

Minimal Metaphysics vs. Maximal Semantics:
A response to Paul Roth and Fons DeWulf

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1. Introduction

In our article, “Past Facts and The Nature of History” (2021), we unpack a broadly realist view of the nature of history and historical narratives. Paul Roth’s (2020) *The Philosophical Structure of Historical Explanation* serves as our primary foil. Fons DeWulf and Roth have replied, and this is our response to their response. Philosophers are used to debates where it is frustratingly unclear where exactly disagreements lie, and are surely used to that sinking, talking-past-one-another feeling. Our reaction to work like Roth’s has often had this character, and as such it is wonderful to have a direct response to work through. We can’t, in this short piece, meet every criticism they raise, instead our aim is to offer a diagnosis of our disagreement. Happily, our hypothesis is not *quite* that we talk past one another: we suspect our disagreements emerge from differences in background philosophical commitments. That is (perhaps *unhappily*): what we have here is an old-fashioned metaphilosophical dispute.

Our strategy has been to build a minimally realist view by laying down a minimal metaphysics for realism, and suggesting that such views can accommodate the kinds of linguistic concerns that seem typical of much of the analytic philosophy of history. Events and the narratives they occupy are not constructions of historians—or at least not entirely, or even mostly (more on this below). This is in stark contrast to a comparatively

maximally semantic view of the nature of events, at least *as they exist for historians*, as seems to be defended by Roth (2020), DeWulf and Roth (forthcoming), Danto (1968), and Goldstein (1996), etc.. On one view, conceptual, linguistic and representational framing inescapably infects everything. On the other, there is an escape insofar as sometimes historical narratives represent a mind-independent world: the structure of our stories capture the structure of the past. In the following, we'll do our best to clarify the nature of the dispute, as well as our view.

2. What metaphysics, and how minimal?

In our paper we discuss the historiography of so-called 'barter economies'. Historical questions concerning the existence, development, and nature of such economies are not at all like the tidy stories that classical market economists have proffered in explaining the emergence of, say, currencies and, *a fortiori*, monetary markets. Rather, much in the way that Alison Wylie and Robert Chapman (2016) emphasize for archaeology, the material artifacts that investigators discover and examine – from textual to ethnographic to archaeological – force a continual refinement of existing narrative structures. That is, the world *has a structure*, and the aim of narrative and narrative explanation is to *capture* that structure as well as possible – it is in virtue of this that the dynamic interplay between theorizing about economies and the material record can be thought of as progressive, that is, leading us to something deserving of the term 'truth'. Or so the realist would say.

Minimally, then, we are committed to the following: (1) events exist in some mind-independent sense; (2) events are structured with respect to one another in various ways; (3) some narrative explanations capture that structure better than others. In virtue of this we see (for instance) the constant restructuring of what we think barter economies were, whether any such thing (as classically understood) existed and how they functioned if and when they did.

One locus of misunderstanding (or, perhaps, disagreement!) concerns mind-independence. With perhaps too much levity, we characterized irrealism as taking historical facts to depend on historians. DeWulf and Roth chasten us here: it is theoretical and linguistic structures, not individual historians, that historical truth depends on. Fair enough (although we can't help but point out that presumably these theories were constructed by individual historians): we take it that any realism worth its stripes claims that narratives, at least in the good case, reflect the structure of a reality that does not itself depend upon how we represent it. This is what we mean by 'mind-independence' and (so far as we can tell?) irrealism denies this.

Although we think that successful historical narratives describe a mind-independent past, we also think the role of the historians (and their linguistic categories) cannot—and should not!—be removed from the picture. Here we draw parallels between our modest conception of historical realism, and debates about pluralism in the philosophy of science (pluralism about realism, explanation, etc.). There are many strands one might choose to follow, but we emphasized that pluralistic views about realism often take the *aims of scientists* to be an ineliminable part of the analysis of science.

