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ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY
AND
HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

Edited by

Tom Sorell and G. A. J. Rogers

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ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY AND
HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

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Analytic Philosophy and History of Philosophy



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TOM SORELL and G. A. J. ROGERS

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PREFACE

This book brings together specially commissioned papers on the relation between analytic philosophy and history of philosophy. Some are drawn from a conference on this topic held in Oxford in March 2002. Others were written afterwards by invited contributors. The editors would like to thank the Mind Association and the British Society for the History of Philosophy for supporting the original event. The editors would also like to thank those who helped with conference organization, including Mrs Jo Rogers.

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GAJR

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Introduction

TOM SORELL



There are parts of the world today where philosophy takes the form of history of philosophy. In France and Germany and other countries in their cultural orbit, philosophical positions developed in the twenty-first century regularly unfold as commentary on philosophers or philosophical views from the past. In this tradition, it is rare for a philosopher not to have elaborate interpretations of Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, who in turn self-consciously reacted against or reinterpreted their predecessors. This tradition is alien to most philosophers in the English-speaking world. Philosophy written in English is overwhelmingly analytic philosophy, and the techniques and predilections of analytic philosophy are not only unhistorical but anti-historical, and hostile to textual commentary. Analytic philosophy is not uniform, but it usually aspires to a very high degree of clarity and precision of formulation and argument, and it often seeks to be informed by, and consistent with, current natural science. In an earlier era, analytic philosophy aimed at agreement with ordinary linguistic intuitions or common-sense beliefs, or both. All of these aspects of the subject sit uneasily with the use of historical texts for philosophical illumination.

It is true that analytic philosophers think historical texts have pedagogical value. For example, Plato's *Republic* and Hume's *Enquiry* are routinely used to introduce students to philosophy. And history of philosophy has other uses among analytic philosophers. They associate certain failed solutions to live philosophical problems, or certain partial solutions with historical figures. Or they find in the old, dead philosophers anticipations of approved ideas in living philosophers. Berkeley¹ and Aristotle² were once praised for anticipating ordinary language philosophy, and Hume

¹ G. Warnock, *Berkeley* (London: Penguin Books, 1953).

² J. Ackrill, *Aristotle the Philosopher* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).

and Hobbes are sometimes named as founders of twentieth- and twenty-first-century naturalism.³ Again, there are philosophers of the past who are used for target practice—that is, whose ideas are currently widely rejected, and who are referred to mainly as sources of deep illusion or fallacy. Descartes is such a figure in epistemology and metaphysics, and perhaps Bentham is a comparable figure in ethics.

Often analytic philosophers are casual in their use of historical figures. For example, there may be a good basis in Plato's texts for associating him with Platonism in mathematics, but no one interested in Platonism in mathematics cares whether what is called 'Platonism' fits those texts. In the same way, Cartesian dualism is supposed to be discussable even if Descartes is not really an exponent of what most analytic philosophers call 'Cartesian dualism'. The issues associated with these references to Plato and Descartes can be stated quite impersonally and ahistorically, and it is these issues that matter to analytic philosophers of mathematics and analytic philosophers of mind, not the identities of the books or authors the issues are taken to spring from.

It is undeniable that certain issues do submit to treatment in this impersonal and ahistorical form, and it is undeniable, too, that approaching the issues in this way has the great merit of bypassing sometimes quite irrelevant textual and terminological disputes. No wonder that there should be a substantial following for so streamlined a way of discussing philosophical problems. How, then, can substantial history of philosophy find a place in analytic philosophy? If history of philosophy includes the respectful, intelligent use of writings from the past to address problems that are being debated in the current philosophical journals, then history of philosophy may well belong to analytic philosophy. But if history of philosophy is more than this; if it is concerned with interpreting and reinterpreting a certain canon, or perhaps making a case for extending this canon, its connection with analytic philosophy is less clear. More obscure still is the connection between analytic philosophy and a kind of history of philosophy that is unapologetically antiquarian. This is the kind of history of philosophy that emphasizes the status of a philosophical text as one document among others from a far-away intellectual world, and that tries to acquaint

³ B. Stroud, *Hume* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977).

us with that world in order to produce understanding of the document. It is not the kind of history of philosophy that assembles work from the past for the purpose of solving a current philosophical problem. Antiquarian history of philosophy is likely to consider the socio-economic and scientific context of a philosophical work, and to identify problems that were important to its author and intended audience, rather than to its twenty-first-century readers. There is very little room for this in English-language philosophy as it is now practised.

Still, the analytic school does accommodate a kind of systematic history of philosophy. There are book series that shadow the whole canon of Western philosophy, and encyclopaedias in which long entries about the great dead philosophers and some of their lesser contemporaries stand alongside accounts of current developments in the more arcane regions of philosophical and formal logic. The title of one of the relevant book series—‘The Arguments of the Philosophers’⁴—points clearly to one way in which the historical can be assimilated to the analytic. It is done by making *argument* the medium of exposition and discussion of old philosophers. Although it may take some antiquarian knowledge and procedures to assemble the elements of these arguments, analytic philosophy calls upon the historian of philosophy to assemble them as a preliminary to something else. The historian of philosophy is to assess them for soundness, plausibility, and so on. He or she is to choose arguments to reconstruct partly by reference to arguments on similar topics put forward by living philosophers.

On this view, history of philosophy aims, among other things, at adding historical figures to the range of interlocutors in current debates. These figures are represented by their arguments, and essentially the same techniques are applied to these as are applied to the arguments of one’s contemporaries. Sometimes the historically remote arguments that dominate an old work of philosophy will run to conclusions that make sense only against the background of an antique philosophical agenda, and the historian of philosophy is expected to identify this agenda and make it intelligible. Sometimes the historically remote arguments will have to be reconstructed from philosophical texts that do not read as trains of reasoning. But if it is to be presented to analytic philosophers as philosophy,

⁴ ed. Ted Honderich (London: Routledge, 1970-).

the philosophy of the past is expected to be strong in argumentative content. It is supposed to be trying to represent certain things as *true* for reasons or *false* for reasons. When all goes well, a piece of history of philosophy is supposed to fasten on things represented as true or false that engage views widely accepted or rejected by philosophers working today. But in the end, the question raised by old arguments is the same as the question raised by new arguments. Does the conclusion seem to philosophers reading it now to follow from the premisses? Even if the conclusion doesn't follow, is there another way of recasting the argument that does make it follow? Does any such argument depend on a mistake? Does the argument contribute to an answer to a good philosophical question. And so on.⁵

History of philosophy in this style has to be written by people who are trained as analytic philosophers. It does *not* have to be written by people whose historical knowledge is extensive, or whose knowledge of the literature, religion, art, and science of the past is more than elementary. It does *not* have to be written by people who know all of the languages their texts were originally written in, or who know how to read and distinguish different manuscript versions of the same text. People who write about historical figures in analytic philosophy often contribute to the non-historical fields of analytic philosophy as well. They are often philosophers before they are specialized historians of philosophy, and they are *some* sort of philosopher to a far greater degree than they are *any* sort of historian. In this and in other respects, 'analytic' historians of philosophy often differ from their non-English-speaking counterparts. In the non-English-speaking world, historians of philosophy are often very erudite and learned, but less good at assessing arguments. The claim that they are historians rather than philosophers is too crude a way of putting the difference, but there is something correct that the bad formulation is getting at.

A main theme of the papers which follow is that the history of philosophy is history of a kind, but that it is also and irreducibly philosophy, with philosophy's connections to seeking truth and its commitment to giving reasons. When *analytic* philosophy defines

⁵ For balanced criticism of this approach from someone of a more antiquarian persuasion, see D. Garber, 'Beyond the Arguments of the Philosophers', in Y. C. Zarka (ed.), *Comment écrire l'histoire de la philosophie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2001).

the philosophical side of the distinction between philosophy and history, the tension between philosophy and history is perhaps deeper than it needs to be. But it is probably a mistake to think that the tension is illusory, or that it can ever be ironed out, even when history is pitted against *non*-analytic philosophy.⁶

In the opening paper of this collection Anthony Kenny discusses the relationship between philosophy and the history of philosophy. He considers how philosophy from the distant past can have lasting relevance without excluding such a thing as progress in philosophy. There *can* be progress, Kenny says, in the sense of definitive answers to some questions and improved answers to others. It can also be true that some of these answers are lacking in writings that are nevertheless works of genius. Kenny denies that the canon in Western philosophy is a collection of works of genius in the same sense as canonical works of literature are works of genius. It is not as if the works of the great philosophers are all on a level just because they are products of great minds. Some philosophers answered questions conclusively, often inaugurating a branch of natural science in doing so and shrinking the boundaries of philosophy at the same time. In this sense some of the successors of Democritus made advances on Democritus. But there are other philosophers who made advances within philosophy, inventing arguments or distinctions for understanding questions that are not proto-scientific but metaphysical, and that have been part of the subject since the outset. In this sense Plato made an advance on Parmenides by distinguishing different senses of 'exist', according to Kenny. And perhaps—these are not Kenny's examples—Kant and Wittgenstein make advances on Descartes by seeing certain kinds of metaphysics as sources of deep illusion or mystification, rather than fundamental truth.

John Cottingham's essay begins with a tension visible in analytic philosophy today. Although it is supposed to do away with arguments from authority and professions of discipleship, in practice analytic philosophy is rife with deference to a few living philosophers and a few recently dead ones. So even if history of philosophy were full of deference to philosophers of the past (which it isn't), that would not set it apart from analytic philosophy. More importantly, however, analytic philosophy, being a kind of philosophy, aims at making

⁶ See the chapter by Zarka in this volume.

people see connections. It is not just the unlimited application of critical reflection to any subject-matter. It has a range of characteristic concerns, and understanding what makes them characteristic is partly historical understanding. Historical understanding is essential for addressing the philosophical question of the nature of philosophy itself; but it is also necessary, according to Cottingham, for answering questions about the nature of human knowledge. As for history of philosophy in particular, it is essential for giving us detachment from views we are likely to accept unthinkingly because they are so widely shared and familiar. History of philosophy also induces sympathy for views that, despite their strangeness or quaintness, tell us something we still need to know. It may even equip us to recognize the strangeness for the first time. Cottingham illustrates this by trying to separate the concerns of the historical Descartes from the 'Brains in the vat' problem so often thought to bring Descartes up to date. Adapting an idea of Edward Craig's, he concludes with the challenging idea that the only philosophically authentic kind of understanding is historically sensitive understanding.

In my own contribution to the volume, I try to show how the history of philosophy helps with the problem-solving agenda of analytic philosophy. Taking my cue from views about the history of philosophy expressed by the distinguished analytic philosopher Gilbert Harman, I set out a number of reasons why history of philosophy is relevant and useful. To begin with, many currently recognized problems are old and unsolved, or open to interpretation as versions of older problems, rather than being freshly minted. Older approaches to these problems can be inaccessible to those without training in the history of philosophy. These older approaches can throw light on current versions of old problems, or produce instructive examples of failed solutions. The fact that the assumptions and methods of the subject have changed does not mean that the continuity of consideration of these problems is a fiction, or that approaches that have been discarded or forgotten cannot be illuminating when they are reconsidered. On the other hand, when there *are* discontinuities, it can take history of philosophy to inform us that our problems are different enough from problems of the past to make an old conceptual scheme unserviceable for a present purpose. Failure to appreciate this can sometimes lead to mistakes in analytic philosophy, as I try to illustrate by reference to claims made in contemporary moral philosophy.

Catherine Wilson, too, is concerned with the ways in which history of philosophy benefits analytic philosophy. After giving a brief survey of the status of history and historians of philosophy in analytic philosophy since the 1970s, she distinguishes between convincing and unconvincing grounds for valuing history and historians more highly. She agrees that historical texts have their pedagogical uses, and that history of philosophy can call attention to blind alleys in, for example, contemporary moral philosophy. But these are secondary to its main benefit, which is to provide philosophy with some sort of framework for taking in and reflecting critically upon the results of the natural and social sciences. It is mainly through its reflection on the sciences that philosophy renews itself, and the history of philosophy is partly a history of ways of doing this, as well as raw material for thinking about the ways in which philosophy is or isn't assimilable to science. Wilson thinks that specialist reflection on philosophers from the past is not necessarily beneficial for philosophy. And she has doubts about a whole series of views about the history of philosophy that would justify a more specialized scrutiny of its past or its past as we have it now. The idea that philosophy transmits a kind of perennial wisdom is historically naïve, but the more eclectic approach of what she calls 'non-aligned' philosophy is open to selectiveness and superficiality.

Gary Hatfield has more confidence than Wilson in the philosophical benefits of history of philosophy. He takes some important examples in analytic philosophy of the use of a historical figure or a philosophical tradition to make a philosophical point. Strawson's *The Bounds of Sense* is a study of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, but it is also a platform for Strawson's own views, and it is closely connected in various ways with the ostensibly unhistorical *Individuals*. One of its aims is to distinguish Kantian metaphysical claims that seemed in the mid-twentieth century to have been superseded from claims that seemed then still to have relevance to or value in solving mid-twentieth-century philosophical problems. Inevitably, this approach serves Kant less well than it does mid-twentieth-century philosophy. Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* is another work of analytic philosophy whose medium is the history of philosophy. Hatfield points out that Rorty's book is a curious combination of historicism and historical caricature. On the one hand, there are supposed to be no perennial philosophical

problems, but only the historically distinct problems of different philosophical periods; on the other hand, post-seventeenth-century Western philosophy in general is supposed to be bewitched by a single metaphor for the mind. Hatfield thinks there is more to the idea of the perennial problem than does Rorty, but also less unity in the views that the early modern philosophers and their successors were seduced by. A suitably contextualist history of philosophy avoids the problems of Strawson's and Rorty's approaches, but contextualism is not pure historicism or antiquarianism, and it is not incompatible with an interest in large-scale patterns in the evolution of philosophical thought and with a latter-day philosophical agenda.

