

Real True Facts: A Reply to Currie and Swaim

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Currie and Swaim (hereafter CS) impute to Roth's view, as they imagine it, a multitude of problems. Best then to begin by reviewing Roth's actual approach to narrative as a form of explanation and how that relates to his concerns with the metaphysics of history. As made explicit in the very titles of several of Roth's articles and his book, Roth focuses on issues in the analytic tradition traditionally held to be obstacles to the *logical evaluation* of narrative *qua* form of explanation. In particular, histories often take the form of narratives – stories – and narrative form seemingly lacks the type of logical structure taken as a prerequisite for a rational evaluation of scientific theories. From this, previous analytic philosophers inferred a dilemma: either historiography fails to provide *scientific* explanations, or the narrative form predominant in historiography needs to be recast in order to display a logical structure which can then be rationally evaluated.¹ Roth's irrealism belongs to a larger strategy that offers an escape from this apparent dilemma. It does this by articulating a logical structure that respects narrative form in historiography (with all the associated problems) and, at the same time, demonstrates why this form ought to count as an acceptable scientific explanation.

1 P. Roth, "The Full Hempel", *History and Theory* 38, nr. 2 (1999), 249–63.

1 What Irrealism Aims At

Roth's *The Philosophical Structure of Historical Explanation* (hereafter PSHE) addresses questions about the semantic structure and the related logic of narrative explanation by initially sorting objections into two categories: metaphysical and methodological. Metaphysical considerations about historical explanation unsurprisingly tie to some notion of realism. More specifically, a type of realism about the fixity of past historical events – the past imagined on the model of immutable and unchanging dioramas – can be thought to constrain narrative explanation by requiring that histories must aggregate. In the end, there can be only one.

But this proves impossible to reconcile with what Roth takes to be an epistemological consequence of historiographic practice, namely the existence of multiple, incompatible histories. On the one hand realism, as traditionally conceived, unduly narrows the field of possible histories to those that prove mutually compatible. On the other hand, anti-realism typically offers no good accounts of what constrains histories. So, the apparent metaphysical options contribute to the initially noted dilemma regarding narrative as a form of explanation. The former imposes too strong a constraint on historical explanation, and the latter too weak. In sum, a key to Roth's redemption of narrative as a form of explanation involves rejecting a philosophical assumption about the metaphysics of history that posits a forced choice between realism and anti-realism.

The book's defense of narrative as a form of explanation proceeds moreover from a specific epistemological perspective on historiography. This takes it that like sailors adrift on the sea, inquirers never get to do more than tinker with the theoretical raft that keeps them afloat on the shifting tides of experience. From this perspective, irrealism as developed in Chapter 3 of Roth's PSHE and deployed throughout the rest of the book argues that an assumed forced choice between the aggregation implied by realism and the frictionless spinning in a void often associated with anti-realism proves false. *Irrealism thus constitutes neither an argument against realism nor need it do so.* Rather, it articulates an *alternative* metaphysical account that accords best with what Roth also takes as the *epistemic* position of theorizers. Irrealism serves to accommodate an epistemology that eschews the myth of the given or anything akin to the analytic-synthetic distinction. In short, irrealism rationalizes historical practice by establishing why, on the one the hand, historical narratives can be expected to take incompatible forms but, on the other hand, they remain constrained by experience.

2 What is the Actual Difference between Moderate Realism and Irrealism?

Situating irrealism in this way brings up the question of how to construe the actual differences between CS and Roth. The former declare their intent to be that of seeking “a happy median between anti-realist accounts which cut historians too far from actual happenings in the past, and naïve realist accounts which underemphasize the role of historians in creating history.”² No disagreement there. Yet while disavowing naïve versions of realism, CS offer the following characterization of the sort of “moderately realist” position they take themselves to defend. This consists of the following two claims:

[2.1] “historical facts are ... truly facts *of the past*”

[2.2] “those past facts do not metaphysically depend on historians.”

Understanding substantively and philosophically what either of these claims entails proves quite challenging. What do the claims [2.1] and [2.2] entail that separates the view that CS believe themselves to defend and they interpret Roth to reject? Let us begin with [2.2], since it can easily be disposed of. Roth maintains nowhere that facts (and we will worry in a moment what those could be) “metaphysically depend” on historians, at least conceived as *individuals*. As certainly CS appreciate in a rhetorically more measured moment, the notion of fact at issue ties to a holist view of *theories*. Hacking, to whom the revival of Goodman’s neologism ‘irrealism’ owes much, himself writes extensively about ‘style of reasoning’, and how various *styles* function to stabilize the objects that appropriately trained and socialized scientists then study. Relatedly, as Roth’s many writings on Quine’s epistemology make clear, a fact-stating sentence presupposes a theoretical structure within which certain propositions take on different epistemic roles for purposes of inquiry, some fact asserting, some not. Those sentences taken to be fact stating typically involve sentences about what counts as readily perceivable, e.g., ‘The cat is on the mat.’ Others presuppose mediation by more explicitly theoretical considerations, e.g., ‘Neutrinos lack mass.’ But in neither case does the notion of what a fact is depend metaphysically (whatever that might mean) on any individual. Thus, [2.2] can be dismissed without further ado.