This has been emphasized by, for instance, Ron Giere (1999), William Wimsatt (2007), Michael Weisberg (2013) Angela Potochnik (2017), and Michaela Massimi (2021). This just scratches the surface of the relevant literature. What matters is that, as with their views about the nature of realism concerning deliverances of science, our account is *perspectival*, but it is not perspectival alone. Realists must argue that our perspectival knowledge goes beyond perspective: that is, in the right conditions, our theories, explanations and narratives capture states of a mind-independent world (see, for instance, Chakravarty 2010, Baker 2020). This escape perhaps involves something like the leap of faith DeWulf and Roth discuss, but only insofar as we might turn out to be wrong about particular instances. And we don't think philosophers should be afraid of the risk inherent in induction (it doesn't scare scientists, after all). The many flavors of realism on the philosophy of science market typically embrace the kinds of ontological and representational pluralism that we identify with moderate realism. DeWulf and Roth might complain that we haven't fully cashed this idea out, but that was never our aim: once more, our purpose was to show that these varieties of realism can accommodate the various features highlighted by the (often a-realist) linguistic turn, that such moderate realism can accommodate dynamic facts, and that there are some features of historical practice that might motivate it.

There is a sense in which perspectivism complicates things, given that the core commitment of realism is that our discoveries (or, rather, our representations of them), historical or otherwise, stand in something approximating a correspondence relation with the world. On the face of things, there exists no (or there should not be, anyway)

privileged role for “perspective”, or at least ‘interest-dependence’, on what we might call “full-throated” realism. The latter takes knowledge as a two-part relation between theories and the world, the former as a three-part relation—scientific knowers are an inseparable part of the picture too.

Here we find common cause with our anti-realist and irrealist compatriots. The reason to adopt a perspectival view, realist or not, is that history and historical practice is just too complex to make due without it. There must be some role for imagination, creativity, and invention within historical practice, otherwise historians could not undertake the task of trying to find the narrative “joints” within history’s patterns, and therefore could not provide narrative explanations that track the development of historical subjects in any meaningful way. But for the realist this just amounts to the claim that, for instance, *speculation* is an important part of narrative-craft. As W.B. Gallie (1964) puts it, there are places within the narrative where the historian must “insert” herself, because as raw structure, narratives come with gaps. In order for the gaps to be filled in a way that makes for a coherent narrative, the historian must practice a bit of craftsmanship, and this can’t be done unless the historian writes from the standpoint of some particular perspective on things.

But embracing interest-relativity or even full-blown perspectivalism doesn’t force our hand vis-a-vis minimal metaphysics, as described above. Rather, by admitting the role of perspective, we show that with minimal metaphysical commitments we can accommodate the semantic concerns of various kinds of non-realists, without denying that such concerns may rear their head at various points in the dialectical construction of

narrative explanations. Indeed, it is our contention that our view can accommodate all of these concepts (*non-standardization*, etc.) without doing any damage to a moderately realist conception of history.

3. Roth's *Irrealism*

Having explicated our position a bit, we'll now offer some clarificatory remarks concerning what we do and do not claim about Roth's (2020) *irrealism*.

In our (2021), we offer several arguments concerning the structure of historical narratives that Roth discusses at some length. Specifically, Roth argues that narratives do not *aggregate*, that the explananda of narrative explanations are *indetachable* from the relevant explanantia that explain them, and that historical events are *non-standard*. In brief, non-aggregativity amounts to the claim that historical narratives won't combine into something like an historical whole; narrative structures are broadly incompatible with one another in various ways, so one would not be able to, in piecewise fashion, put them all together and come back with a "total history." Rather, what you'd have would be little more than an inconsistent mass of sentences. The explananda of historical narratives are *indetachable* from the narratives that explain them because they are *embedded in* the narratives that explain them (this is different from other kinds of explanations and the logical forms that attend to them. The explanandum of, say, a D-N explanation (Hempel 1965) is not *indetachable* from the rest of the explanation, as it is just another term within a relatively atomized logic). Finally, narrative events are *non-standard* in that they do not come "typed." Insofar as historical events can be typed,

according to *irrealism*, it is through semantic interventions on the part of the historian, whereby events *qua* historical events are given some conceptual structure which they lack on their own.