Dan Garber admits to a strong sympathy for the history side of the history/philosophy distinction. What is wrong, he asks, with a self-consciously antiquarian approach—one that tries to be guided by the preoccupations of the period in which philosophical books were written, whether or not those preoccupations have much in common with those of philosophers working today? Garber considers the case of Descartes, the focal point of much of his own work, and shows how the task of expounding the *Meditations* leads very naturally to an investigation not only of Descartes's philosophical contemporaries, but of a climate in which attacks on intellectual authorities were seen as socially and politically subversive. The way in which Descartes sought to loosen the hold of Aristotle's ideas cannot properly be understood apart from the politics of intellectual and social life in Paris and Western Europe in the first half of the seventeenth century. But once this understanding has been produced, is there any philosophical illumination to be had from it? Garber suggests that there is some understanding of the nature of philosophy to be had, and that this is useful at a time when analytic philosophy at least seems to be becalmed and introspective.

The essay by Yves Charles Zarka counterbalances Garber's case for a more unapologetically historical history of philosophy. Zarka has the perspective of a French philosopher, working within a context in which historical interest in a text, far from being suppressed, as in the English-speaking world, is in danger of overwhelming philosophical content. Zarka tries to outline a methodology in which the excesses of historicism are avoided, and in which history of philosophy retains its connections with philosophy. 'Philosophical historiography', he says, 'involves an approach which considers three registers—distinct registers, although they go

together: enunciation (the restoration of the historical conditions in which a text was produced); utterance (the text); and the object of enunciation (that which is given to be thought about in what is said or written)'. Zarka's essay concludes with an explanation of the way these three registers are related.

No essay in the current volume reflects on the reasons why French and German philosophy should normally be more historical in outlook than Anglo-American philosophy, but no doubt this goes back in part to the founders of analytic philosophy in the twentieth century, and in particular to Russell's repudiation of an early enthusiasm for Hegelianism, and its historicism. Although Russell is the author of a full-scale history of Western philosophy, his most distinctive work, the sort expounded in his writings in the first decades of the 1900s, is notably unhistorical, and outlines a programme for metaphysics inspired by the interpretation of the 'new', i.e. Fregean-Russellian, quantificational logic. In Anglo-American philosophy before this phase—in Bradley, for example—the common ground between England and Germany was at least as great, philosophically, as it was later to be between England and the USA.

The closing sequence of papers in the book is historical rather than historiographical. Analytically trained historians of philosophy go about their business, usually by reference, as in the rest of the volume, to early modern philosophy.

John Rogers detects signs in Locke of a belief in the therapeutic properties of philosophy, a belief represented in twentieth-century analytic philosophy by, among others, Wittgenstein. How can there be much continuity between Locke and Wittgenstein, given their divergent understandings of the term 'philosophy'? Rogers thinks that what Wittgenstein meant by 'philosophy' converges on what Locke meant by 'logic' or 'the doctrine of signs'. Locke took it that one of his tasks as under-labourer to the great natural scientists of the seventeenth century was to identify and try to dispel the nonsense imported by the scholastics into physics. These scholastics might be understood as the counterparts of at least some of the professional breeders of misunderstanding whom Wittgenstein held responsible for some of the illusions he sought to clear up. In his *Tractatus* period, for example, Wittgenstein was one of the fiercest critics of twentieth-century 'logicians' who still used Aristotelian syllogistic in preference to the systems of Russell and Frege.

Descartes and Locke had their own reasons for rejecting this logic. But Rogers thinks that there is a parallel, too, between Locke's way of dispelling the metaphysical problem of free will and a Rylean dissolution of a philosophical problem. He also thinks that Locke's views on terms for essences have affinities with Wittgenstein's belief in family resemblances.

A little-known contemporary of Locke, Richard Burthogge, is the subject of Michael Ayer's paper. Burthogge can be seen as the forerunner of a kind of idealism developed by Kant and Quine, rather than Berkeley, according to Ayers. This is idealism in the sense of supposing that our hold on reality is always mediated by forms of thought or concepts due to us. Idealism in this form is not motivated by some sort of scepticism about sense experience: Platonism is a more important source of it. So is a certain kind of reaction to Spinoza. So, again, is a certain sort of preoccupation with whether the logical form of subject and predication has a source in extra-linguistic reality. Burthogge denies that it has such a source, and this contributes to a criticism of the belief in the existence of self-subsistent substance. Ayers does more than try to locate Burthogge's form of idealism in intellectual history: he also takes issue with it. He objects to the implication of both Burthogge's and Locke's epistemology: that we have access through sense perception only to the accidents of things that are inaccessible to us. In Locke's case, this implication is out of keeping with his doctrine of sensitive knowledge. In Burthogge's, the problem 'is one of division of labour between his logical "notions" and sensation'. The way out, Ayers suggests, is to accept that in sensation we *do* have access to the relevant things, namely bodies. He thinks that something comparable can be maintained against the more subtle idealisms of Davidson and McDowell in our own day.

Steven Nadler focuses on the tensions between the characteristic preoccupations of analytically-minded historians of philosophy and the requirements of interpreting philosophical systems of the past. Nadler takes the case of Spinoza. Focusing on Spinoza's doctrine of the eternity of the mind, he points to the impatience and contempt which its oddity and obscurity have inspired in some analytic commentators. Nadler provides a reading which makes sense of the doctrine, connecting Spinoza's suspicions of the manipulative tendencies of the clergy with the human weakness for superstition and the special effects of hope and fear on human thought and

action. Belief in the possibility of an afterlife of bliss or torment plays on these fundamental passions, but metaphysical understanding is an antidote to that. It gives us a way of understanding God that does not assist religious manipulators of hope and fear, by undermining the usual picture of the immortality of the soul. This interpretation makes Spinoza's metaphysics cohere well with his politics. Such synthesizing interpretations are not yielded readily by typical analytic techniques, which is why analytic history of philosophy requires adjustment.

Although the historiographical and historical essays in this volume concentrate on the early modern period, analytic philosophers have had interesting things to say about medieval, and especially ancient, philosophy. These matters are touched on in Anthony Kenny's opening essay, where he considers the historiographical views of the analytic historian of ancient philosophy Michael Frede. Ancient philosophy adds to the usual problems of making sense of philosophies of the past the effects of many more centuries of intellectual distance. The views of the Greeks are usually handed down to us in a corrupt, fragmentary form, and even where they seem to be presented nearly whole, their meaning can seem elusive. The more distant the sense to be recovered, the greater the allowance that must be made for standards of argument and of what counts as a philosophical problem that are very remote from our own. But there are limits to how different these standards can be while still producing something recognizable to a modern audience as discussable philosophy. This is why ancient and medieval philosophy are especially subject to the dangers of superficiality and anachronism, as Kenny points out. These dangers are by no means eliminated when one focuses on early modern philosophy or what comes after it, but it is perhaps no accident that post-seventeenth-century philosophers are frequently treated even by analytic philosophers not trained in the history of the subject as if their views were more or less accessible and relevant. Though this sense of accessibility is no doubt exaggerated, it is not entirely baseless, and it is a partial excuse for the narrow historical scope of most of the essays that follow.

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The Philosopher's History and the History of Philosophy

ANTHONY KENNY



It is important to distinguish the history of philosophy (what philosophers have done) from the historiography of philosophy (what historians of philosophy do). In this paper I will try to use 'historiography', not 'history', when that is what I mean. I won't, however, use the ugly word 'historiographer', since there is little danger of thinking that a historian of philosophy is somebody who makes history rather than someone who writes history. Our main concern here is the historiography of philosophy; but I must spend some time in discussing the history, since the nature of the historiography depends on the nature of the history. In its turn, the nature of the history of philosophy depends on the nature of philosophy.

There are two different views of the history of philosophy, which it is important to sort out at the outset. Michael Frede, in the introduction to his *Essays in Ancient Philosophy*, has an illuminating account of the way in which the study of the great philosophers of the past entered into the general philosophical curriculum at the end of the eighteenth century. It depended, he said, on a conception of the history of philosophy

in which certain questions that define the philosophical enterprise are seen and understood ever more clearly and in which the answers to these questions become more and more apparent, [in which] it is perhaps even assumed that there is some mechanism or force that guarantees this kind of progress and in terms of which the history of philosophy, therefore, has to be understood.¹

¹ Michael Frede, *Essays in Ancient Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. xxv.

Regrettably, Frede says, this conception remains influential in some quarters at the present day. Surely, he says, it was and is a mistake to think that the proper way to understand and explain Aristotle's thought was and is to see it as a crucial step forward in the direction of Kantianism, or whatever later philosophical system we may espouse.

One can indeed with profit study the great philosophers of the past as historical models. But this, Frede maintains, is quite different from the historiography of philosophy conducted in the way in which it should be conducted. (The rules for its good conduct he delineates in illuminating detail in his essay, to which I will return later in this paper.)

Now of course 'philosophy' means different things in different mouths. Correspondingly, 'the history of philosophy' also has many meanings. What it means depends on what the particular historian regards as being essential to philosophy. This was true of Aristotle, who was philosophy's first historian, and it was true of Hegel, who hoped he would be its last. The two of them had rather different views of the nature of philosophy. But both of them, when they expounded the views of earlier philosophers—Aristotle in *Metaphysics Alpha*, and Hegel in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*—saw them as being halting steps in the direction of a vision they were themselves to expound.

There is a view quite opposite to this. The major philosophical problems, according to this view, are all still being debated after centuries of discussion, and are no nearer to any definitive resolution. Anyone looking back over the long history of philosophy is bound to wonder: does philosophy get anywhere? Have philosophers, for all their efforts over the centuries, actually learnt anything? Voltaire compared metaphysicians to minuet dancers moving through a room in the finest attitudes, in perpetual motion without advancing a step, and finishing at the identical point from which they set out.

In our own time, Wittgenstein wrote:

You always hear people say that philosophy makes no progress and that the same philosophical problems which were already preoccupying the Greeks are still troubling us today. But people who say that do not understand the reason why it has to be so. The reason is that our language has remained the same and always introduces us to the same questions. . . . I read 'philosophers are no nearer to the meaning of "reality" than Plato

got'. What an extraordinary thing! How remarkable that Plato could get so far! Or that we have not been able to get any further! Was it because Plato was *so* clever?²

The difference between these two attitudes to progress in philosophy—we may call them the Aristotelian and the Wittgensteinian—is linked with two different views of philosophy itself. Philosophy is a very unusual discipline, difficult to classify. It may be viewed as a science, or as an art.

On the one hand, the philosopher, like the scientist, is surely in pursuit of truth. There seem to be discoveries made in the course of philosophy: certain things that we understand that even the greatest philosophers of earlier generations did not. And so, as a philosopher, one has the excitement of belonging to an ongoing, co-operative, cumulative process, in the way that a scientist does; and one has then the hope that one may add one's own stone to the cairn, make one's tiny contribution to the building of the great edifice.

If philosophy is like a science in this respect, then there is an obligation on the philosopher to keep abreast of current thinking. This is an urgent task, since the shelf-life of a scientific article is estimated to be about five years. Philosophy, on this view, is a cumulative discipline in which recent work supersedes earlier work. We stand no doubt on the shoulders of other and greater philosophers, but we do stand above them. We have superannuated Plato and Kant.

On the other hand, philosophy seems to have the attraction of the arts, of the humanistic disciplines. Surely, classic works of philosophy do not date. If we want to learn physics or chemistry, as opposed to their history, we don't nowadays read Newton or Faraday, whereas in literature we read Homer and Shakespeare not merely to learn about the quaint things that passed through people's minds in those far-off days. And the same is true of philosophy. We read Plato and Aristotle not simply in a spirit of antiquarian curiosity.

On this view philosophy is essentially the work of genius, the product of outstanding individuals. If one sees philosophy as a succession of towering intellects, then there is no sense in which Kant superseded Plato, any more than Shakespeare superseded

² A. Kenny, *The Wittgenstein Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 273.

Homer. On this view, you can do philosophy as well by reading Democritus as by reading Davidson.

Philosophy is not a science, because progress in philosophy is not a matter of expanding knowledge, of acquiring new truths about the world. It is a matter of understanding, that is to say of organizing, what is known. Because philosophy is all-embracing, is so universal in its field, the organization of knowledge it demands is something so difficult that only genius can do it. Only a wholly exceptional mind can fully recognize the consequences of even the simplest philosophical argument or conclusion. For all of us who are not geniuses, the only way in which we can hope to come to grips with philosophy is by reaching up to the mind of some great philosopher of the past.

Like the humanities, philosophy has an essential relation to a canon of texts. Philosophy is defined as a subject by its great practitioners, since it has no specific subject-matter, but only characteristic methods. The earliest people whom we recognize as philosophers, the pre-Socratics, were also scientists, and several of them were also religious leaders. In their time the distinction between science, religion, and philosophy was not as clear as it became in later centuries. In the sixth century there was an intellectual cauldron in which elements of all these future disciplines fermented together. Later, religious devotees, philosophical disciples, and scientific inheritors could all look back to these thinkers as their forefathers. But these philosophers did not yet think of themselves as belonging to a common profession with which we can claim continuity. It was Plato who in his writings first used the word 'philosophy' in some approximation to our modern sense. Those of us who call ourselves philosophers today can genuinely lay claim to be the heirs of Plato and Aristotle. But we are only a small subset of their heirs. We are not footnotes to Plato; but it was Plato who set our agenda. What distinguishes us from the other heirs of the great Greeks, and what entitles us to use their name, is that unlike the physicists, the astronomers, the medics, and the linguists, we philosophers pursue the goals of Plato and Aristotle by the same methods as were already available to them. That is why history is so intimate with philosophy, and why philosophy is so important for the historian of philosophy.