2 A. Currie & D. Swaim, “Past Facts and the Nature of History”, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, this issue (2022), § 1.

A consideration of [2.1] brings to the fore the question of what notion of fact CS take to be in dispute. Whatever facts may be taken to be, for purposes of the debate, here they must be understood as sentences of a certain semantic type. For in order to serve as evidence or to figure into rational discourse, presumed fact-stating sentences must be assigned some semantic value, typically true or false. Logical positivists attempted (and of course they were neither the first nor alone to do this) to identify a set of protocol sentences, i.e., fact-stating propositions that function as epistemic/evidentiary starting points of inquiry. Now, champions of protocol sentences need *not* take them to be a species of what Sellars stigmatizes as the “myth of the given.”³ Even Quine took a pass at defining within his limits what might count as an observation sentence. Be that as it may, the key issue turns on the semantic underpinnings of such fact-stating statements.

Here it helps to borrow an elegant and apt phrase from Robert Brandom’s discussion of what Sellars opposes in the notion of givenness. Brandom uses the term ‘semantically autonomous’ to characterize the type of statements Sellars *rejects* when arguing against any notion of an epistemic given. *A statement counts in this regard as semantically autonomous on the assumption that determination of its truth value does not depend on any supporting statements of fact.*⁴ In this key respect, statements of fact so conceived must be non-inferential. For if in order to predicate ‘true’ of such statements, other statements must be assumed to be true, and thus the epistemic status of the supposed fact would be the product of an inference, a consequence of the assumed truth of other statements.

Now these other statements either are fact stating in a semantically autonomous way or they are not. If not, then the truth of the supposed fact-stating statement does not *directly* or independently state a fact; it too owes its truth to assumptions made about statements from which it is derived. So, either

3 Inspired by Neurath, Carnap defended in 1932 that the set of protocol sentences accepted by scientists as starting points of empirical inquiry is entirely historically contingent. That scientists most of the time agree on protocol sentences is a happy historico-sociological fact. “The only way to identify ‘our science’, is to point out historically that it is the science of our culture.” R. Carnap, “Erwiderung auf die vorstehenden Aufsätze von E. Zilsel und K. Duncker”, *Erkenntnis*, 3 (1932), 180. In Section 5, we will argue that irrealism defends a similar position: historical events are not framework independent, but the result of a historical process of inquiry. In Chapter 6 of *PSHE*, Roth argues that Kuhn’s work also points to a similar perspective on science as an essentially historical object. As is well known now, Carnap was particularly enthusiastic about Kuhn’s historical perspective on scientific paradigms. G.A. Reisch, “Did Kuhn Kill Logical Empiricism?” *Philosophy of Science* 58, nr. 2 (1991), 264–77.

4 R. Brandom, *From Empiricism to Expressivism: Brandom Reads Sellars* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 124.

there exists a continual regress that never reaches to some “bare” theoretically unmediated statement of fact, or a semantic account is on offer of what such theoretically unmediated statements state. Put another way, absent semantic autonomy, “fact-stating” marks only a *position* in a theoretical web, and not some direct connection to the really real. Theories *accommodate* experience, but they do not do so in a way traceable to semantically autonomous statements. Or so Roth maintains.

From this epistemic perspective, a statement such as “The cat is on the mat” is *not* semantically autonomous because knowing its truth value entails, *inter alia*, knowing how to categorize items as ‘cat’ or ‘mat’ within the flux of experience. Understood in this way, “The cat is on the mat” and “Neutrinos lack mass” simply lie at different ends of what is nonetheless a *theoretical* continuum. Semantic autonomy classically requires an immediate inference from the causal/perceptual to the semantic, paradigmatically being stimulated in a certain situation just induces specific propositional knowledge in an individual, e.g., “Adrian sees redly” or “Daniel feels an ache.” Semantic autonomy requires that certain propositions have a truth value *qua* individual propositions, full stop. Absent an assumption of semantic autonomy, any sentence taken to be fact stating will be theoretically hedged, and so has factuality only derivatively and not absolutely.

Must CS commit to semantic autonomy? On the one hand, in order to draw the issue with Roth, it seems they must be. On the other hand, CS make it no easy matter to discern what semantic theory could possibly underwrite the notion of *fact* (or fact-stating statement) to which they claim to subscribe. “We’ll take a ‘fact’ to be a true description, sentence, or proposition about a property ascribed to an event. We don’t think this way of speaking presupposes realism, anti-realism or irrealism”.⁵ Now, the first sentence can easily be read as asserting semantic autonomy for some privileged set of statements. Yet, what semantic features determine the truth value assignment? It will not do to say “the facts” since precisely what is at issue involves the notion of factuality being appealed to in making a semantic assignment. Perhaps, *the world as it is* determines the truth-value assignment? In this specific regard, their professed metaphysical agnosticism in the second sentence simply fails to accord with what the first sentence certainly presupposes.

