that he (together with some other people, for he says “we”) created stars and constellations. At the same time, this Goodman’s claim, we should not forget, is directly related to (and a version of) Roth’s view that past events exist only when they are described. Or, what about black holes? Did they exist before John Michell described them in 1783? Astrophysics says that they did, Rothians imply that they did not, because they could have come into existence (which is an event) only once they were described. Or, how is Roth’s claim that events exist only under description going to be brought in line with thermoluminescence and C14 dating? If Roth is right, then large portions of modern physics, that underwrite these procedures, must be wrong.

Truth and correspondence

Zeleňák is probably right when he emphasizes views on the correspondence-based understanding of truth as a major point of disagreement between realists and anti-realists. It is, however, not easy to say how the anti-realist rejection of truth-as-correspondence would work when it comes to historians’ statements about the past.

Let us start by saying that past occurrences either happened or did not happen independently of historians’ descriptions. From the realist point of view, historians’ statements about the past are true or false depending on whether their conditions of satisfaction are satisfied by these past occurrences.⁷² In the case nothing ever happened in the past then all historians’ statements and statements about the past would be false in the sense of correspondence to the past. Because of the Rothian regress, this would be indeed the case if events existed only under description.

Now imagine that there is another, a non-correspondence-based kind of truth that is also applicable to statements about the past. Let us call such truth “truth^{NC}” and let us call correspondence-based truth “truth^C.” It should be uncontroversial that the statement

Black holes have existed for millions of years but only *after* (or: *once*) they came into existence in 1783, when Michell described them.

⁷⁰ C. Firestone and B. Scholl, “Cognition Does not Affect Perception: Evaluating the Evidence for ‘Top-Down’ Effects,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* (2016), vol. 1, 1-77.

⁷¹ Hubálek and Kowalewski Jahromi, “Naturalizing the Past(s),” 342.

⁷² That is, statements express propositions which are themselves identified by the conditions that need to be satisfied for the individual proposition to be true. See Searle, *Intentionality*, 10-13.

could be true^{NC} according to some versions of truth^{NC} but it will certainly be false^C. Similarly,

'The Renaissance' has no counterpart in the past, so the past occurrences that the Renaissance consisted of did not happen, and the past occurrences that the Renaissance consisted of did happen.

could be true^{NC} although false^C. Clearly, once this distinction true^C / true^{NC} is introduced, statements will be true^C if occurrences were really the way these statements assert, false^C if they were not, whereas the distinction true^{NC}/false^{NC} may be dependent on some other properties of statements (such as whether they are politically correct, whether they advance certain political agendas, whether historians agree about them or similar). The distinction between true^{NC}/false^{NC} has nothing to do with what really happened in the past. Contrary to Zeleňák's claim (cited above) that realists only accept their version of truth, for a realist like myself this is all perfectly acceptable, as long as we do not muddle the distinction and furtively use the term "truth" to confuse truth^C and truth^{NC}. Admittedly, it remains unclear whether anti-realists have any convincing arguments to convince us to disregard truth^C in favour of various versions of truth^{NC} and how this would work in historiography—but let us leave these questions aside.

The important rub is that history of historiography is also a historiographical discipline. Statements about what historians did in the past and how they wrote their works are also historical statements. If we say that no historical statements are true^C then this statement is itself also a historical statement that pertains to the statements historians wrote in the past. For anti-realists, this should be an important issue, since they want to say that their rejection of correspondence *really* applies to what historians actually do. So, the dilemma is whether they should say that the statement "no historical statements are true on the basis of correspondence to the past" is true^C or true^{NC}? If they say that it is true^C then they are admitting correspondence in their own account of historical works written in the past. Self-contradiction is unavoidable, since they have to argue that the historical statement that "no historical statements are true^C" is true^C. But if they say that the statement is true^{NC} then they are admitting that their claim that no historical statements are true on the basis of correspondence does not say something about the way historical statements are true.