But though the works of ancient philosophers are not superseded in the same way as the works of ancient scientists, there is such a

thing as progress in philosophy. Bertrand Russell, in his *History of Western Philosophy*, maintained that there were instances where philosophy had reached definitive answers to central questions. He gave as one example the ontological argument.

This as we have seen was invented by Anselm, rejected by Thomas Aquinas, accepted by Descartes, refuted by Kant, and reinstated by Hegel. I think it may be said quite decisively that as a result of analysis of the concept 'existence' modern logic has proved this argument invalid.³

The ontological argument is a two-edged instance to cite. It does indeed show that there can be developments in philosophy: Anselm brought off the feat of inventing an argument that had not occurred to any previous philosopher. On the other hand, if the best example of philosophical progress is a case where later philosophers show up the fallacy of an earlier philosopher, that is small encouragement to study philosophy or its history. Worst of all, quite recently, some contemporary philosophers, using more recent logical techniques than those available to Russell, have claimed to reinstate the argument he thought decisively refuted. Moreover, the analysis of 'existence' to which Russell appealed did not wait for the nineteenth century to discover it. Abelard, before Anselm was cold in his grave, said that in the sentence 'A father exists' we should not take 'A father' as standing for anything; rather, the sentence is equivalent to 'something is a father'. None the less, on this issue of the possibility of progress in philosophy, I think Russell was closer to the truth than Wittgenstein.

Philosophy does make progress, in several ways. According to Wittgenstein, one task, perhaps *the* task of philosophy, is to cure us of intellectual sicknesses—to free us from the bewitchment of our intellect. Even on this therapeutic view, the tasks and achievements of philosophy differ from age to age; because the temptations to delusion presented by one age are not those presented by another. Each age needs fresh philosophical therapy. The knots into which the undisciplined mind ties itself differ from age to age, and different mental motions are necessary to untie these knots. A prevalent malady of our own age, for instance, is the temptation to think of the mind as a computer. Other ages thought of it as a telephone exchange, a pedal organ, a homunculus, or a spirit. While

³ Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 752.

new therapies are needed for new illnesses, the maladies of an earlier age may return. When, as a young man, I read Aquinas and saw the battery of arguments he produced against the astrological prediction of human behaviour, I skipped them because no one in their right mind believed in astrology. Nowadays, they are quite worth reading: I saw them all used recently, without acknowledgement, in an opinion piece in one of the broadsheet weeklies.

Therapeutic progress is only a dismal kind of progress: there are more encouraging developments in philosophy to be observed. For instance, it is undeniable that we know some things that the great philosophers of the past did not know. But the things we know that they didn't know are not philosophical things. They are the scientific truths that have grown out of the sciences that have established themselves through the centuries from a philosophical basis in the past, as physics grew out of natural philosophy, and experimental psychology set up house alongside philosophy of mind. Though this is not strictly progress in philosophy, it is one undoubted way in which we are better placed than our philosophical predecessors.

But there are forms of progress that are more intrinsic to philosophy. We are all familiar with Sir John Harrington's epigram

Treason doth never prosper, what's the reason?
For if it prosper, none dare call it treason.

Something similar happens in philosophy. Once a philosophical problem is resolved, no one regards it as any more a matter of philosophy. It was once a question for philosophers whether we live on a flat or a spherical earth. For much longer, it was a question whether or not the sun and the moon and the planets were living entities. No one today would regard those as philosophical questions. The solution of these problems, it might be maintained, was not a philosophical achievement, but was reached when science inherited philosophy's mantle. But there are also cases within the area of philosophy narrowly defined where philosophical problems, after successful treatment by a great philosopher, simply disappeared. One outstanding example is the treatment of Parmenides in Plato's *Sophist*. Put very crudely, much of Parmenides' system depended on a systematic confusion of the 'is' of existence and the 'is' of predication, and a corresponding confusion between Un-being and Non-being. Plato sorted out the issues so successfully

that there has never again been an excuse for mixing them up. Indeed, it now takes an enormous effort of philosophical imagination even to work out exactly what was puzzling Parmenides—a puzzle which terrified philosophers for generations.

It is unsurprising, given the relationship of philosophy to a canon, that a notable feature of philosophical progress is that it is largely progress in coming to terms with, and interpreting, the thoughts of the great philosophers of the past. The great works of the past do not lose their importance in philosophy—but their intellectual contributions are not static. Each age interprets and applies philosophical classics to its own problems and aspirations. This is most visible, in recent years, in the field of ethics. The ethical works of Plato and Aristotle are as influential in moral thinking today as the works of any twentieth-century moralists—this is easily verified by taking any citation index and comparing the number of entries for Aristotle with, say, those for Richard Hare—but they are being interpreted and applied in ways quite different from the ways in which they were applied in the past. This is genuine progress in the understanding of Aristotle; but of course it is understanding of quite a different kind from what is given by throwing new light on the chronology of his works. It resembles, rather, the enhanced appreciation of Shakespeare we may get by seeing a new, intelligent production of *King Lear*.

Finally, there is in philosophy a kind of progress that we might call analytic. Philosophy does not progress by making regular additions to a quantum of information; but this is because what philosophy offers is not information but understanding. There are certain things that philosophers of the present day understand which even the greatest philosophers of earlier generations failed to understand. Even if we accept the view that philosophy is essentially the clarification of language, there is plenty of room for progress. For instance, philosophers clarify language by distinguishing between different senses of words; and once a distinction has been made, future philosophers have to take account of it in their deliberations.

Take, as an example, the issue of free will. Once a distinction has been made between liberty of indifference (ability to do otherwise) and liberty of spontaneity (ability to do what you want), the question 'Do human beings enjoy freedom of the will?' has to be answered in a way that takes account of the distinction. Even

someone who believes (as I do) that the two kinds of liberty coincide has to provide arguments to show this; he cannot simply ignore the distinction and hope to be taken seriously on the topic. This is an example of analytic progress in philosophy, to be set beside the other forms of progress we have identified, which we may call therapeutic, contextual, and hermeneutic.

Because philosophy is unique, the history of philosophy is unique. It may be studied for philosophical reasons, or it may be studied for historical reasons. We may read the philosophers of other ages either in order to resolve philosophical problems of abiding concern, or in order to enter more fully into the intellectual world of a bygone age. But whatever the motive, the historian of philosophy cannot help being both a philosopher and a historian.

The history of philosophy is unlike the history of any other pursuit. A historian of painting does not have to be a painter; a historian of medicine does not, *qua* historian, practise medicine. But a historian of philosophy cannot help doing philosophy in the very writing of history. It is not just that someone who knows no philosophy will be a bad historian of philosophy; it is equally true that someone who has no idea of how to cook will be a bad historian of cookery. The link between philosophy and its history is a far closer one. The historical task itself forces historians of philosophy to paraphrase their subjects' opinions, to offer reasons why past thinkers held the opinions they did, to speculate on the premisses left tacit in their arguments, and to evaluate the coherence and cogency of the inferences they drew. But the supplying of reasons for philosophical conclusions, the detection of hidden premisses in philosophical arguments, and the logical evaluation of philosophical inferences are themselves full-blooded philosophical activities. Consequently, any serious history of philosophy must itself be an exercise in philosophy as well as in history.

Michael Frede has written illuminatingly on the special role of the historiographer of philosophy. Take an ancient philosopher, call him Archaïos, who held a certain philosophical view *p*. There are, Frede says, two ways of looking at this. One can look at it as a philosophical view, wonder whether it is true, what reasons there are for holding it, what its implications are. Or one can be interested in the fact that it was Archaïos's view, in his circumstances, and explain this in the way one explains historical facts.

When we explain historical actions, we ask for the agent's reasons; if we find a good reason, we think we have understood his action. If we conclude that he did not have a good reason, even in his own terms, we have to find a different, more complicated explanation. What is true of action is true of taking a philosophical view. If we find a good reason for Archaios's view, our task is done. (Sometimes this may involve changing our own notion of what constitutes a good reason.) 'One reason we study the thought of great philosophers with such care would seem to be precisely this, that we trust that in many cases they had good reason to say what they did, although, because of limitations in our understanding, we do not readily understand it.'⁴ One of the things we hope to achieve by our study of the great philosophers of the past is the removal of these limitations.

We can conclude, sometimes, Frede says, that the philosopher had no good reason. This is a hard conclusion to reach—it is claiming that it is not owing to our lack of understanding that we find it difficult to understand why the person held this view—a claim not easily made in the case of philosophers, whose power of intellect and depth of insight generally far exceed our own. In that case we have to look for explanation of a different kind. But even here, historical understanding of A's holding view *p* will involve a philosophical understanding of the view itself—otherwise, how judge that there was no good reason?

In such a case, there are still alternative approaches. We may adopt two different kinds of explanation. One is by pointing to false assumptions, or fallacious reasoning, of a kind we might envisage ourselves as making or committing. The other is where we appeal to the historical context for the explanation. Even when we conclude that there was no good reason for a thought important in history of philosophy, the historian of philosophy has to offer a special kind of explanation.

It is at this point in particular that the historian of philosophy will have to display all his historical learning and his philosophical ingenuity. For he will have (i) to try to reconstruct some philosophical line of reasoning that would explain why the author in question thought his reasons for holding the belief adequate, and (ii) to make a case for saying that it was, indeed, because of such a line of reasoning that the author thought his

⁴ Frede, *Essays*, p. xi.

reasons adequate. To do the first often requires much philosophical resourcefulness; to do the second requires a firm grasp on what kinds of reasoning, which kinds of philosophical considerations were available at the time.⁵

Sometimes even this kind of explanation is not available—here we have to look for explanation in terms of some other branch of history—for instance, the history of religion. We might think that what he thought can be understood only in terms of something in the history of his life, or of the social structure of his society—including the philosophical academic structures of the time.

It is, as Frede says, difficult to reach a conclusion that a great philosopher had no good reasons for saying what he said. For a historian of philosophy, it is a much more daunting task to criticize a philosopher than to defend him. In order to defend a text, it is sufficient to find one reading of it which makes it coherent and plausible; if one wishes to expose confusion, one has to explore many possible interpretations before concluding that none makes the text satisfactory. I had this experience when writing a book recently published, *Aquinas on Being*.⁶ I argued in that book, on the basis of a detailed consideration of passages in many of Aquinas's works, that his teaching on the topic of Being was fundamentally confused. I did my best to attribute appropriate senses to the passages I discussed, but in many cases I failed to do so. And at the end of it all, no doubt, there are many places in which my failure to make sense of what Aquinas says reflects incomprehension on my part rather than confusion on his.

Following the lead of Frede, it is possible to make more precise the nature of the historiography of philosophy. The kernel of any kind of historiography of philosophy is exegesis: the close reading and interpretation of philosophical texts. Exegesis may be of two kinds, internal or external. In internal exegesis the interpreter tries to render the text coherent and consistent, making use of the principle of charity in interpretation. In external exegesis the interpreter seeks to bring out the significance of the text by comparing it and contrasting it with other texts.

Exegesis may form the basis of two quite different historical endeavours. In one, which we may call historical philosophy, the aim is to reach philosophical truth, or philosophical understanding, about the matter or issue under discussion in the text. Typically,

⁵ Frede, *Essays*, p. xv.

⁶ (Oxford University Press, 2002).

historical philosophy looks for the reasons behind, or the justification for, the statements made in the text under study. In the other endeavour, the history of ideas, the aim is not to reach the truth about the matter in hand, but to reach the understanding of a person or an age or a historical succession. Typically, the historian of ideas looks not for the reasons so much as the sources, or causes, or motives for saying what is said in the target text.

Both of these disciplines base themselves on exegesis, but of the two, the history of ideas is the one most closely bound up with the accuracy and sensitivity of the reading of the text. It is possible to be a good philosopher while being a poor exegete. Wittgenstein's treatment of St Augustine at the beginning of the *Philosophical Investigations* is very dubious exegesis; but this does not weaken the force of his philosophical criticism of the 'Augustinian' theory of language. But Wittgenstein did not really think of himself as engaged in historical philosophy, any more than in the historiography of ideas. The invocation of Augustine as the author of the mistaken theory was merely to indicate that the error is one that is worth attacking.

In different histories of philosophy, the skills of the historian and those of the philosopher are exercised in different proportions. The proportion varies in accordance with the purpose of the work and the field of philosophy in question. The history of philosophy may be studied either in pursuit of historical understanding or in pursuit of philosophical enlightenment. One's primary interest may be in the people of a particular period or culture of the past: one studies their philosophy because one wants to know not just what they wore, how they supported themselves, or how they were governed, but also what they thought. Or one's primary interest may be in a particular philosophical problem or set of problems: one studies the writings of past thinkers to see what one can learn from them about freedom and necessity, virtue and vice, or the mind-body problem.

Both approaches to the history of philosophy are legitimate, though both have their dangers. Historians who study the history of thought without being themselves involved in the philosophical problems that exercised past philosophers are likely to sin by superficiality. Philosophers who read ancient, medieval, or early modern texts without a knowledge of the historical context in which they were written are likely to sin by anachronism. Rare is

the historian of philosophy who can tread firmly without falling into either trap.

Each of these errors can nullify the purpose of the enterprise. The historian who is unconcerned with the philosophical problems that troubled past writers has not really understood how they themselves conducted their thinking. The philosopher who ignores the historical background of past classics will gain no fresh light on the issues which concern us today, but merely present contemporary prejudices in fancy dress.

The two dangers threaten in different proportions in different areas of the history of philosophy. In the area of metaphysics it is superficiality which is most to be guarded against: to someone without a personal interest in fundamental philosophical problems the systems of the great thinkers of the past will seem only quaint lunacy. In political philosophy, the great danger is anachronism: when we read Plato's or Aristotle's criticisms of democracy, we will not make head or tail of them unless we know something about the institutions of ancient Athens. In between metaphysics and political philosophy stand ethics and philosophy of mind: here, both dangers threaten with roughly equal force.