We raised several issues with respect to these three points, and DeWulf and Roth helpfully clarify the role they play in Roth's argument. As they say, non-aggregativity, non-standardization, and indetachability *do not* constitute something like the argument for *irrealism*. Rather, Roth (2020) argues that despite the obstacles presented by this trio of concepts, *irrealism* offers a consistent logical form of explanation for narrative that it has traditionally been taken to lack. We do not take issue with this. We do not take non-aggregativity, non-standardization, and indetachability, as interpreted by Roth (2020) to constitute a positive argument in favor of *irrealism* (although perhaps we spoke unclearly on this point). Roth takes himself to be showing that *irrealism* is consistent with these features of narrative explanation. We attempt to show that moderate forms of realism do just as well. Perhaps in this regard, at least, we talk past one another: us developing a realist, and Roth an irrealist, account of history.

Regardless of whether Roth takes features like non-aggregativity as providing an argument for *irrealism*, he certainly thinks they makes trouble for realism—this argument is repeated in the response, and we take ourselves to have shown that such arguments fail. Further, we take these features to be important motivations underpinning the development of Roth's account of narrative explanation, and we find that this motivation is misplaced. Anything important that follows from this trio of concepts can

be captured by the moderate form of realism, underpinned by our minimal metaphysics, as characterized above.

This, in part, may be read as denying that there needs to be something like a “logic of narrative explanation.” If you take this to be as implication of our view, we would probably take no issue. The vast majority of recent work on scientific explanation, for instance, can hardly be read as offering a distinct “logic” of scientific explanations. Relations of deduction and induction may feature in certain accounts, but this is not because philosophers of science typically think of scientific explanation as “distinctively” or “essentially” having to do with a proper logical form (see for instance Strevens 2008; Potothnick 2017; Glennan 2017). Rather, in a plurality of ways, philosophers see causal structures as explanatory, and use some logical tools to precisify, facilitate the communication of, or represent those causal structures (see Garfinkel 1981). The same could be said of our attitude toward historical narratives: they might have some interesting features that call for different kinds of explanatory moves, but there is no need for a distinctive logic of explanation in order to see how it is that narratives explain (see for instance Currie’s take on this in 3.2 of his 2019). So not only do we find Roth’s particular logic of narrative explanation undermotivated, we see no proper motivation for thinking that we stand in need of any special logic of narrative explanation at all (see Klauk 2016).

4. The real rub: history, philosophy, and the “linguistic turn”

Over a casual conversation about the state of analytic philosophy of history, Arthur Danto (1968) and “narrative sentences” came up. Narrative sentences are unique, because they gain new features as history progresses: it is now the case that the 40th President of the United States was a star in the 1954 film “Cattle Queen of Montana,” but that was not true of the same person in 1954 (quibbles about general relativity notwithstanding). One of us (Swaim) admitted to not understanding why sentences of this kind were stressed as being so central to the philosophical analysis of history on Danto’s account. The other (Currie) wryly suggested that Danto makes “metaphysical mountains out of semantic molehills.” We think there is, here, a *programmatically* difference between ourselves and irrealists, which perhaps explains why so frustratingly little of the dispute seems to turn on actual historical practice, and why that talking-past-one-another anxiety surfaces with such regularity. In this section we’ll attempt our diagnosis: there is a real difference of opinion between ourselves on the one hand, and DeWulf and Roth on the other – but this difference of opinion is at base metaphilosophical.

4.1 The linguistic turn and the semantic infection of everything

As DeWulf and Roth highlight, Roth’s work follows the epistemological tradition of Quine and others in what many now refer to as the “linguistic turn” in philosophy. Roughly speaking, this just means that questions about *what we know* turn crucially on the kinds of semantic and linguistic structures that we construct in order to make sense of the world.