Perhaps something akin to Tarski’s Convention T might seem to be all that is needed here. But that would be a false hope, at least for purposes of differentiating the positions. A Tarskian style theory of truth maps items in an object language to those in a metalanguage. But that begs what is at issue, namely the

5 Currie & Swaim, “Past Facts and the Nature of History”, §1.

metaphysical status of whatever model is in play for interpreting the object language sentences. Put another way, in order to actually have a disagreement between Roth and CS about the nature of facts, the disagreement must be about the semantic basis of fact-stating propositions. For Roth, statements taken for purposes of inquiry to state facts only mark sentences currently situated at a non-disputed edge of a theoretical web. These nonetheless remain embedded in a more general semantic model to which inquirers acquiesce. Either CS assert the semantic autonomy of supposedly fact-stating sentences, or they do not. If they do, they straightforwardly endorse a classically realist stance. If they do not, it becomes quite obscure in what respects their position differs from Roth's. Both can avail themselves of the notion of "true description." But only a claim to the semantic autonomy of fact-stating sentences provides a robust enough sense of 'true' to differentiate the position that CS claim to defend from that which they claim to attack.

Reasons to suspect that CS have misstated or misunderstood the metaphysical commitments of their notion of a fact surface consistently. For within a few sentences of denying that their notion of a fact involves any metaphysical commitment, they assert:

By contrast, on our view, the events and properties are (except under circumstances we'll clarify) independent of historians. Further, although (on some versions of minimal realism) facts might be relative to a description or sentence, their being facts turns critically on events and their properties. And on other versions, facts can be understood as propositions *whose truth is entirely indifferent to token descriptions or sentences, uttered by historians or otherwise.*⁶

Keep in mind that Roth uses characterizations of realism found in, e.g., work by Michael Dummett and Crispin Wright, which takes it that propositions have a truth-value which is, as they put it, "verification independent." Statements are true or false even if they are in principle unverifiable; their semantic value depends only on the way the world is. This certainly *seems* to be what CS assert above.

What is at issue in the distinction between realism and irrealism is not whether the truth of statements is "indifferent" to the individuals who make them. Of course it is. But truth cannot be indifferent to the truth conditions, and the truth conditions depend on how to construe the terms used in making the statement. Either those terms map directly onto some theoretically

⁶ Currie & Swaim, "Past Facts and the Nature of History", §1. (emphasis added).

unmediated world, or they do not. If CS accept the latter, it becomes impossible to discern how their semantics differs from Roth's without further specification. If they accept the former (contrary to what they maintain elsewhere), this makes their position a canonically realist one, one committed to full-blooded semantic autonomy.

CS use the example of Franklin Roosevelt's career. According to them, irrealism conceives that career is an artifact of a historiographical activity. However, CS maintain that Roosevelt's career exists independent of any representation of that career by historians. The career cannot be an artifact, although on their view a representation of Roosevelt's career can be. The career itself does not care whether historians notice it or not, just like a speciation event which happened millions of years ago exists before any biologists represent it.

The example of Roosevelt's career serves well to exemplify the semantic distinction between irrealism and CS's realism. Irrealism entails that the truth-value of any sentence about Franklin Roosevelt's career can only be assigned from within a broader historiographical practice, one which is both social and epistemic and, at the same time, itself the result of a historical process (more on this later). Irrealism does not dispute the existence of historical facts, e.g. the Second World War started on 1 September 1939, but it denies that these exist as facts independent from a historical practice of inquiry which already presupposes many other facts, empirical ways of testing those facts, and theoretical frameworks to anchor them.⁷

From an irrealist perspective, Roosevelt's career is an artifact just like a piece of pottery. It results from a human practice and exists only so long as some practice supports it. "A plurality of pasts results because constituting a past depends to some degree on socially mediated negotiations of a fit between descriptions and experience."⁸ Today, we can talk about the political career of the Athenian Pericles, even if no one in Pericles' own time or even 2000 years after Pericles would/could have talked about Pericles' life in terms of him having had a career. If there was no modern-day practice to retroactively discuss Pericles' life in terms of a career, that career would not have existed. There are truths about Pericles' career 2500 years ago that only came into being thousands of years later. However, this does not imply that statements about Pericles' career lack truth-value and are merely *fictitious* constructions out of someone's imagination. Statements about Pericles' career have truth-value and become an object of rational debate from within modern biographical concepts like "career" and an entire philological tradition capable of reconstructing all the

⁷ Roth, *The Philosophical Structure of Historical Explanation*, 55.