Must a philosopher be a historian of philosophy? Not all the time: it is wrong to think of philosophy as being nothing more than the study of the philosophical canon. But it is a great advantage to a philosopher to have a knowledge of the subject's history. It will provide her with examples of best practice. It will free her from the temptation to reinvent a philosophical wheel (especially in cases which show that the wheel in question turned out to be square). Finally, it will enable her to strip off from her thinking layers of contemporary prejudice.

The classical example of the intimacy of history to philosophy is given by the first part of Frege's *Grundlagen der Arithmetik*. Almost half of Frege's book is devoted to discussing and refuting the views of other philosophers and mathematicians. While he is discussing the opinions of others, he ensures that some of his own insights are artfully insinuated, and this makes easier the eventual presentation of his own theory. But the main purpose of his lengthy polemic is to convince readers of the seriousness of the problems to which he will later offer solutions. Without this preamble, he says, we would lack the first prerequisite for learning anything: knowledge of our own ignorance.

Why Should Analytic Philosophers Do History of Philosophy?

JOHN COTTINGHAM



I. INTRODUCTION: AUTHENTIC PHILOSOPHY

‘To say “thus spake the Master” is unworthy of a philosopher; better to trust our own native wit.’¹ Thus Francisco Sanches, in his *Quod Nihil Scitur*, published in Lyon in 1581 (one year after Montaigne’s *Essays*). The pioneers of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries had a robust disrespect for the history of philosophy, which sometimes calls to mind what one finds among many analytic philosophers today. Although they might not have been prepared to sign up to the slogan found on car stickers on some American campuses—‘Just Say “No” to the History of Philosophy!’—they certainly believed that far too much time was spent retailing the views of long-dead philosophers. Sanches had a healthy impatience with the kind of adulation that said of Aristotle *natura locutus est ex ore ejus* (‘nature spoke out of his very mouth’). Instead, *homo sicut nos*, insisted Sanches: Aristotle was just a human being, like us.

That we should trust our own innate light of reason rather than the received authority of the past is a maxim we tend to associate most directly with Descartes; so it may surprise us to find it there in Sanches, some fifty or sixty years before the *Discourse on the Method*. But Sanches himself was in this respect (as indeed in many others) following a much earlier writer, the Spanish humanist Joannes Vives, whose *De Disciplinis* (1531) abounds in references to the primacy of the *lumen naturale*. The metaphor, of course, has

¹ Francisco Sanches, *That Nothing is Known (Quod Nihil Scitur)*, Latin text established, annotated, and translated by Douglas Thomson; introduction, notes, and bibliography by Elaine Limbrick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

origins that are much earlier still.² But whatever metaphors are used, the readiness to reject past authority in favour of individual rational inquiry is a stance that in an important sense goes back to the very origins of philosophy, to the Socratic injunction to ‘follow the argument where it leads’. To adopt a genuinely philosophical stance is almost by definition to see wisdom as more than the passive reception of doctrine. Thus we find Descartes observing, in the Preface to his *Meditations*, ‘I would not urge anyone to read this book except those who are able and willing to meditate seriously along with me’. It is clear that he wants his work to be not just an exposition of his views, but a series of exercises for each of us to follow for ourselves. He wants his readers to *philosophize*, to display the active, critical, and inquiring spirit that is the hallmark of authentic philosophy.

The implied distinction here, between authentic philosophizing, on the one hand, and the mere exposition of philosophical doctrines, on the other, might be thought to explain the disdain felt by contemporary analytic philosophers for the history of their subject. But if that is the rationale for the disdain, then it is a confused one. For it should be clear that confining one’s inquiries to contemporary or recent philosophical work is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for belonging to the class of authentic critical philosophizers as opposed to slavish expositors.

It is certainly not sufficient. As an editor of a fairly ‘mainstream’ journal of modern analytic philosophy, I am constantly struck by the number of submitted articles that to all intents and purposes begin and end with ‘Thus spake the master’. Except that the ‘master’ referred to is not Aristotle, but Quine, or Davidson, or Wittgenstein, or Searle, or Fodor. Deferring to authority did not die out with the early modern revolution; nor do the names that are invoked with bated breath belong only to long-dead luminaries. So we have an irony here: though many analytic philosophers take a

² Plato, in the *Republic* (c.380 BC) had used the simile of the sun to describe the Form of the Good which makes manifest the objects of abstract intellectual cognition, just as the sun sheds light on ordinary visible objects (514–18). In St John’s Gospel (c. AD 100), the *Logos*, the ‘Word’ or divine creative intelligence, is identified with ‘the Light that lighteth every man coming into the world’ (1: 9). And Augustine, in the *De Trinitate* (c.410), welding together Platonic and Christian ideas, asserts that ‘the mind, when directed to intelligible things in the natural order, according to the disposition of the Creator, sees them in a certain incorporeal light which has a nature all of its own, just as the body’s eye sees nearby objects in the ordinary light’ (XII. xv. 24).

derogatory attitude to history of philosophy, it turns out that the faults they attribute to it are often glaringly manifest in much of their own so-called cutting-edge work. Typically, when the views of some modern luminary *L* are unfolded in such reverential detail, remarkably little effort is put into *showing* (as opposed to assuming) that those views are philosophically important or challenging to the reader; it is apparently enough that they are the views of *L*; or, even worse, that they represent how *L* modified his views in response to the comments of *M*—some other member of the modern analytic pantheon. Yet, if it is unworthy of a philosopher to say ‘Thus spake Aristotle’, it surely *a fortiori* unworthy to say ‘Thus spake Davidson’, or ‘Thus spake Searle’.

As for the notion that confining oneself to modern work is *necessary* for authentic philosophizing, the falsity of this claim hardly needs arguing. It would be extraordinary if a ‘cutting-edge’ analytic article on the mind–body problem somehow risked losing its critical sharpness because it brought in reference to Descartes along the way, or if a paper on the metaphysics of substances and tropes were to risk its ‘state-of-the-art’ cachet by so much as mentioning the views of Aristotle or Ockham. Extraordinary, but—such is the power of academic fashion—perhaps not entirely incredible. Nevertheless, all save those who are total slaves to such fashion would surely accept that authentic philosophizing *may* involve back reference to its past. The question I want to address in the remainder of this paper, however, is this: taking it for granted that analytic philosophers *may* become involved with the great philosophers of the past, what reasons are there for thinking that they *should*?

2. PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERSTANDING AND HISTORICAL ROOTS

The germ of the answer is perhaps already there in the distinction between mere exposition and critical reflection. Critical reflection aims at understanding; understanding requires the making of connections. If that is so, then we have pretty much all we need in order to see what is likely to be wrong with the kind of compartmentalized approach that tries to tackle philosophical puzzles in isolation, cutting off the possibility of making any links that go beyond what was said in the last decade or so.

This argument, though, is a little swift, and needs, I think, to be supplemented by an examination of the kind of subject philosophy is. It will be useful to consider two other subjects for comparative purposes: theology and modern natural science. The theologian, it seems obvious, not only *may* but *must* refer to the great texts of the past; for the Christian theologian what Jesus taught has an absolute primacy, just as what the Buddha taught has primacy for the expositor of Buddhism. The reference backwards is so vital that any work that aimed at avoiding it altogether would simply not count as belonging to the relevant subject. At the other end of the spectrum is a modern science such as, for example, biochemistry. Here, references backward seem entirely avoidable (except in so far as academic courtesy and the rules regarding plagiarism require authors to acknowledge their debts to previous work). No previous theory or body of learning has any kind of ‘primacy’; the scientist is answerable only to the constraints of logic and the touchstone of empirical evidence.

But before we ask where philosophy belongs along this spectrum, some severe qualifications need to be made to the sketches just given. At one end of the spectrum, Christian theology has, one may grant, an ineliminable historical component; but the suggestion that any particular canonical text or texts have absolute primacy must be an exaggeration, as will be clear to anyone who has even a cursory acquaintance with the discipline. For Thomas Aquinas, to be sure, theology, *maxime sapientia inter omnes sapientias humanas*,³ the highest of all human kinds of wisdom, was a demonstrative science whose first principles derive from divine revelation—‘the revelation made to the prophets and apostles who wrote the canonical books’;⁴ and it was ‘heresy to say that any falsehood whatever is contained in the gospels or in any canonical scripture’.⁵ For the Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford University, writing just over 700 years later, things are rather different (I quote some relevant extracts from a fascinating study by Keith Ward, entitled *Reason and Revelation*):

Revelation... is a divine communication shaped to the interests and values of a particular society at a particular time...

³ Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (1266–73), Ia, qu. 1, art. 6.

⁴ Ibid. art. 8.

⁵ In *Job*, 13, lect. 1. These references are cited in Keith Ward, *Religion and Revelation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

We cannot exempt one alleged revelation, be it Christian or any other, from the general process of human history and development, so as to leave it unquestioned, indubitable and simply given as a whole.

The conversation in which the theologian must engage is a conversation with the many differing perspectives and forms of thought which characterize human life. Since this conversation continues as the participants adjust their own views by reaction to the other, theological views will always stand in need of restatement . . . Thus again it becomes clear that all theological thought is provisional.

An emphasis on dialectic . . . continually . . . extend[s] the process of reflection by which one comes to appropriate these truths as determining one's present total perspective on reality.⁶

There is perhaps a temptation to see such statements as trading the certainties of traditional faith for a modern relativistic fudge. But such a judgement would, at least in the case under discussion, be quite unfair. Throughout the book the author makes very clear his resistance to relativism, and indeed the final position he reaches is distinctly traditional and orthodox. What he does do, however, is to bring theology into line with the conception of knowledge that is now pretty much common ground in any area of human inquiry—a conception that rejects St Thomas's Aristotelian conception of *scientia* as deduction from certainly known axioms as an impossible fantasy, and substitutes a fallibilist view of science as proceeding along a path of continuous improvement, with a given body of knowledge being subjected to constant testing and revision in the light of evolving understanding and experience. Moreover, Ward's emphasis on *dialogue* is part of a healthy recognition that none of us can claim a hot line to truth 'as it really is'; rather, our inquiries take place as part of an interactive process with our fellow humans, and are shaped by a living tradition of developing discussion and interpretation.

Once these points are recognized as applying both to contemporary theology and to (current conceptions of) knowledge in general, we can see the need to revise our paradigm at the other end of the spectrum—that of natural science. For it seems that the continuous, revisionary, dialectical process we have described must be as much in point here as elsewhere; in which case one needs to qualify the exalted view of biochemistry, or any other natural

⁶ Ward, *Religion and Revelation*, pp. 23, 24, 32, 33.

science, as an isolated, purely rational endeavour answerable only to timeless logic and objective empirical evidence. In other words, we need to recognize (as much recent philosophy of science from Kuhn onwards has of course done) how much the given understandings of the natural world in any epoch owe to the human cultural environment, and how mistaken it is to consider even the specialized and technical disciplines of modern natural science in isolation from the historical tradition of which they are a part.

So we need to modify our initial model of a spectrum with at one end a subject like theology, with its immutably fixed historical anchor, and at the other end contemporary science, floating autonomous and free from history, conforming only to abstract canons of rationality and evidence. Human understanding, in whatever field, must move forward, never resting content with the received wisdom of the past; but it must also progress by drawing on (modifying and developing) that tradition of which it is necessarily a part.

Part of *philosophy's* job, of course, is to inquire into just such features of human knowledge and its evolution. And having uncovered the feature just discussed—what may be called *the historical component in all knowledge*—it will be ready to bring that discovery to bear on the reflexive understanding of its own nature that has always been at the top of its agenda. If there is an ineliminably contextual and historical dimension in all human understanding, then any conception of philosophy itself which explicitly aims to ignore that dimension will, at the very least, risk incurring the charge of philosophical naïvety.

3. FAMILIARITY, STRANGENESS, AND THE PAST

So far the argument has been that philosophizing must, inevitably, have a historical dimension if it is to count as philosophizing at all. In this section, I want to go a bit further, and discuss some of the positive advantages which explicit reference back to past philosophy may bring to the discipline. In a 1994 paper on the historiography of philosophy, Bernard Williams argued that looking back at the great philosophers of a previous epoch may deepen our philosophical understanding of current philosophical debates by generating what Friedrich Nietzsche called an ‘untimely perspective’,

making the familiar seem strange, and vice versa.⁷ The sense of strangeness may create a kind of hiatus, making us pause and stand back from the immediate mêlée of contemporary philosophical disputes, leading us to re-evaluate the presuppositions we (often unconsciously) bring to bear on those disputes. A few years earlier than Williams, Dan Garber had brought out a similar point, citing a much earlier source than Nietzsche: namely, Descartes in Part One of the *Discourse on the Method*. According to Descartes:

Conversing with those of past centuries is much the same as travelling. It is good to know something of the customs of various peoples, so that we may judge our own more soundly and not think that everything contrary to our own way is irrational, as those who have seen nothing of the world ordinarily do.⁸

Glossing this, Garber observes that ‘seeing what others do may at least get us to raise the question for ourselves [of] *why* we have the beliefs and customs we do and, perhaps, lead us to see what is arbitrary and what is well grounded in our beliefs and behaviour’.⁹

This point, the ‘Williams–Garber–Nietzsche–Descartes’ point, as it might rather clumsily be called, is certainly a suggestive one. In the words of the novelist L. P. Hartley, ‘the past is a foreign country: they do things differently there’; and this may provide a very good reason for looking back into the past. But it does make the value of historical inquiry very much an instrumental value: it is simply a *means* to developing a more detached and critical stance towards our own contemporary world-view. All well and good; but it does not perhaps supply very much of an incentive for the sceptical analytic philosopher to spend the time and energy needed for the kind of detailed historical research that might generate such a perspective. Foreign travel is expensive, and if its value is merely the

⁷ Bernard Williams, ‘Descartes and the Historiography of Philosophy’, in J. Cottingham (ed.), *Reason, Will and Sensation: Studies in Descartes’ Metaphysics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

⁸ *Descartes, Discours de la méthode* (1637), part i, AT VI 6: CSM I 113–14. In this paper, ‘AT’ refers to the standard Franco-Latin edition of Descartes by C. Adam and P. Tannery, *Œuvres de Descartes* (12 vols., rev. edn., Paris: Vrin/CNRS, 1964–76); ‘CSM’ refers to the English translation by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vols. I and II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), and ‘CSMK’ to Vol. III, *The Correspondence*, by the same translators plus A. Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁹ D. Garber, ‘Does History Have a Future?’ (1989), repr. in *Descartes Embodied* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 22.

instrumental one of making us think more critically about how we do things back home, there might be quicker and cheaper ways of achieving the same result. Socrates managed to be effectively and (to his contemporaries) infuriatingly critical in his probing of received opinions; yet his beneficial gadfly activities did not, so far as we can tell, depend on scholarly inquiry into previous philosophical systems.