This, of course, was not a new insight with respect to Quine and others. In one sense or another, similar views were developed by figures like Kant (1781), William Whewell (1858), and Ernst Mach (1893). The main difference between these older traditions and that of by Quine, Brandom, Sellars and others is two-fold: first, these later thinkers brought much more to the party vis-a-vis formal tools for the analysis of language and its use, and second, they take knowledge and experience to be *fundamentally* mediated by sets of linguistic practices.

There is much more to say about the linguistic turn, but the basic issue at hand is the following: does semantics infect everything we can meaningfully say, *and further*, everything that we can say about what we know? Roth, we take it, is working under something like this conception of knowledge, and has carved out a special logical form of narrative explanation that falls under its auspices. This provides for a very different set of intuitions about what the problems for narrative explanation are, and what the investigation of historical truth looks like. Here, we are in deep metaphilosophical disagreement.

Take Roth's (2020) example of the "career of President Roosevelt" (pick whichever Roosevelt you please). According to Roth, we can't make sense of Roosevelt's career until we've constructed the concept "career" and all of the sub-concepts that fall under a person's having had one. Similarly, and more controversially, the event referred to as "The Holocaust" is importantly constructed. The same is true, he claims, of the historical concept "The Black Plague." The claim is that in order to give a narrative explanation in the logical form that he explicates under his *irrealist* treatment of historical narrative, it is

first necessary to construct the categories that give the events (in effect, the concrete material objects of the past) their *meaning* within a narrative. Without doing the semantic work of concept construction, there are no events, and without events, there are no histories, and without histories, there are no narratives, and without narratives, there are no narrative explanations. It is in this way that semantics, as we say, infects *everything* as seen under the eye of the linguistic turn (in history and elsewhere). On this view, the events of history are part of our semantic structures, not part of the world (although there may still be mind-independent facts about the past that constitute some kind of 'chronology').

It is fair to say that we do not stand in the epistemological tradition of Quine (at least in that regard). DeWulf and Roth may be right in arguing that events don't come prepackaged; that is, in order for an event to be an event such that we can properly evaluate it as such it may be necessary to perform some of the linguistic constructions that Roth has described. But importantly, little hinges on this claim, as far as our view is concerned. The following is centrally important: language is *not* fundamental (at least in that sense) to inquiry and explanation (historical or otherwise), and language does not infect all knowledge and experience, as is seemingly implied under *irrealism* (and similar views). And we'd say the same of other conceptual and representational structures as well. Although knowledge is perspectival or at least interest-dependent, we can go beyond perspective by providing reason for taking our linguistic states to track the world.

Frankly, we find ourselves unmoved and somewhat nonplussed at programmatic claims to the effect that historical traditions create historical facts in virtue of the necessity

of those facts being embedded in semantic structures. We *are* impressed by how said semantic structures are shaped in conversation with the empirical world, and take these processes of resistance to provide an escape from pure theory-relativism. If our hypothesis about the dispute being metaphilosophical is right, then we anticipate similar reactions from irrealists at our programmatic commitments.

4.2 Realism: slight return

The primary complaints of DeWulf and Roth seem to be the following: (1) we have not properly characterized *irrealism*, and (2) we have not given enough by way of positive argumentation to defend our moderated version of historical realism, or at least have not shown how it significantly differs from *irrealism*.