As a result of this contusion, the papers from the Poznań conference presented in the latest issue of the *Journal of the Philosophy of History* are so indebted to correspondence-based understanding of truth that their authors' denunciations of correspondence cannot but sound dishonest. Consider Ewa Dumańska's and Krzysztof Brzechczyn's introductory summary of Brzechczyn's and Kowalewski Jahromi's article "Putin's Image of the Past."⁷³ We are told that the article "examines the image of Russia and Ukraine's past disseminated by Russian state institutions" generated by approaches

⁷³ Domańska and Brzechczyn, "Expanding," 274.

that “distort the reality that they refer to.”⁷⁴ But if these distortions are distortions of “reality,” then what really happened matters—and it can matter only in the sense of correspondence to the account-independent past. No account can distort the reality that it constructs. I applaud Brzechczyn’s and Kowalewski Jahromi’s view that “it is so important to distinguish between critical historical knowledge and its mythologized distortions.”⁷⁵ It remains, however, unclear how they can make this distinction if they reject correspondence to the description-independent past and assume that both “critical historical knowledge” and “mythologized distortions” are nothing more than constructs whose incommensurability merely derives from the different methodologies and conceptual frameworks used in their construction. Similarly, when they criticize the Russian official narrative for omitting “the aggression by the Soviet Union towards Poland on September 17, 1939” this criticism makes sense only insofar as this aggression really happened and they expect that historical accounts should be true in the sense of correspondence to this past occurrence. Or, are they saying that the statement “The Soviet Union invaded Poland on September 17, 1939” is not stating *wie es eigentlich gewesen*—that it is not true on the basis of correspondence to what really happened and independently of any description? If this is what they think, and if they believe that past events are merely constructed by descriptions whereby different pasts are constructed by different narratives, then—in accordance to what Roth has taught them—they should accept it as normal that their narrative about what happened on 17 September 1939 differs from the Russian official narrative, since it pertains to a different past. In fact, if Roth and Ian Hacking are right, Brzechczyn’s and Kowalewski Jahromi should be able to *change* the past, *cancel* the invasion and ensure that it did not happen by re-conceptualizing it retroactively (e.g. as “liberation”).⁷⁶ It is only not clear why they should bother to do it, since from the anti-realist point of view the account that describes the invasion is not true on the basis of correspondence to what really happened—and it is consequently not clear why they would classify the invasion as a bad event or believe that something needs to be done about it. How convincing can be the condemnation of an invasion if one admits, at the same time, that the invasion is a mere construct that occurred only in the sense that it has been described by historians and did not happen in reality independently of the description? Or that it is colligatory concept that has no counterpart in the past?

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 274.

⁷⁵ K. Brzechczyn and P. Kowalewski Jahromi, “Putin’s Image of the Past: an Attempt at Methodological Analysis,” *Journal of Philosophy of History*, 19 (2025), 123-143.

⁷⁶ See Roth, “The Pasts,” 333 for a description how according to Hacking the past can be changed “by changing descriptions available.” If someone were to argue that “what has been done cannot be undone” Roth explains that this depends “on what one takes ‘doing’ to be. If what happens in the world is at least in part a function of human actions, and if what actions are Goodmanian kinds, that is, exemplifications of ways a given community descriptively collates behaviors in particular ways, then when new descriptions, new ways of collating physical doings, become available, this changes what actions happened, whenever they happened.”

Conclusion

Judging by the articles included in the volume of *Journal of the Philosophy of History* the anti-realists' conference on the philosophy of history in Poznań seems to have been a rather gloomy echo chamber, probably desperately needed in the moment when the postmodernist worldview has died out in almost all other fields of the humanities. When Tor Egil Følrand organized a similar realist conference in Oslo in 2024 a number of prominent anti-realists, such as Kuukkanen or Giuseppina d'Oro were also invited and we had (I dare say) some very productive discussions. I think that Aviezer Tucker, Følrand and I managed to convince Kuukkanen that realism does not entail that there can be only one description of a past event; d'Oro made me think about my anti-anti-realist stance in relation to Kant's transcendental idealism and I had to realize that I am not so much opposed to anti-realism as to social constructionism. The Poznań conference, however, does not seem to have been about arguments or new insights but about recapitulating and reassuring. Or at least the published papers suggest so.