Aside from these worries, it seems to me that the 'foreign country' argument does not quite to ring true to the way historical work in philosophy is actually conducted. For it is not as if a sense of strangeness, of foreignness, is an immediate 'given' that emerges from looking at past philosophers (a 'given' that can then be utilized as a benefit for making us more critical about our own world-view). On the contrary, the way in which human inquiry operates is inevitably such that our first bearings in any new territory have to be points of *contact*—similarities, not differences, between the terrain we are scrutinizing and the one we are coming from.

Consider the case of Descartes, perhaps the figure in the historical canon whom the analytic philosophers of the last fifty years or so have, for one reason or another, been most ready to look at. What are the themes they discern in the Cartesian corpus? The answer is pretty uncontroversial: analytic work on Descartes has returned again and again to the certainty of the *Cogito*, external world scepticism, and mind–body dualism. Are these really strange, disquieting themes, vibrating with the kind of foreignness that might make us stand back from our contemporary philosophical concerns? Of course not: the headings under which these topics fall, which are, respectively, foundationalist epistemology, the debates between the sceptic and the anti-sceptic, and the relation of bodily states to conscious states, are simply the ruling preoccupations of contemporary analytic philosophy retrojected back on to Descartes.

To pick out just one example, I think it is fair to say that hardly a month has gone by in the last twenty or so years when some analytic philosopher has not published, or submitted for publication, a paper describing some variant of the by now tiresomely familiar scenario of the 'brain-in-the-vat': perhaps, for all the evidence available to you, you are not now sitting listening to these words, or reading this paper, but are a brain floating in a nutrient vat in the Andromeda galaxy, and some mad alien scientists are stimulating your brain so as to give you all the appropriate sensations to make

you suppose that you are here on Earth. So do you really *know* you are now reading this paper? This is an exercise in what is often called ‘Cartesian doubt’, with the brain-in-the-vat being simply a successor to the scenario in the First Meditation of a ‘malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning’ who has implanted various illusions in the meditator’s mind in order to deceive him. The only difference is that Descartes couched the scenario in immaterialist terms, with the demon directly inducing the deceptive sensations into the consciousness of a supposedly bodiless meditator, while today’s more physicalist scenario prefers to talk of stimulating the nerve fibres of a severed brain, the bodily organ of consciousness.

If this kind of interest in sceptical puzzles is what we bring to the *Meditations*, this is what we will find there. There is someone called ‘the sceptic’, who has to be defeated; and Descartes, although few now accept his supposed weapons for the victory (weapons which invoke divine power and goodness), is at least credited with taking doubt to its limits, and showing us just what the anti-sceptic has to overcome. With the introduction of Descartes’s malicious demon, says Richard Popkin (not an analytic philosopher, of course, but a distinguished historian of philosophy), ‘the *crise pyrrhonienne* was pressed to its farthest limit’.¹⁰

But in reality, of course, there *was* no ‘Pyrrhonian crisis’ in the early modern period, or indeed ever—at least not if you mean by a crisis something that ever kept anyone seriously awake at night. For one thing, as David Hume famously said (writing some hundred years after Descartes), ‘nature is always too strong for principle’, and ‘though a Pyrrhonian may throw himself or others into a momentary amazement and confusion by his profound reasonings; the first and most trivial event in life will put to flight all his doubts and scruples’.¹¹ It is humanly impossible for anyone to be sincere, in everyday life, in maintaining the artificial doubts of the philosophers. And in the second place, Descartes himself never seriously entertained such doubts.

If we are prepared to look a little more closely at Descartes’s own characterization of the sceptical doubts of the First Meditation, we

¹⁰ Richard Popkin, *The History of Skepticism from Erasmus to Descartes* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 184.

¹¹ Hume, *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (1748), end of sect. XII, part 2.

find he calls them ‘exaggerated’ or ‘hyperbolic’, and ‘deserving to be dismissed as laughable’. That is the unequivocal statement he makes as he closes the book.¹² And Descartes does not just mean here that he can now stop worrying about the doubts because his arguments in the *Meditations* have defused them, or laid them to rest. He means exactly what he says: that he now realizes that the doubts of the last few days were ‘exaggerated’—way over the top, we might say—and that they deserve to be treated as ridiculous (the Latin word is *explodendae*—literally, to be hissed or booed off the stage). So why introduce the doubts in the first place? Why bother to find an elaborate way out of the doubt, if the doubt is a farce? Descartes made his own intentions very clear in the Synopsis published as an introduction to the first edition of the *Meditations* in 1641:

The great benefit of these arguments is not, in my view, that they prove what they establish—namely that there really is a world, and that human beings have bodies and so on—since no sane person has ever seriously doubted these things. The point is that in considering these arguments we come to realize that they are not as solid or as transparent as the arguments which lead us to knowledge of our own minds and of God.¹³

Descartes, in fact, is not an epistemologist at all, if by that one means someone who engages, as a purely academic exercise, with that philosopher’s dummy, ‘the sceptic’. His philosophical masterpiece is primarily a work of metaphysics, not epistemology (in correspondence he called the work his *Metaphysics*¹⁴); as its subtitle makes clear, the subject to be discussed is not the nature of knowledge, but ‘the existence of God and the distinction between the human soul and the body’. You may object that the First Meditation, at least, is surely about doubt. But the title is significant: it is not ‘What sorts of doubt threaten to disturb our security’ or ‘What we have good reason to doubt’, but rather ‘What may be called into doubt’ (*in dubium revocari*). What is envisaged is a deliberate, wilful calling into question: the Will, to use a key phrase of the First Meditation, is deliberately wrenched or twisted

¹² ‘...hyperbolicae superiorum dierum dubitationes, ut risu dignae, sunt explodendae’: Sixth Meditation (AT VII 89; CSM II 61).

¹³ Synopsis to *Meditations* (AT VII 15–16; CSM II 11).

¹⁴ Cf. Letter to Mersenne of 30 September 1640 (AT III 185; CSMK 154).

round into the opposite direction from its natural disposition: *voluntate plane in contrarium versa*.¹⁵ The doubt does not consist of a series of arguments that should make us suspect that the external world might not really exist; nor is the malicious demon a ‘hypothesis’ whose truth is a serious possibility; rather, it is a deliberate supposition (‘I will suppose therefore . . .’), introduced in the teeth of an inchoate awareness that it can’t be right: ‘I will suppose that not God, who is supremely good and the source of truth, but rather some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning . . .’¹⁶ We can hardly fail to see that such a supposition is being introduced only on sufferance, as it were. For the very phrasing implies a residual commitment to the idea of a God who is ‘supremely good and the source of truth’; and since such a being is by definition omnipotent (as Descartes will shortly be making explicit), then it can hardly be that this lesser being is also ‘of the utmost power’ (*summe potens*). It will not be long before the demon is summarily dismissed, and the meditator reverts to his firmly rooted belief (*infixa opinio*) in God, a God whose contemplation is the key to everything we can know. For in him, says Descartes at the start of the Fourth Meditation, in a direct quotation from the Vulgate text of St Paul, ‘all the treasures of wisdom and the sciences lie hidden’.¹⁷

To reach the theocentric agenda that is at the core of the *Meditations*, the theological commitments that lie behind the superficial interest in the ‘laughable’ sceptical scenarios, we have to be prepared to read the *Meditations* in a way that prescind from the modern preoccupations of today’s increasingly professionalized and compartmentalized view of philosophy as a set of purely academic puzzles. The meditator’s search for truth is no mere epistemic exercise, but a journey towards the divine source of light that illumines our intellect and guides our will. Virtually every aspect of the truth, moreover, turns out to be conditioned by its divinely ordained character; the understanding of our embodied nature, to take just one key example, is not just an abstract excursus into the ‘mind–body problem’, but an exercise in theodicy—one that strives to accept the limitations imposed by our physicality as consistent

¹⁵ AT VII 22; CSM II 15.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ ‘In quo nempe sunt omnes thesauri scientiarum et sapientiae absconditi’ (AT VII 53; CSM II 37); cf. Colossians 2 : 3 (‘in quo sunt omnes thesauri sapientiae et scientiae absconditi’). See further S. Menn, *Augustine and Descartes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 303.

with the work of a benevolent creator. The genre of theodicy—the vindication of the justice and goodness of God—is, on proper scrutiny, the only plausible category to which the main argument of the last three Meditations can be assigned. Descartes’s goal in the climax of his argument is to show that although our bodily mechanisms mislead us from time to time, there is nothing in the constitution of our brains and bodies, or in the systematic programming whereby brain activity determines sensory awareness—‘absolutely nothing to be found in all this that does not bear witness to the power and goodness of God’. The *immensa Dei bonitas*, the immeasurable goodness of God, referred to in the penultimate paragraph of the *Meditations*, is no casual afterthought, but a leitmotiv that runs through the entire project for the validation of human knowledge and the avoidance intellectual and moral error.

Without my going any further into this particular example, I hope its general force will be apparent. There *is* a strangeness in Descartes, a passionate commitment to a theocentric world-view that sets him light-years apart from the concerns of most modern analytic philosophers; but a sense of this strangeness is not *provided* by reading the historical texts, it is a *result* of reading the historical texts *from a certain perspective*—namely, one that prescind from our modern preoccupations. So generating a distance, or strangeness, or sense of perspective, cannot really be proposed as an *argument* for the study of history of philosophy, since it turns out to be something that is *required in the first place* in order for historical study to disclose its riches. Travel broadens the mind only for those who are already open to having their minds broadened. If you go to southern Spain solely for sunbathing and cheap beer, you will not tend to be struck by the ancient cities and their exquisite interplay of Islamic and Christian cultures.

Let me add just a brief postscript to this particular example from Descartes. It seems to me that for us moderns to achieve a full sense of the ‘strangeness’ of the Cartesian world-view, what is required is a kind of recursive or reiterated application of the historical perspective: we need not just to see the connections and the disparities between him and us, between seventeenth and twenty-first centuries, but to achieve a sense of what unites him and what divides him from his own historical forebears. Fruitful historical study of period X brings our own culture into juxtaposition not just with X, but with X’s predecessor cultures. To understand what

Descartes is doing in the *Meditations*, we have been able to see why he was regarded as a purveyor of a ‘new philosophy’, but we also have to know something of what links him to the ideas of Bonaventure and Anselm before him. Thus the voice that rings out at the end of the Third Meditation—in a passage that most modern students probably would not recognize as by Descartes at all, since they would be encouraged just to skip it—speaks in language redolent more of the early Middle Ages than of the early modern revolution. ‘Let me here rest for a while in the contemplation of God himself and gaze upon, wonder at, and adore the beauty of this immense light’ (*immensi hujus luminis pulchritudinem . . . intueri, admirari, adorare*).¹⁸ The meditator’s voice here is the voice of the worshipper rather than the philosopher; or perhaps we should more aptly say that Descartes is adopting a modality of thought vividly exemplified in the writings of many of the Christian Fathers, a mode which mixes critical reasoning and devotion, one in which philosophizing and religious contemplation are inextricably intertwined.

4. PHILOSOPHY AND SELF-DISCOVERY

Why should we bother to achieve these kinds of complex historical perspective—ones that are often quite difficult to achieve, since (as just suggested) unravelling one historical thread often pulls us back further into the labyrinth of the even more distant past? I would not want to deny that it is legitimate for analytic philosophers to be wary of being drawn too far into the labyrinth. But to cut free of the threads entirely is likely to be a recipe for shallowness. For in the end, some degree or level of historical awareness seems inextricably bound up with that reflexivity, that self-scrutiny, that has always been part and parcel of the philosophical enterprise at its best. As I put it in the introduction to a volume of source materials on Descartes’s *Meditations*, ‘fruitful philosophical analysis, like individual self-discovery, operates at a point of interplay between the struggle towards a future not yet achieved, and the effort to recover and understand the past we have (partly) left behind’.¹⁹

¹⁸ AT VII 52; CSM II 36.

¹⁹ Roger Ariew, John Cottingham, and Tom Sorell (eds.), *Descartes’ Meditations: Background Source Materials*, Cambridge Philosophical Texts in Context Series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Introduction, p. xiii.

Some may be put off by the psychoanalytic flavour of this comment. But by referring to self-discovery here, I do not mean to offer any hostages to the specific technicalities of Freudian or Jungian thought, but merely to point to something in the everyday experience of all of us: we are all, like it or not, shaped by our past; and if we want our future to be creative and open, we must, whether we like it or not, struggle to understand and come to terms with that past. The same, I think, is true of philosophy in general.