⁸ Roth, *The Philosophical Structure of Historical Explanation*, 64.

important testimonies about Pericles, etc. Absent an epistemic culture necessary to study the history of ancient Greece, including its theories and practices of inquiry, statements about Pericles' career could not have a truth value. Then, those statements would be akin to fiction.⁹

Roth's aim throughout was epistemological and semantic, i.e., showing how, given that one does not have to opt for either realism or anti-realism, one *can* make sense of sentences having semantic inter-relationships within a narrative structure. CS scour Roth's writings and declare them empty of refutations of realism. But this comes as no surprise, for what they seek Roth never needed nor intended to offer.

3 The Placeholder Metaphysics of Moderate Realism

Time and again, the sole argumentative ploy found in CS consists of an assertion that what Roth says about, e.g., non-aggregativity is *consistent* with their form of realism. Under those conditions, of course irrealism appears a toothless and unmotivated metaphysical view. Conversely, one searches in vain in CS for any hint of what they require, namely an argument regarding what their semantically autonomous realm of facts consists in. The following typifies what passes for positive argument in their paper.

Philosophers of science are not irrealists about scientific facts in the face of non-aggregativity because it simply doesn't follow from our making idealizations – even ineliminable idealizations – that the facts are not 'out there' to be had. There is an important sense in which non-aggregativity does not actually lead to inconsistency. Non-aggregativity is due to events being sensitive to description, that is, the events are not treated as 'bare', but as events-qua-some perspective. It is perfectly consistent to capture some event *qua* perspective *a*, and the 'same' event *qua* perspective *b*, even if event-qua-*a* and event-qua-*b* would be inconsistent if treated as either perspectiveless or from the same perspective. It does follow that there is no consistent, single, non-perspectival 'god's-eye-view' to be had.

9 Bruno Latour expanded a similar perspective to all scientific objects: their existence requires an epistemic culture. Similar to Roth's irrealism, Latour framed this perspective as a middle ground between classical realism and some form of anything-goes anti-realism. B. Latour, "On the Partial Existence of Existing and Non-existing Objects" in: L. Daston (ed.), *Biographies of Scientific Objects* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 247–70.

The full picture will be irredeemably pluralistic. But pluralism is not in conflict with realism insofar as it amounts to the denial of those events *only existing because of scientists taking those perspectives*.¹⁰

CS put ‘same’ in scare quotes above, and well they might. They only rescue themselves from a threat of inconsistency by the startling last three sentences of the foregoing quote. They begin by *conceding* that there exists neither a ‘god’s-eye-view’ nor an alternative to a legitimate plurality of non-consistent descriptions. Yet, they imagine that they remain at odds with Roth. Their longing to have their cake and eat it too does not make for plausible philosophy.

As noted, CS seemingly reject a form of realism in the non-verificationist sense used by Dummett and Wright and taken by Roth as his model of what realism in historiography comes to. But this simply highlights that they leave the semantic underpinnings of their supposedly fact-stating or event-stating propositions quite mysterious. If no god’s-eye-view is to be had, with respect to precisely what will their statement be taken to be true or false?¹¹ CS for all intents and purposes advocate for a notion of factuality that supposedly entails neither the metaphysical embrace of a view from nowhere nor naïve realism. Claiming this semantic perspective affords them a clear advantage. As Russell famously quipped, it is precisely the advantage of theft over honest toil. Having conveniently jettisoned every realist metaphysical claim that might prove inconvenient or burdensome, they nonetheless appropriate a typically unabashedly realist conclusion – the semantic autonomy of statements of fact. But having denied all the usual bases for ascribing autonomy to alleged statements of fact, including that it even is a metaphysical position, they leave unbegun the hard philosophical work required to fill out what “connects” their fact-stating statements to the “really real.”

10 Currie & Swaim, “Past Facts and the Nature of History”, § 2.1.

11 CS deepen the mystery of their imagined semantics by declaring in footnote 19 that “To put things in another way, realists need not (and should not) be committed to the possibility of a kind of ‘ideal chronicle’ which in a unified, non-perspectival way, captures all the past facts.” Danto’s famous thought experiment, of course, aimed in large part at the idea that what could be said to be true at any moment in time could be exhausted by what was knowable at just that moment. CS elsewhere oppose the conclusion Danto draws and Roth endorses from this, namely that what happens later adds truths to earlier times. This compounds the puzzle of what for CS makes statements of fact statements of facts, full stop.

But CS will be sure to protest that they do provide more. In one sense, this is correct. Here is an example of their something more.