I can thus partly agree with Domańska and Brzechczyn that the published papers reflect "changes in the field that mark a shift away from abstract, formal analyses of concepts and explanatory models."⁷⁷ On the one hand, this implicit suggestion that formal and conceptual analysis is not the strong side of the papers published is certainly correct when it comes to the two papers I have analyzed here. But on the other, I do not see that this is a big change or a shift since (as I have complained a number of times in the past) poor philosophical quality of arguments, especially of those in favor of anti-realism, has haunted publications in the philosophy of history for some decades. The novelty that disturbs me is the second part of Domańska's and Brzechczyn's sentence following what I have just cited, where they explain that the emphasis at the conference was on the "social conditions shaping the production of historical knowledge."⁷⁸ I would not be disturbed if this statement came from realists, since for realists historical knowledge can be affected by its social context in the sense that the context often motivates the questions that the historian will ask. Nevertheless, from the realist point of view, historical truth is underwritten by correspondence to past reality and thus independent of social pressures. When anti-realists, however, talk about social conditions that shape historical knowledge one has reasons to be worried, because this suggests the view that the evaluation of historical works is to be based exclusively on social approval (not on correspondence to the past!), which easily translates into saying that historical narratives are valid insofar as they please the establishment (professional, academic or political etc.), and that the establishment is always right. In other words, that when it comes to the ethics of historical profession, individual historians' integrity does not matter and that all that matters is submissiveness to the authorities. Consequently, I feel unease about Domańska's and Brzechczyn's latest "social turn" grounded in "the recognition that historical knowledge must be assessed not only in terms of truth conditions but also with respect to its credibility, usability,

⁷⁷ Domańska and Brzechczyn, "Expanding," 265.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 265.

and public accountability.”⁷⁹ In social constructionists’ view truth-conditions or credibility are not underwritten by correspondence to an independently existing past, but are products of social interactions as much as narratives about usability or public accountability. All this disturbingly sounds like the endorsement of the establishment’s (often political) control over historical research. Hubálek and Kowalewski Jahromi advance this reasoning further when they endorse the view that they attribute to Roth: “The task of the historian cannot be to uncover a pre-existing past, but to construct internally coherent and externally plausible narratives that also work with their own historical contingency.”⁸⁰ Since massive part of narratives’ “historical contingency” and external plausibility depends on their political context, one can wonder whether they are really presenting Roth’s view, or the view attributed to the Bolshevik historian Mikhail Pokrovsky that “history is politics projected backwards.”⁸¹ Clearly, such a position is unavoidable if correspondence to the description-independent past does not matter in historical work, and if all that matters is the perspective of the contemporary context in which the views of the establishment (professional, academic, political etc.) necessarily come to dominate. I believe that this explains the main reason for my aversion to social constructionism. Social constructionism is a collectivist ideology of submission to the social environment; it promotes blind obedience to the establishment that controls social interactions and thus leaves no space for intellectual integrity.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 263.

⁸⁰ Hubálek and Kowalewski Jahromi, “Naturalizing the Past(s),” 343.

⁸¹ Pokrovsky actually used this phrase in order to describe and criticize the methodology of some nineteenth-century historians. During the Stalin era, when it became politically opportune to criticize him, the view was attributed to him and he was accused for advocating it. His critics thus practiced what they falsely accused him of preaching—a good lesson about what can happen when “social conditions” and “historical contingency” start shaping historians’ works. See B. W. Eissenstat, “M. N. Pokrovsky and Soviet Historiography: Some Reconsiderations,” *Slavic Review* 28 (1969), 604-618, 614.