Individuals who ignore their past, or fail to understand it, are liable to find their deliberations marred by distortions of perception and understanding. Their deliberations may appear to be rational, but because of projections and hidden assumptions operating beneath the surface, they may fail to grasp the deeper significance of what they are doing, with potentially disastrous results. Now analytic philosophers, or many of them, tend to be highly sceptical about the idea of the past as exercising a hidden influence on the present, since they tend to subscribe to a highly ratiocentric model of the mind as a transparent goldfish bowl, within which clearly identifiable items called 'beliefs' and 'desires' swim around, only waiting to be properly arranged in order for rational decisions to be possible. But once we accept the basic psychoanalytic insight that the partly forgotten past colours the significance of what we do today, then if we refuse to scrutinize that past, the risk is that we will lack a proper awareness of the true motivational structure of our present activities, decisions, and projects, and that the resulting distortion may have highly damaging consequences.²⁰

Edward Craig, in his insightful study *The Mind of God and the Works of Man*, makes in effect a somewhat parallel point to this—a point applying not to individuals but to entire social epochs, or periods in the history of thought. Often, Craig argues, the reasons why a given argument seems convincing to members of a given culture will depend not on its formal structure, but on hidden assumptions and presuppositions that operate beneath the surface of our supposedly transparent rational deliberations. To fully understand the thought-patterns of Romanticism, for example, or Idealism, or Positivism, we need to do more than scrutinize the arguments and counter-arguments offered by the relevant thinkers;

²⁰ For this theme, see John Cottingham, *Philosophy and the Good Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), ch. 4.

we need to grasp the underlying world-view that generated the impetus for these debates in the first place. And Craig's suggestion is that the concealed assumptions that underpin the world-view in question often operate at a pre-rational level, and are therefore frequently best glimpsed as much through the poetry and literature and music of an epoch as via an analysis of the treatises produced by its philosophers.²¹

I do not have time in the present paper to develop and defend this notion. But if it is anything like correct, then it provides a strong additional reason why philosophers of any stripe should always want to cultivate historical sensitivity. By looking back at the past in the way suggested by Craig, we begin to appreciate how far the formal philosophical arguments that we find in the canonical philosophers are importantly incomplete as an explanation of why they came to hold the conclusions they did. Berkeley's metaphysical arguments about existence and perception, though philosophers can dissect and analyse them *ad nauseam*, will never fully explain why some find his idealism deeply compelling, while others regard it as baroque nonsense; only by uncovering the world-view of the early eighteenth century, one shaped by the conflict between traditional theism and an emerging secular materialism, can we grasp the underlying pressures that give point to Berkeley's insistent denunciation of material substance. But this example aside, the crucial point I want to make here is this: whatever is true of past ages, and the ways in which the convincingness or otherwise of arguments is underpinned by latent cultural presuppositions, is likely to be true of our own present age. Having performed Craig's suggested exercise with respect to the classical, or medieval, or early modern period, we may be in better shape to bring a similar distancing to our own current philosophical concerns. Instead of fortifying ourselves with the illusion that we are quasi-scientific researchers, advancing philosophical progress through the pure weapons of rational analysis, we will be more ready to see that philosophical argument does not spring out of nowhere. It is part of a cultural tradition that delivered us to where we are today; and if we ignore that tradition, we will lack full awareness of the significance of the philosophical moves we make, with potentially disastrous results.

²¹ Edward Craig, *The Mind of God and the Works of Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

If this argument is on the right lines, then it turns out that not only *should* philosophers cultivate historical sensitivity if they are to philosophize in a self-aware way, but, more than that, it may even be true that historically based philosophical inquiry is the *only* kind that can aspire to qualify as genuine philosophizing (or at the very least, that it is far better placed so to qualify than its contemporary ‘up-to-date’, ‘cutting-edge’ cousin). For the hidden assumptions of our own contemporary epoch are likely to be enormously difficult to disentangle; the kinds of detachment and self-awareness that may take the psychoanalytic patient years to achieve are going to be equally, if not more, daunting tasks for the philosophical scrutinizer of contemporary culture. When we look back at a past epoch, by contrast, we often have a certain perspective supplied by distance: the trivia and the blind alleys have been eradicated by time, the central claims emerge more prominently distinguished from the peripheral, and the presuppositions that were so deeply woven into the culture that they could not be distinctly discerned now stand out more clearly. The philosophical scrutinizer of past epochs should in principle (though clearly this is very hard and seldom fully achieved in practice) be able to attain a genuinely philosophical overview of the arguments and counter-arguments that he or she examines: an overview that is genuinely philosophical because it is able not just to question the structure of the arguments, but to delve into the intellectual and cultural presuppositions that gave life to those arguments, and thus make a truly critical assessment.

5. CONCLUDING OBSERVATION

André Comte-Sponville, a modern philosopher who in his recent *A Short Treatise on the Great Virtues* has shown how reference back to the past can produce a philosophical best-seller for our own times, has spoken of a ‘duty of memory’: ‘the past is in need of our compassion and gratitude; for the past cannot stand up for itself as can the present and the future’.²² I suspect that most of those who do history of philosophy do so for this comparatively

²² André Comte-Sponville, *A Short Treatise on the Great Virtues* (*Petit Traité des Grands Vertus*, 1988) (London: Heinemann, 2002), p. 21.

straightforward reason: they feel a duty, or an inclination, to preserve the thought of past ages, to protect what cannot stand up for itself, to reawaken and revivify our cultural inheritance for its own sake. In this sense, philosophy remains, in my view, part of the humanities: despite increasingly determined attempts to turn it into a specialist science, it has as one of its basic aims the protection and transmission of an intellectual culture (where protection, to be sure, need not preclude critical re-evaluation and development). This is, if you like (to use Hegelian speak for a moment) the *thesis*: history of philosophy as a good for its own sake. The *antithesis* is contained in the kind of robust scepticism about past wisdom exemplified in Seneca's advice to Lucilius, written about AD 65:

'Zeno said this.' And what have you said? 'Cleanthes said that.' What have you said? How much longer are you going to serve under others' orders? Assume authority yourself and utter something that may be handed down to posterity. Produce something from your own resources . . . The men who pioneered the old routes are guides, not our masters. Truth lies open to everyone. There has yet to be a monopoly of truth. And there is plenty of it left for future generations.²³

The antithesis, then, is that we should break free from the past and say something for ourselves. What I have been arguing for in this paper is a kind of synthesis. Analytic philosophy, which is rightly committed to 'saying something for ourselves', can benefit enormously from the kind of systematic historical study that shows how far what we want to say 'for ourselves' is influenced by the culture that shaped us. Conversely, history of philosophy never simply says, or should never simply say, 'Thus spake the Master'. Instead, it aims to uncover not just what the master said, but how the significance of what he said emerges from the cultural context in which he operated. And the exercise of uncovering this serves as a kind of paradigm for all sound philosophy.

²³ *Epistulae morales*, xxxiii.

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On Saying No to History of Philosophy

TOM SORELL



This paper grew out of a piece of gossip. Years ago, I heard about a sign pinned to an office door in Princeton, New Jersey. The office door was Gilbert Harman's, and I was told the sign read, 'Just say no to the history of philosophy'. 'Just say no to the history of philosophy'—a clear echo of Nancy Reagan's 'Just say no to drugs'. When I was told this story, I believed it. I took it that Harman's sign expressed one prominent analytic philosopher's deep antagonism to the history of philosophy, and I wondered where that antagonism came from. Many analytic philosophers I knew were uninterested in or bored by the history of philosophy, but not usually hostile, and I wondered why Harman seemed to be more vehement. I doubted that Harman thought the history of philosophy so addictive that he had to warn people against it in the manner of Nancy Reagan, but apparently he did. I e-mailed Harman, saying that I gathered he was critical of the history of philosophy, and asking whether it was true that he had once put that notice on his door.

He replied by saying that he didn't think his views on the history of philosophy were very interesting. Here is what he wrote:

...I believe my views about the history of philosophy are mostly orthodox nowadays. The history of philosophy is not easy. It is very important to consider the historical context of a text and not just try to read it all by itself. One should be careful not to read one's own views (or other recent views) into a historical text. It is unwise to treat historical texts as sacred documents that contain important wisdom. In particular, it is important to avoid what Walter Kaufmann calls 'exegetical thinking': reading one's views into a sacred text so one can read them back out endowed with authority. For the most part the problems that historical writers were concerned with are different from the problems

that current philosophers face. There are no perennial philosophical problems.

On the whole, these views about the history of philosophy are quite close to those of my late friend Margaret Wilson.

For reasons I do not fully understand, I have sometimes upset people by distinguishing between philosophy and the history of philosophy or by noting that philosophy is what the history of philosophy is the history of.

I also think as an empirical matter that students of philosophy need not be required to study the history of philosophy and that a study of the history of philosophy tends not to be useful to students of philosophy. (Note 'tends'.) Similarly, it is not particularly helpful to students of physics, chemistry, or biology to study the history of physics, chemistry, or biology.

Of course, it may be helpful for students of physics to start with classical Newtonian physics before taking up relativity theory and quantum mechanics. But it tends not to be helpful for them to read Newton.

The playful sign that was once on my office door, 'History of Philosophy: Just Say No!' was concerned with whether our students should be required to do work in the history of philosophy.

That is not to say that I have anything against the study of the history of philosophy. I do not discourage students or others from studying the history of philosophy. I am myself quite interested in the history of moral philosophy for example and have occasionally taught graduate seminars in Kant. I have done a certain amount of work on Adam Smith's relation to Hume and others.¹

These views are measured, and they certainly do not express the deep hostility toward history of philosophy that I ascribed to Harman on the basis of the gossip about the sign on his door. At the same time, they do not seem to me to be uncontentious. After elaborating some of them in ways I hope will not take away their initial plausibility, I give reasons for disagreeing with them. My claim is that history of philosophy is useful and relevant even when philosophy is thought to be, as it might be thought by Harman to be, the activity of solving ahistorically formulated problems. It is useful and relevant not just in the sense that these problems have historical roots, or that the conception of philosophy as ahistorical problem solving has historical roots. History of philosophy is relevant and useful in that many still recognized problems are old and unsolved, or open to interpretation as versions

¹ Reproduced with permission. I am grateful to Harman for comments on an earlier draft.

of older problems, rather than being freshly minted. Older approaches to these problems can be inaccessible to those without training in the history of philosophy. These older approaches can throw light on current versions of old problems, or produce instructive examples of failed solutions. The fact that the assumptions and methods of the subject have changed does not mean that the continuity of consideration of these problems is a fiction, or that approaches that have been discarded or forgotten cannot be illuminating when they are reconsidered. On the other hand, when there *are* discontinuities, it can take history of philosophy to inform us that our problems are different enough from problems of the past to make an old conceptual scheme unserviceable for a present purpose. The claim that there are, or that there are not, perennial philosophical problems can only be made on grounds provided by the history of philosophy.

History of philosophy *would* be unnecessary and even irrelevant if, as was once thought in the analytic tradition, philosophy consisted of a method of logical reconstruction or logical clarification, with the same unhistorical method of reconstruction or clarification being practised on many different subject-matters. This conception of philosophy has never been true to the actual practice of the subject, even in the English-speaking world. History of philosophy would be irrelevant, too, if philosophy were only about the interpretation of scientific results, or if it were only concerned with how some of these might be synthesized. But this conception also has failed to catch on much outside the sector of the Anglo-American philosophy of mind now known as cognitive science.

I

Let me begin with the issue addressed by Harman's playful sign: namely, that of what students of philosophy might reasonably be required to read in order to get on with the subject. Presumably they can reasonably be required to read *something*. When Harman was urging people to say 'No' to the history of philosophy, he was not taking a stand against reading lists. Was he, however, taking a stand against reading lists mentioning historical figures? It is hard for an analytic philosopher who says 'No' to the history of philosophy to be even-handed in his treatment of historical figures, or the importance of studying them. The analytic movement was not

invented yesterday, and some of the writings of its heroes—Frege and Wittgenstein—are not highly accessible even in English translation. The work of expounding these writings is not different in kind from the work of expounding older figures, but this work is not satisfyingly classified as history of philosophy full stop, if that classification keeps it from connecting up with the current philosophy of language or philosophy of mind. Some exposition does connect up in this way. A good example of this cross-over genre of exposition of dead philosophers comes from work on passages in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* concerned with following a rule. In discussing these passages, real philosophical luminaries like Saul Kripke² and, to a lesser extent, Colin McGinn,³ rub shoulders with people who have spent a long time trying to make Wittgenstein clearer, people who know all of the published and unpublished writings of Wittgenstein, but whose own views, to the extent they are different from Wittgenstein's, tend to be unknown. Is the controversy over how to interpret Wittgenstein on following a rule merely historical? And if it is not, is that because someone like Kripke takes an interest? Again, if work on Wittgenstein on following a rule is not merely of historical interest because someone with important philosophical views in their own right takes the trouble to discuss it, are we to say that work on Descartes turns from having merely historical interest to having something more when Bernard Williams extracts the 'absolute conception' from the *Meditations*,⁴ or when Thomas Nagel goes in for a Cartesian defence of the authority of reason against familiar kinds of relativism?⁵ The fact that these questions can be asked shows that the dividing line between the mainstream of analytic philosophy and the history of philosophy can shift, so that it is not always clear what one is saying 'No' to when one says 'No' to the history of philosophy.

Suppose that a reading list for a course in moral philosophy makes references not only to Rawls, Dworkin, Parfit, Williams,

² Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language: An Elementary Exposition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982).

³ Colin McGinn, *Wittgenstein on Meaning: An Interpretation and Evaluation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984).

⁴ Bernard Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978).