One way, then, to gloss a realist response to Roth's argument for non-aggregativity is to say that nature (and *a fortiori* history) is *structured* or *patterned*. A particular phenomenological pattern corresponds, roughly, to one *potential carving* of the world's natural (or political, economic, etc.) history. Some of the ways that historians carve the world are more similar to true patterns of events than others, and this fact is what underwrites the substantiveness of historical debate (as we will argue below). The moderate realist, then, can deny that these potential carvings are the inventions of historians, they are instead the events, processes, and patterns that historians seek to find and understand.¹²

Well, if there exists a particular phenomenological pattern, then it would be foolhardy indeed to deny that a perceived pattern fails to also be a potential pattern. The metaphysical rub, of course, comes *not* with regard to what *appears* to be the case – and an appearance is what a “phenomenological pattern” is – but rather with their additional assertion above that “some of the ways that historians carve the world are more similar to true patterns of events than others.” The world is all that is the case, as someone once wrote. Slipping in their favored semantic term does not thereby *justify* the purpose for which they invoke it. Indeed, since CS maintain – barely a page prior – that no perspectiveless view is there to be had, of what are true patterns true? What makes a pattern true in some recognizable sense of “the real” remains the unanswered question. CS employ semantic terms and yet deny that they have any account with any metaphysical implications that would underwrite their semantics. They cannot have it both ways.

4 What Is the Argument in Support of Irrealism?

CS assert that “As we’ve seen, Roth argues from non-standardization, non-aggregativity and indetachability to irrealism.”¹³ As noted at the outset, this completely misstates and fundamentally misrepresents Roth's position. The case for non-standardization, non-aggregativity, and non-detachability develop *independently* of and prior to the argument for irrealism as the structure and

¹² Currie & Swaim, “Past Facts and the Nature of History”, § 2.1.

¹³ Currie & Swaim, “Past Facts and the Nature of History”, § 3.

argument of PSHE make explicit. "In rejecting realism about history, what results turns out to be not antirealism about the past but irrealism. But the case for irrealism must be deferred to Chapter 3 in order to dispense with a type of commonsense metaphysics of history."¹⁴ And, indeed, subsequent to what CS incorrectly identify as the argument for irrealism, Roth opens Chapter 3 of his book by emphasizing the order of arguments to which CS prove oblivious.

But insofar as any metaphysical assumption regarding a fixed or determinate inventory of what has past can be problematized, then this removes a seemingly important reason for assuming a form of explanation tailored to an ontologically or theoretically well-defined world. A consequence of establishing the implausibility of any realist-inflected metaphysical assumption would be to help reopen questions of how historical events do become candidates for explanation. Put another way, realism deflects serious consideration of the special nature of historical explananda, and so what form their explanation can take. This chapter moves beyond the critique begun in chapter 2 by offering a positive argument for what I term historical irrealism.¹⁵

Roth's account attempts to explicate a semantics of narrative explanation on the epistemic assumption that inquiry must always proceed from within a theoretically inflected understanding of how things are and what there is. The challenge then involves making intelligible a notion of real pasts without simultaneously metaphysically subscribing to a view that takes there to be just one way of legitimately fashioning histories. Roth crafts his account of irrealism as his answer to that challenge.

On what, then, does the argument for irrealism presume? Roth's strategy here relies on his particular way of generalizing insights he takes from Kuhn's and Hacking's views on categories as theoretical as opposed to natural kind terms. Without worrying here over the details of the argument, it still proves possible to see how badly what CS take to be a counterexample to Roth's quite openly historicist and constructivist view misses the mark.

The populations' initial isolation being a speciation event is indetachable from their diverging genetically and phenotypically. But from where does the new property (and fact) emerge? On Roth's model, we would say that it is via the *intersession of biologists*. When a biologist points at

14 Roth, *The Philosophical Structure of Historical Explanation*, 24.

15 Roth, *The Philosophical Structure of Historical Explanation*, 35.

a population splitting and names it a speciation event, a new fact comes into existence. But this is implausible: the population division is a speciation event because it led to two new species. The species do not care whether biologists notice them.¹⁶

What fact of the matter does Roth's account prove insensitive to on this rendering of his view? Speciation, or so say CS. But what sort of "fact" is speciation, not to mention genetic and phenotypic data? Not a fact absent a theoretical perspective, or so CS have already stated.

But what middle ground exists between the semantic autonomy view – statements about, e.g., speciation are true or false as individual statements and absent any further semantic context – and Roth's constructivism? Roth makes or endorses nowhere the assumption that semantic status "depends" on the judgment of this or that individual. CS relentlessly read this into Roth's writing: "But in the last section, we saw biological examples wherein past events gained new properties without the biologist as an intermediary."¹⁷ The only semantic "intermediary," as Roth's insistent and repeated citing of Quine and Sellars signals, concerns theories in which certain categorizing terms play a specific role. Again, if statements of fact come to something more than what inquiry takes as settled, that "something more" will be what divides the view championed by CS from that espoused by Roth.