We have tried to address (1) in some of the above. As to (2), it is difficult to know precisely how one ought to respond. It is true that we don't offer a rigorous analytical demonstration of the superiority of realism over other anti-realist analyses of historical knowledge (inclusive of *irrealism*). Our argument, rather, is dialectical in structure. That is, we show that some basic realist commitments (as in those listed in the above) make better sense when we think about the work historians do and how they ultimately figure out the truth of the world. We don't want to claim the mantle of naturalism for ourselves (as Roth also considers himself a naturalist, after all), but we take it that our approach to the analysis of history picks up on the strain of naturalism that has been developed over the last several decades in the philosophy of science. That is, our approach runs counter to the claim that "theory ladenness" in itself undermines realism. The empirical is, as it

were, in the driver's seat. Roth's "disappearance of the empirical" does not occur, because the semantic categories we use for explanation-craft follow from the objects of experience. Such semantic categories do not dictate the practice of explaining, modeling, or theorizing in science; they partially facilitate such activities (see Morgan and Morrison 1999). It seems both historians and scientists have often been successful in such endeavors, and without some minimal metaphysical commitments underlying some kind of realist attitude toward this process, such successes seem mysterious, in history or any other chiefly empirical discipline. But this is just what realists like us would say—and do say all the time.

Having said this, we do genuinely think that examples from historical practice such as the historiography of 'barter economies' speaks at least to some extent in favor of our metaphilosophical position over the irrealists'. If disputes about narratives, however rich and complex they may be, are ultimately nothing more than clashing theoretical/linguistic structures, which are not amenable to evidence-based argumentation, then why do historians bother with them? Why do we bother listening to them? That narratives can be true or false, that they can reflect the actual structure of history in better or worse ways, is required to make sense of how evidence works in history. We don't think irrealists mean to diminish history's power or its reflexivity—DeWulf and Roth are right to protest on that point—but we think that, despite their intentions, their view ultimately does undermine it. Hopefully irrealists will take this as the challenge that it is, and show us why we're mistaken.

5. Concluding remarks

Metaphilosophical disputes are annoying, and at least one of us (Currie) is enough of a sloppy pluralist to think that, if indeed things turn on such disputes, then the best option is to doff our caps and agree to disagree. We are grateful to Paul Roth and Fons DeWulf for reading and taking the time to respond to our article. They have given us much to think about, and there is much that is of value in their criticisms. Unfortunately the constraints of time and space make it such that we cannot say everything we wish to say, or take each of their points one-by-one.

We've argued that the main points of contention between us and the irrealists stem from some rather deep metaphilosophical differences concerning the power of conceptual and linguistic structures, the need for a logic of explanation, and so forth. As with any dispute of philosophical significance, this escapes easy or quick treatment. So, we will offer the following as a summary statement of our position, and how it contrasts with DeWulf and Roth.

For us, representational apparatuses—languages, descriptions, theories, models, explanations and, yes, narratives—are developed in iterative contact with a complex, often obstinate world, and, under the right conditions, this iterative process can provide grounds for taking our representations to be of that mind-independent world. DeWulf and Roth, it seems to us, perform the task of “world-building” in a way that frontloads philosophy with a heavy semantic burden. Our diagnosis is that the differing approaches

to the philosophy of history arise from this: from the former, historians discover the events of history, from the latter, they invent them. This perhaps eases some of the talking-past-each-other anxiety.

We have here a metaphilosophical dispute that resists any obvious solution. But a couple of things are worth noting. First, as we've stressed, we don't take our position or arguments to constitute a knock-down argument against the irrealist. For instance, Roth makes commitments about explanation and language that we do not, and so those who share Roth's commitments will likely not be moved by our account. A further task might be to, as it were, ask whether Roth succeeds at his own game—given those commitments—but as we don't share such commitments, that would not be so compelling for us. We have given some reason to think the irrealist position lacks proper motivation. Indeed, Roth presumably does think that the world pushes back, that the actual past in some sense does constrain the work of history—but not sufficiently to take historical events metaphysically seriously. We're not sure why that extra step, taking historical events as ontological rather than semantic objects, is such a sticking point. Second, we maintain that the semantic blows against realism miss the mark, precisely because by making some minimal metaphysical assumptions, and then seeing where semantic issues emerge as a result, such arguments lack the desired bite. We don't deny the role of linguistic construction in the philosophical analysis of history, nor in any other part of philosophy. We merely put semantics in its proper place, which is downstream of some basic metaphysical commitments concerning our cognitive relationship with reality.

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