⁵ See Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

Scheffler, Kagan, and other contributors to the journal literature, but also to Kant, Sidgwick, Hume, and Aristotle? I take it that such a course need not count as a course on the history of moral thought or the history of moral philosophy just because it includes selections from the works of great, dead philosophers. It can count as a course on moral philosophy proper, because the contentions of Kant, Hume, and Aristotle on various topics can be represented as disagreeing with the contentions of people who were not their contemporaries on issues that are still live in moral philosophy as we have it. For example, it is a live question in Anglo-American moral philosophy whether moral requirements demand too much of human beings. In its currently discussed form, this question probably originates in a book called *Utilitarianism: For and Against* that Bernard Williams and J. J. C. Smart contributed to in 1973. In this book Williams claims that utilitarianism is overdemanding, and in work that came later, Williams extended the charge to Kantianism, and generally to all strongly impersonal forms of morality inspired by philosophy.

Those who agree with Williams (I am not among them) will be attracted to a moral philosophy that can strike a balance between the personal fulfilment that individuals can reasonably try to get from life and what morality can reasonably exact from anyone who can understand its demands. Moral philosophies that connect moral requirements to human flourishing or to the concept of living well stand a chance of doing this, for the concept of living well may call for the cultivation of the deep personal attachments and for the pursuit of personal projects that Williams criticizes utilitarianism and Kantianism for asking agents to sacrifice in the name of morality. Aristotle's moral philosophy makes a lot of flourishing, and it has plenty to say about at least one kind of personal attachment—namely, friendship. For these reasons, it may be a starting-point for those who are disposed to articulate and defend a position like Williams's.

I think it will be agreed that this use of historical figures for pursuing a live problem in philosophy is not what Harman was urging people to say 'No' to. On the contrary, in Harman's own introductory book on meta-ethics,⁶ one finds this sort of use made of Hume. Hume is made into a spokesman for a historically

⁶ Gilbert Harman, *The Nature of Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

unspecific sort of moral anti-realism, just as, in the controversy over moral demandingness, Aristotle might be used to define a historically unspecific position that concedes something to Williams. When this use is made of Hume or Aristotle, does it matter, philosophically, that they are the authors of highly influential texts that many generations of philosophers have studied? Does it even matter, philosophically, that the quotations used to ascribe anti-realism to them or an appreciation of the moral importance of personal attachments bear those interpretations?

It isn't obvious that it matters philosophically. Even if Harman gets Hume wrong, there is still a view or contention expressing anti-realism that may deserve discussion. And even if Aristotle is not an antidote to impersonal moral philosophy, it may be that there is some route to an antidote from the requirements of Aristotle's concept of living well, broadly but perhaps anachronistically interpreted. On this sort of view, what matters philosophically is filling out discussable contentions relevant to a problem, and not so much whether those contentions can credibly be extracted from the writings of a philosopher with a famous name. So, on this view, whether moral anti-realism fits Hume is irrelevant. What matters philosophically is whether the form of anti-realism that Harman (rightly or wrongly) attributes to Hume is defensible.

Whether this non-committal use of historical figures is acceptable depends partly on how *any* figures on a reading list—even living contemporaries—may legitimately be used. I think there are a number of such uses. If we are trying, for pedagogical purposes, to make an inventory of the different possible approaches that could conceivably be taken toward a problem, or if we are trying to motivate an approach that has not yet been tried, it may not matter that one cannot find a piece of philosophical writing representing each approach from a historical author or a contemporary. So to force a historical author into the confines of one of the possible positions required by the inventory will probably be gratuitous. On the other hand, if one is philosophically attracted to one of those approaches, and wants to adopt it oneself, it can matter a great deal—matter philosophically rather than historically—that it or something apparently similar has been developed before now, whether by a living philosopher or by a dead one.

I am not saying that one has to read a lot, including historically, to avoid reinventing the wheel, as if reinventing the wheel were an

annoying and everyday hazard in philosophy. It is *hard* to reinvent the wheel in philosophy, or to come upon a line of thought leading to an established but historically remote theory or outlook. What reading helps people, especially students, to avoid is the much more familiar sense of not knowing where to begin, of not having any bearings at all in relation to a problem. It can matter that a number of philosophers have been there before one has arrived oneself. It can be useful for there to have been a controversy about the right way to proceed and for various things to have been tried in response. This is the way in which progress is made in philosophy, and working through a controversy can be one way of getting into a position to contribute productively to a treatment of a philosophical problem oneself. One way of working through a previously developed position is by working through a historical text or texts. Although it *need* not take one further than working through the recent journal literature, or than working through a reliable twenty-first-century summary of the historical literature, it sometimes can. For example, it can matter that an approach to a problem one is interested in has been developed as part of a *system* of philosophy, or a system of moral and political philosophy, not merely a line of thought covering one or two pages in the journal *Analysis*. The approach of the historical text or texts can offer a kind of relief from the fragmentariness and specialization of some of the current literature.

What I am presenting is a sort of argument from problem-solving for the use of historical texts among others. Historical texts can suggest ways forward with current problems just as literature by living philosophers can. Courses in the history of philosophy make the contents of some of these texts available when they would otherwise not be, and inculcate some of the skills necessary to read these and further texts intelligently. It is true that courses in the history of philosophy also introduce distinctive problems and controversies of their own, including many that do not point beyond the texts, or philosophers, or the period, under study. But this can be true equally of logic courses taken as part of a philosophy degree. Even if the main effect of logic courses on philosophy students is the absorption of the symbolism and apparatus of first-order proofs, so that they can follow rather than contribute to some of the more technical literature in philosophical logic, that is not nothing, and some of the skills acquired are transferable to

other parts of the subject. It can be the same with the text-reading and interpretation-testing skills necessary to establish a reading of a single historical text or a philosopher several centuries old. The controversy at Princeton over whether students should be required to take history of philosophy courses has a counterpart in a controversy in many UK universities over whether students should be able to do a philosophy degree without having to learn along the way how to prove a sequent of the predicate calculus. I would take the same side in each of these controversies. That is, I would argue for saying 'Yes' to elementary formal logic *and* to history of philosophy. Of course, the argument for saying 'Yes' is not an argument for saying 'Yes' *only* to logic or *only* to the history of philosophy. Someone who comes out of a philosophy degree programme unable to do more than construe the texts of Descartes or someone else, someone without any views of his own on ethics or metaphysics, would be a failure, just as someone able to prove theorems but unable to write an essay would be.

How far must a student's exposure to the thought of historical figures be exposure at first hand to their texts? It is possible, I think, to grasp the sense/reference distinction without having read Frege's essay on sense and reference, and it is possible for someone to know what Russell's theory of descriptions says without having got it out of a text by Russell. Again, it is possible to learn about some of the limitations of syllogistic logic without having immersed oneself in textbooks on the subject, still less in Aristotle. This is part of what Harman is driving at when he says that, just as a student of physics does not have to have read Newton to get on with physics as we have it, so the student of philosophy does not have to study the history of philosophy to get on with philosophy as we now have it. It is significant that what Harman says of Newton could be said of people in more recent physics, too. Textbooks can communicate Feynman's results and some mathematical techniques that Feynman introduced into physics without the student having to read anything by Feynman. There is something about the way in which physics is an organization of problems and results that keeps a textbook presentation from distorting things when it digests Feynman's findings without quoting any of Feynman's articles. How, if at all, is it different for philosophy?

There *are* such things as definite results in philosophy. Russell's theory of descriptions is an example. Kripke's theory of the rigid

designator is another. But these are unrepresentative of philosophy, and I am not sure how typical they are even of analytic philosophy. There are also philosophical textbooks, but they tend to give synopses of unconcluded controversies and disagreements rather than definite results. Unconcluded controversies and open-ended disagreements do resist a textbook summary. This may be one reason why students of philosophy are so often taught from anthologies of texts rather than from summaries of those texts: because a large part of philosophy is participating in controversies that one comes to expect will not be settled, and because one gets a sense of what can be disputed by seeing where philosophers have in fact disagreed, and how the disagreement has resisted a resolution. Since Descartes there has been a long tradition in Western philosophy of objection and response. Objection and response *followed* by objection and response, rather than objection followed by definitive response.

Long before Descartes, something important about the subject was captured by its being pursued in dialogue form. Whether or not philosophy is always dialectical, it characteristically is, and someone who knows the subject only from, for example, Spinoza's *Ethics* or some other imitation of a book of deductions, misses a great deal, and may even be blinded to a great deal. In a book of deductions there are plenty of results or definite conclusions, but a formal proof is a caricature of what is involved in arriving at a philosophical view, or in defending one, and often a would-be proof lacks conclusiveness despite the appearance of rigour. The dialogue, in which different possibilities are considered and rejected and various possibilities are left hanging without being pursued, and which can be broken off without reaching the last word, is a better guide to what most of philosophy is like, and to how to do it. Part of what I am driving at is that there is something more characteristic about the *non*-result in philosophy than about the result. Knowing how to recognize a false start or a short-circuited solution or a premature conclusion is just as important in philosophy as knowing how to construct an argument to a positive conclusion or how to construct necessary and sufficient conditions that will not be open to obvious counter-examples. Again, having a sense of a burden of proof, of what people in general, or specialists working on the same problem, are likely to find plausible is more important than mastery of formal proof techniques.

Now the sense of the dialectical in philosophy is heightened by a sense of the inconclusiveness of philosophy not only *at* a time but *over* time. Putnam's 'Brains in a vat' has pretensions to solve a problem that Kant and Descartes both addressed, and someone who reads it without any exposure to the First Meditation or the First Critique will miss these pretensions and also part of the point of the paper. In a comparable way, someone who thinks that Descartes has satisfactorily answered scepticism may find that there are more dimensions to the problem of scepticism to be got out of ancient philosophy, some of which are untouched by Descartes. Harman says that there are no perennial problems in philosophy, and if that means that there is no single problem of scepticism preoccupying many philosophers from Carneades to Descartes to Putnam, perhaps that is right. But differences between Carneades' and Putnam's problems do not mean that they have *nothing* to do with one another, and a procession over time of versions of a problem can get close to what is meant by 'perennial problem'. If the age of a problem is a measure of its depth, then history of philosophy may be necessary for imparting to students a sense of the depth of a problem.

This way of finding a use for the history of philosophy may appear to go with a dispiriting picture of philosophy itself as an age-old struggle with questions that will always defeat us. But I have already conceded that the history of philosophy can also be a reservoir of systematic answers to questions, including ones that are still live. It is not just for acquiring a sense of what *cannot* be done that one turns to the history of philosophy. It is also a source of striking declarations of final solutions, and answers to questions of all kinds. Theories on a grand scale are still constructed: Davidson and Rawls give illustrations of two different kinds, but these are dwarfed by the systems of the past.

II

So far I have been arguing for the relevance of historical texts to work on current philosophical problems, and for the power that history of philosophy has of giving a sense of the persistence of some philosophical problems. I have been arguing against the view—held by, among others, Harman—that history of philosophy

stands to current philosophy as history of physics stands to physics. This is not yet an argument for the need for historical knowledge in seeing whether a solution to a philosophical problem is promising or possible. But I think such an argument can be given. To do so, I want to go back to an illustration that I used earlier of a current philosophical problem apparently open to a historically inspired solution. The current problem is that in moral philosophy of finding an apparatus that will strike a balance between, on the one hand, the fair demands of one's personal projects and attachments, and, on the other, the demands of impersonal morality, where these conflict. The possible historical solution to this problem is the Greek one of gearing moral requirements or morally required types of behaviour to a concept of living well or of human flourishing, rather than to the maximization of welfare or equal respect for persons. If doing right were definable in terms of living well, then certain kinds of self-sacrifice would not be morally required but morally objectionable, just as Williams has claimed. And the fact that some attachment or project was deeply important to a person would have moral significance and would not always be trumped by the importance of keeping prior commitments or of benefiting more people, whoever they are.

One difficulty with going as far back as the Greeks to reform moral philosophy along the lines Williams recommends is that some of the concepts in Plato and Aristotle belong to the prehistory of intuitions that favour impersonal moralities. We, living at the beginning of the twenty-first century, can make sense of an action or years of action being morally required, even though it leaves the agent miserable, but this is hard or impossible to make sense of if what is morally required always has to promote human flourishing: how can something that will make one miserable help one to flourish? For us, the concepts of what produces pleasure, of what contributes to a good human life, of what is morally required, of what benefits the agent; all of these *can* apply to the same action, but they need not always or typically apply together and, pre-philosophically, we can understand examples—such as Kant's example of the man drained of feeling by misfortune—in which a person's motivation for doing something they ought to do leaves us straining to say how doing what they ought to benefits them. In Aristotle this doesn't happen, and we cannot regain his viewpoint without conceptual surgery.

It is one thing to be given arguments showing that our intuitions or second-nature applications of concepts are wrong, as when our intuitions are hospitable to an arguably objectionable impersonal morality. It is another to wish that we had different intuitions and to reintroduce a theory fitting those, as *if* they were ours. Being able to tell the difference depends on learning a lesson from the history of philosophy. The lesson is taught in Kathleen Wilkes's 'The Good Man and the Good for Man':

Aristotle's claim is . . . then that the best man is the man who exercises his rational capacities to their fullest extent to *gain for himself the best life possible*. He arranges and patterns his entire way of life upon his deliberative reasoning about what short-term and long-term goals and interests will bring him most eudaimonia, taking into account his social, material, intellectual endowments and limitations.

This thesis must be understood properly. For unless we understand it, we may agree with the kind of disapproval that Ross, for one, has expressed of 'the self-absorption which is the bad side of Aristotle's ethics' and may interpret the truth that Aristotle's ethics is ultimately selfish as a condemnation rather than a description. The essential thing to realize is that Aristotle—and Plato—wrote at a time when the distinction between the moral (other-regarding) and prudential (self-regarding) virtues had not yet been framed, and, perhaps more importantly, that they would have denied any reality or importance to the distinction had it been explicitly presented to them.⁷

I do not believe that we can reacquire Aristotle's or Plato's innocence of this distinction, and it is possible that Williams's search for an alternative to impersonal morality is precisely a disguised wish to unlearn what is a settled part of our thinking.⁸ Being able to raise this possibility in the current debate over the supposed over-demandingness of ethics is partly made possible by the history of philosophy.