5 Why the Argument for Moderate Realism Fails

CS promise to deliver on this much needed something more in Section 4 of their paper, encouragingly titled "How to be a realist." How indeed. CS continue their practice of denying in one sentence what they assert in a prior one.

If you want, we might say that history comes 'pre-carved'. But this is a highly misleading metaphor, as the realist need not say that there is a single, unified, privileged carving. Instead, the 'carving' will be multifaceted, sensitive to description and potentially open-ended. There's no need, for the moderate realist, to appeal to any special sense of 'carving'. Historical processes lead to a patterned history, some highly contingent, some more robust, and these patterns and patchiness are the targets of historical discovery.¹⁸

¹⁶ Currie & Swaim, "Past Facts and the Nature of History", § 3.1.

¹⁷ Currie & Swaim, "Past Facts and the Nature of History", § 4.

¹⁸ Currie & Swaim, "Past Facts and the Nature of History", § 4.1.

Some carvings, CS have previously maintained, are “more correct” or “truer” than others. Now, this cannot be “more correct” just by current *theoretical* lights, for that shrugs off the realist connotation of “more correct” they claim to embrace. Put another way, to assert that a realist “need not say” that some sense of carving is privileged simply makes hash of any sense of realism. What can “more correct” possibly be understood as asserting? Fits the facts better? But, of course, this just leads once again to the same semantic impasse.

The extent to which CS either talk past or simply do not in any philosophically relevant way engage with the issues as framed by Roth can be found on full display in another putative counterexample they belabor.

The historian’s narrative, then, typically aims to pick out a static process-completed event: that, say, Reagan in fact did win the 1980 US election. In this sense, speaking of narratives as ‘describing’ past properties and events rather than creating them is happily consistent with those events being dynamic. Further, when the historian generates a new narrative, or new categorization, they do not thereby ‘create’ a new event or fact. They rather describe (or at least attempt to describe) a static process-completed event. The truth-conditions of the historian’s analysis are rooted in what actually occurred in the past.¹⁹

The focus here should be on their semantic claim, namely that the “truth-conditions” root “in what actually occurred in the past.” Does this example assert anything that Roth denies? CS imagine so, stating that “Roth’s antirealism goes further, denying that there is a chronology to be had in the first place.”²⁰ The gasp you hear is Roth’s. Nowhere do they cite proof for this interpretation, nor do they produce an argument to establish this. Moreover, like the example of speciation noted earlier, disagreement would require asserting that “Reagan did win the 1980 US election” is semantically autonomous. We await that argument.

We turn then to the claim that “moderate realism” of the sort espoused by CS does a better job reflecting the nature of historical inquiry and disputes. Note that CS actually make a much stronger claim. Moderate realism is a necessary interpretation of historical knowledge, because only realism can capture an important aspect of historiographical practice, which Roth’s irrealism cannot, namely, “the substantiveness of historical debates.”²¹ CS claim that irrealism

19 Currie & Swaim, “Past Facts and the Nature of History”, § 4.1.

20 Currie & Swaim, “Past Facts and the Nature of History”, § 4.1.

21 Currie & Swaim, “Past Facts and the Nature of History”, § 4.2.

fails to articulate what makes historical practice rational, because it cannot uphold the substantiveness of historical debates.

Substantiveness is supposed to capture two aspects of historical practice:

[5.1] successful historical narratives are constrained, i.e., writing history is not like writing fiction, and

[5.2] such constraint, at least to some degree, exists in empirical data or facts which historians unearth, analyse and ultimately use to justify their accounts of the past.²²

From a realist perspective, the constraint on historical narratives should be understood in terms of the aim of historiography, namely, to attain a truthful account of the past and capture the facts from the past (what lies behind phenomenological patterns) through truth-apt historical representation. However, whether historical narratives actually succeed in attaining such truths about the past can only be assessed in *virtue of* their empirical adequacy and explanatory success. Since CS deny a view from nowhere, what, in their view, constitutes according to them success in representing “what actually happened”? What metaphysical view underwrites their assertion of “substantiveness” they pass over in silence, and so it remains unknown. Absent an answer to that question of what gives substance to their substantive statements of fact, it is mere posturing on their part to assert that irrealism cannot account for “substantiveness” in any way that they can.

Adding to the confusion of what actually separates the view that CS advocate from the view they claim to oppose is that Roth also takes both [5.1] and [5.2] for granted. In the preface, Roth is explicit that his account offers an improved methodological self-consciousness to historians: their narratives are not unconstrained by evidence, despite the fact that they often have to make choices of form.²³ In Chapter 3, Roth defends an account of evidential constraints on narratives from a holistic perspective.²⁴ What comes to count as evidence is itself part of ongoing inquiry and not a given foundation. In Chapter 7, Roth positions such a situated notion of evidence within his naturalist epistemology. The “disappearance of the empirical” does not imply an epistemic anarchy, but it denies any *philosophical* notion of empirical data as constituting a privileged access to the world as it is.

²² Currie & Swaim, “Past Facts and the Nature of History”, § 4.2.

²³ Roth, *The Philosophical Structure of Historical Explanation*, xvi.

²⁴ Roth, *The Philosophical Structure of Historical Explanation*, 61.

Roth's alternative of a "comparative method" offers an admittedly weaker interpretation of [5.2]: any evaluation of a historical narrative will be comparative to alternative narratives and must start from a commonly accepted set of evidential materials. The result is a disenchanting pluralism: historical disputes might never be settled. Yet, CS's moderate realism yields, they acknowledge, a similar sort of pluralism. In the end, the only difference between irrealism and moderate realism consists in the addition of a metaphysical story, namely that some narratives which are accepted by historians are accepted as true accounts of what "actually happened." But since what CS provide establishes absolutely no semantic basis for their alleged tie to robust factuality, it remains unknown what difference their asserted difference makes.

Both Roth and CS claim to start their analysis from historical practice, and both accept a general notion of "substantiveness" of historical debates (which entails [5.1] & [5.2]). Yet, how they conceive the conditions for "substantiveness" differs radically. CS give the example of the dispute over the historical existence of barter economy. They claim that the role of new empirical discoveries is where the substantiveness lies, and, although they claim that the empirical, conceptual and theoretical discussions about barter economy are interwoven, the 'rubber hits the road' with the empirical record. In this metaphor, the rubber [historical narrative] and the road [empirical evidence] used to test it are two distinct entities that have no relation to each other before they collide.

In historical practice, this distinction between the empirical and the theoretical cannot be made in the same way. Ethnographic information about economic systems relies both on economic theory and anthropological theory about the cultures in which such information is gathered. Although CS themselves admit that no clear distinction between theory and evidence can be made coherently, they maintain that the "empirical facts" are in the "driver's seat".²⁵ Supposedly, this ensures that historical debates are substantive. Without any argument, the moderate realist apparently takes a leap of faith and assumes that the use of empirical evidence guarantees the inquirer's accounts latch onto what actually happened, i.e., the historical facts.

According to irrealism, no leap of faith is required. Ethnographic evidence can only be understood within an ongoing epistemic culture that both uses empirical evidence to improve its theoretical account, but also constantly reflects on what such evidence is. The facts of the matter about the barter economy can thus only arise from within a broader investigative practice, which is both social and epistemic at the same time and itself the result of a

25 Currie & Swaim, "Past Facts and the Nature of History", § 4.2.

historical process. This last element is an integral aspect of irrealism: objects of historical inquiry are artifacts, and are thus the historical result of human activity. Debates among historians and their outcomes (dispute, unanimous agreement and everything in between) are themselves “historical” in two ways: they are shaped by the evidentiary and theoretical assumptions of past practitioners, and they shape the way historical inquiry moves forward. In those two ways, according to irrealism, historical debates are constrained by the past historical practice and operate as constraints on future practices. This is what makes debates substantive, and not some mysterious leap of metaphysical faith that ultimately some piece of evidence is what latches onto the really real. Nothing CS include in their example of barter economy either reveals a need to posit some form of metaphysical realism or shows that Roth’s account fails to accommodate evidential reasoning as a constraint on historical practice.

The argument from substantiveness of historical debates to realism as presented by CS proves circular. For only by first assuming that *independent* of any epistemic framework there is a fact of the matter that permits reference to “economic structures” and “barter economies” does irrealism fail to do justice to a historical debate. But what legitimates such an assumption? Are economic formations some metaphysical kind? Ever since Kant, the typically realist/idealist dichotomy between the facts of the world and our representations that need to match those facts has been disputed. To conceive of representations purely as abstractions from or approximations of the real accepts a realist perspective on what science is and aims at. However, this only takes for granted what is in fact at stake in philosophical discussion.

Consider in this regard CS’ definition of a dynamic fact.²⁶ It functions only as a placeholder. Under what conditions does “e having Property P” *depend* upon the occurrence of another event? How should we understand this dependence? Irrealism is at least clear on this point that the significance of later events to earlier ones arises from the historian’s interests in developing a narrative – only in virtue of a narrative is the significance of events on each other clear. CS want to claim that significance of events within a narrative represents the causal relations of events in the world, and those relations are presumably “out there”, independent of any epistemic practice. Unfortunately, CS offer no further explanation of what this causal relation is, and what they consider the boundary conditions of historical events. How does it make sense to talk about causal relations between events in the absence of any general theory on what an event can be and how to understand the causal relations between events?

26 Currie & Swaim, “Past Facts and the Nature of History”, § 4.

Examples from intellectual history prove how difficult it is to conceive intellectual events and their interdependence outside of a particular narrative. Dewulf offers here an example from his own research. If one defends that philosophy of science arose as a subdiscipline of American professional philosophy only late in the 1950s, then the Unity of Science movement of logical empiricists in the 1930s cannot yet be conceived as philosophy of science.²⁷ From this perspective, the 1935 *International conference of Scientific Philosophy* in Paris becomes an important event in the eventual emergence of philosophy of science. However, if one thinks that philosophy of science was already a discipline in American philosophy in the 1920s and 1930s, then logical empiricist philosophy can be conceived as an attempt to restrict what philosophy of science is about.²⁸ In that case, the Paris conference plays an active part not in the emergence of philosophy of science, but in the historical restriction of what philosophy of science was about. Two different perspectives on the history of philosophy of science as an intellectual field thus lead to very different ways of conceiving the 1935 conference.

How to conceive the 1935 conference as a historical event, and especially its significance for the history of philosophy in the twentieth century, is impossible absent further assumptions about what philosophy of science is and the broader philosophical, social and cultural elements at play during the conference. Taken on its own, no piece of text can guide the intellectual historian to the *real* categorization of the conference.

Similar problems arise in considering cs' realist perspective on the Rationalist-Empiricist distinction in the history of early modern philosophy. cs separate, on the one hand, the truths about Descartes' *Meditations* in its own right and in its own time frame and, on the other hand, the truths about the effects of the *Meditations* in later centuries (including its categorization as part of the rationalist tradition to defend Kantian philosophy). As Currie argued in another paper, written with Kirsten Walsh, the identification of Cartesian philosophy as rationalist might be labelled "mythmaking", because such identification does not represent the "core facts" about Descartes' philosophy.²⁹ It only represents the "core facts" about Kant's historical reinterpretation of his

27 F. Dewulf, "The Institutional Stabilization of Philosophy of Science and its Withdrawal from Social Concerns after the Second World War." *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 29, nr. 5, 935–953. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2020.1848794>.

28 J. Katzav, Joel & K. Vaesen, "The Rise of Logical Empiricist Philosophy of Science and the Fate of Speculative Philosophy of Science". *HOPOS: The Journal of the International Society for the History of Philosophy of Science* (forthcoming).

29 A. Currie & K. Walsh, "Caricatures, Myths and White Lies", *Metaphilosophy* 46, nr. 3 (2015), 431.

predecessors. From a realist perspective, there are truths about Descartes' philosophy, which come 'pre-carved' and independent from the later (re)interpretations of that philosophy. Good history of philosophy will, at the very minimum, do justice to the pre-carved core of Descartes' philosophy.

CS claim that the current debates about the categorization of Descartes's philosophy rely on "interpretations of the original texts and their historical context".³⁰ Supposedly, this ensures that our current accounts of Descartes' philosophy are about the real past independent of any framework/categorization, the favorite posit of the realist. However, this is again a typically realist leap of faith: empirical debates *will* track the really real past. Irrealism makes no such leap of faith: current debates about Descartes' philosophy rely on interpretations of the original texts and their historical contexts, but such interpretations in turn rely on a broader set of commitments which are already the result of earlier debates in historiography and philosophy themselves. To make debates in the history of philosophy substantive, there is no need to posit "real" events independent of the broader sets of commitments which arose from within the history of our inquiry. From this irrealist perspective, it does not follow that any interpretation of Descartes' philosophy is equally justified. Historical debates are still substantive.³¹ They are about the evidence, possible interpretations, and viable categorizations of events in the past. Whereas the realist wants to posit "real events" existing independent of any framework of inquiry, the irrealist abandons such metaphysical posits as insignificant for empirical inquiry.

6 Conclusion

CS write as if historiography needs rescuing from those such as Roth, who would recklessly sever whatever they imagine bestows history's title to being a non-fiction exercise. But their worries are as baseless as their assertions about truth and factuality. Philosophical theories of facts posit a semantically autonomous realm. Examples from the history of philosophy abound, ranging

³⁰ Currie & Swaim, "Past Facts and the Nature of History", § 4.3.

³¹ An irrealist perspective on the history of philosophy does not deny the distinction Currie and Walsh make between caricatures and myths in the history of philosophy, but it would give a different characterization of that distinction. Currie and Walsh understand myths as statements about the history of philosophy that do not accord with the "core facts". Currie & Walsh, "Caricatures, Myths and White Lies". Irrealism understands myths as statements about the history of philosophy that are rejected by most practitioners in the history of philosophy.

from Platonic Forms to clear and distinct ideas to self-justifying statements of how things appear. How any philosophical theory of what makes a statement a statement about reality aids and abets working historians has yet to be told. CS have not offered any such account, and what they offer proves philosophically indiscernible from what they claim to oppose. In any case, if irrealism represents a problem about the semantics of fact-stating sentences, what CS retail as an answer proves philosophically indistinguishable. That there even exists *any* problem about facts in need of a solution remains to be established.