The illustration just given and the possibility it raises of not being able to redeploy philosophical theories from the past may seem to

⁷ In A. Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 354.

⁸ The phenomenon in philosophy of trying to unlearn distinctions we may be stuck with is not confined to ethics. Perhaps Strawson's attempt to relaunch the concept of persons or the Wittgensteinian interest in human beings can be seen as a wish to unlearn the mind-body distinction, with all the problems it creates. Like the distinction between living well and doing right, the mind-body distinction seems to me to be part of our conceptual equipment.

go Harman's way and not mine. It is Harman who cautions against looking in old sources for solutions to current philosophical problems. My own view is that it is hard to generalize in this area. It is possible that a moral philosophy reoriented along the lines of Williams's views would only strike an ancient philosopher as entirely natural; it does not follow that every attempt to redeploy historical apparatus will fall afoul of conceptual change. Philosophers interested in how far ethics should make use of virtue concepts do not have to start from scratch in their accounts of how the virtues are distinguished or defined. Aristotle and Aquinas are still valuable sources. In the same way, Descartes, Hume, and Kant have many things to say that are important to the way the first-person pronoun is supposed to be integrated into a general theory of reference.⁹ This is not to say that our problems are the same as those of the historical figures mentioned. But the question of how closely related the problems are is not to be settled by sweeping denials of the existence of perennial problems, or by sweeping denials of those denials. It will take historical investigation.

III

Although I think it is wrong to say 'No' to history of philosophy in even the measured way that Harman does, I agree that in Anglo-American philosophy as we now have it, history of philosophy has to fit in with a body of work in the rest of the subject that is not historical. History of philosophy has to fit in with this mainstream, rather than the other way round. One way in which it can fit in, I have been suggesting, is by inculcating skills of reading and interpretation that widen the range of reference of philosophers as they get on with the main business of responding as constructively as they can to a stock of currently recognized problems. This is not to say that the skills of reading and interpretation that are taught ought to make visible in historical texts *only* or *primarily* those things that help with a current agenda. It is also important for the agenda current in the period of the author, and for the author's own agenda, to be clear to the student. Often the old agendas will push

⁹ See the introduction of Q. Cassam (ed.), *Self-Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 210–15.

into prominence issues that are not currently being pursued, and will show that what matters to current philosophy about Aristotle or Hobbes or Descartes was not necessarily a major preoccupation of those philosophers themselves. Nevertheless, it is philosophically beneficial for both vantage-points to be available to the student. And it is important that some of the techniques for engaging with philosophers of the past be techniques not only for construing what they say, and identifying what they say as being of their time and place; the techniques should also permit students to decide whether what the texts say is well grounded or consistent or redeployable now.

This need not involve anachronism. Someone who is reading the *Objections and Replies to Descartes's Meditations* is surely within their rights to ask, taking the issues in their seventeenth-century senses, whether Descartes or the objector is right. Has the critic of Descartes hit on a genuine philosophical difficulty, and, if Descartes's reply is evasive or unsatisfactory, are there things Descartes *could* have said in reply that might have got him off the hook, though Descartes happened not to bring them up? These are the types of responses to the text that are inculcated in one's mainstream philosophical education and that are called for by reading a historical work as a piece of philosophy rather than as a document that gives some indication of the scientific and philosophical climate of the time in which it was written. One by-product of allowing ordinary philosophical reflexes to be engaged by a historical text is that one can come to see things in the text, or gaps in the text, that one would not have seen otherwise. But another possible effect is to be put in mind of a question or answer that one has been mulling over in another (possibly non-historical) philosophy course or in another (possibly non-historical) piece of philosophical writing. This sort of cross-fertilization is certainly not an unusual or unintended effect of including the history of philosophy in a philosophy course, and if it were rare, history of philosophy would not be contributing all it might to a philosophical education.

In this respect the history of philosophy is once again at odds with the history of physics. Although one needs knowledge of physics to understand a treatise or experiment from the history of physics, it is harder to see how the current agenda of physics is supposed to affect that of the historian of physics, or how a historical work is as naturally scientifically thought-provoking as some of the classics

of the history of philosophy are philosophically thought-provoking. There are historical texts that command much attention from specialist historians of philosophy *and* mainstream philosophers that are also assigned to beginners in philosophy and that are sometimes taught by philosophers with no great sophistication in the history of philosophy. Descartes's *Meditations* is perhaps the leading example here for philosophy as we now have it in the English-speaking world, but Plato's *Republic* also plays this sort of role, and so, too, sometimes, does Hume's *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*.

The thinking behind the use of these texts with beginners is that, thanks to the literary gifts of their authors, there is a lot in them that comes over to *any* attentive reader, even one confronting the text in translation hundreds or thousands of years after it was written. I am not sure that there are scientific texts strongly comparable to these texts that are canonical in the sciences, because I'm not sure that there are any scientific texts that are supposed to be accessible to the entirely uninitiated. Now many historians of philosophy seem to me to have qualms about the uses that are usually made of historical texts as canonical texts in philosophical training, for they think that much of the meaning of these texts is missed by people who are ignorant of the relevant historical period or the detailed philosophical background. One of the things that might be supposed to be learnt from the history of philosophy—in the same vein as the point that there are no perennial problems—is that there is no content in a text written at a time that transcends its time enough to convey a timeless message to a student audience. This thesis seems to me to be true in some form, but it has to square with its being possible for students to get quite a lot out of what they are reading with only a little coaxing from their teachers. This phenomenon—we might call it the *Meno* phenomenon—is quite common in my experience. And even if what explains it is not some other-worldly fit between the structure of the human mind and the set of philosophical questions that have come to be regarded as standard, there seems to me to be a sense in which the best philosophical texts from our time or the past do speak directly to a reason innate in us. This is what is engaged in students by works like the *Meditations*. Again, unlike textbooks that introduce physics or calculus to students, one can re-engage with and see things in the canonical texts I have mentioned from the beginning to the end of one's philosophical career. One reason why

this can happen is that the readings one is able to give them in the history of philosophy can deepen rather than revise entirely the readings one is able to give them as beginners.¹⁰

Even courses dominated by analytic philosophy can and do introduce the whole subject by means of Descartes or Hume. Is this a sort of loss of faith with analytic philosophy? There are conceptions of analytic philosophy according to which its subject-matter is human thought, abstractly and ahistorically conceived, and its method is the systematic investigation of the language that is used to express this thought.¹¹ According to this conception, which arguably accommodates ordinary language philosophy in Austin's style, Wittgensteinian grammatical investigation and therapy, the analysis of complexes into constituents à la Russell, and Quinean 'regimentations' of sentences in the vernacular, there is nothing historical about linguistic investigation, and so nothing historical about analytic philosophy. Accordingly, there is no need in philosophical training for a tour through the canonical texts of the great dead. A problem with this conception is that it excludes quite a lot of writing that anyone would want to include in analytic philosophy.¹² More accommodating conceptions, even when they do not invoke history, are consistent with the claims I have been making in this paper. For example, Dagfinn Føllesdall, who sees the limitations of the equation of all analytic philosophy with linguistic philosophy, has proposed that a strong concern with argument and justification is what is distinctive of analytic philosophy.

An analytic philosopher who presents and assesses a philosophical position asks, what *reasons* are there for accepting or rejecting this position? This question necessitates an investigation of what follows from the position at issue, and from what other positions it can be derived. How

¹⁰ This is not always so: some uses of the *Meditations* as a source-book of the main philosophical illusions is objectionable to historians of philosophy despite the importance of those so-called Cartesian illusions to the rest of philosophy. But it can be so. And even revisionary or caricature-mongering readings can be *philosophically* valuable. See my 'Caricature and Philosophical Relevance: The Case of Descartes', in Y. C. Zarka (ed.), *Comment écrire l'histoire de la philosophie?* (Paris: P.U.F., 2001).

¹¹ Dummett, *The Origins of Analytic Philosophy* (London: Duckworth, 1993).

¹² For a good, short summary of the many problems with this position, see H.-J. Glock's editor's introduction to *The Rise of Analytic Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997). See also P. M. S. Hacker, 'Analytic Philosophy: What, Whence, Whither?', in A. Biletski and A. Matar (eds.), *The Story of Analytic Philosophy: Plot and Heroes* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 3–34.

can one strengthen or invalidate this position? This is what is usually meant when one asks: what precisely does this position mean? One then discovers that minute differences in the way a position is formulated determine whether it is acceptable or not.¹³

This view of analytic philosophy as locating ‘positions’ within logical space raises the question of where the ‘positions’ come from. ‘The history of the subject’ is part of the answer. It is also from the history of the subject and from the ongoing challenge to and refinement of ‘positions’ over time that one can acquire one’s sense of what an inadequate position is, and what makes one position better justified than another.

¹³ Dagfinn Føllesdall, ‘Analytic Philosophy: What Is It and Why Should One Engage in It?’, in Glock (ed.), *Rise of Analytic Philosophy*, pp. 7–8.

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Is the History of Philosophy Good for Philosophy?

CATHERINE WILSON



Asked by the *Philosophical Review* in 1992 to provide an assessment of relations between philosophy and the history of philosophy, the late Margaret Wilson noted the new intensity of effort in the historiography of philosophy, the proliferation of new editions and translations, commentaries and companions, conferences, and journals. She asked what this mobilization of historians could mean for the broader discipline of philosophy:

The study of the history of western philosophy . . . has become a thriving international ‘industry.’ But how much reason is there to think that all this activity is likely to bear *philosophical* fruit? Do historians today normally see themselves as joined in common cause with their non-historian colleagues—the cause, that is, of advancing philosophy per se? To what extent is the increasingly professionalized activity in historical studies actually relevant to the concerns of contemporary philosophers? Do contemporary philosophers even care about the positions of their (more or less) glorious predecessors—however carefully or conscientiously interpreted? And to what extent should they care?¹

Wilson insisted that the last question could be answered in the affirmative. Non-historians concerned with advancing their own accounts and theories would be helped to do so by taking advantage of the specialized inquiries of historians of philosophy. Her explanation of these potential benefits was, however, disconcerting. It stated a reason for non-historians to engage with the history and historiography of philosophy, but it cannot be said that it supplied a motive. Indeed, it supplied them with a powerful disincentive to investigate the history of their various fields.

¹ Margaret Wilson, ‘History of Philosophy in Philosophy Today; and the Case of Sensible Qualities’, repr. in *Ideas and Mechanism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 455–95, p. 456.

Wilson believed that those who ignored the history of their subject were condemned to reproduce the posits and re-enact the old dialectical sequences of their predecessors. '[O]ne way in which historical understanding can contribute to philosophy', she said, 'is to help us see how traditional and still influential conceptions of philosophical problems may be bound up with assumptions that require fresh evaluation today,'² and she gave as an example the literature on Locke's primary–secondary quality distinction. Appreciating the various ways in which the distinction has been understood could, she argued, induce philosophers of perception to rethink the relationship of their theories to scientific theories of vision.

As Wilson saw it, there were two schools of Locke interpretation. The old school assumed that Locke, as a representative of the new way of ideas, intended to exhibit in immediate perceptual experience or deduce from reflection on immediate perceptual experience just such a distinction. The new school maintained that the distinction was borrowed from the corpuscularians Descartes and Boyle, who were hypothesizing certain fundamental entities required to save the appearances in chemistry, medicine, and optics. Wilson sided with the new school. For it was now well understood that seventeenth-century philosophers were advocating a view of qualities and their relations to the mind consistent with their mechanical approach to nature. One of the 'assumptions that require fresh evaluation today', in Wilson's view, was whether philosophical distinctions and positions can be the outgrowth of explanatory theories in the physical sciences, as in Locke's writings they were.

But modern philosophers who find the primary–secondary quality distinction worth preserving are not engaged in the long-outdated enterprise of determining what theory of sensible qualities is most consistent with corpuscularianism. Are they, then, articulating a theory of colour that is consistent with the best explanatory theory of modern physiological psychology? If so, what is the difference between a philosophical theory and a scientific theory? Wilson concluded that modern philosophers working on sensible qualities were reacting to the last person they had read, but had no clear idea what they were actually trying to do.

² Margaret Wilson, 'History of Philosophy in Philosophy Today; and the Case of Sensible Qualities', repr. in *Ideas and Mechanism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 455–95, p. 456.

Wilson's point might be developed as follows: Locke and his contemporaries were quasi-empiricists, weaving together elements of incompatible traditions (in this case, ancient atomism and the old ontology of qualities and substances), conjecture, contemporary optical theory, and the results of experiment (mixing chemical solutions, pounding almonds) to manufacture philosophical theories, including theories of colour. By today's standards, this is *bricolage* or proto-science. And we can appreciate that no account of primary and secondary qualities is defensible, because the world isn't organized in such a way (made up of hard, massy 'atoms') as to make this distinction sustainable. But if we give up on the possibility of a philosophical account of colour, the rest of philosophy becomes vulnerable to the accusation that it too is *bricolage* and proto-science—a bit of intuition here, a bit of scientific ontology there, mixed together with a dash of tradition. What do philosophers have to say about reference, now that we have formal logic and linguistics? Or ethics, now that we have anthropology, economics, sociology, and psychology?

Far from enticing philosophers of sensible qualities to the study of their ancestors, then, Wilson's suggestion supplied a reason for them to avert their eyes from the whole messy business of the history of theories of colour. It is courageous but perhaps ill-advised to ask contemporary philosophers to study the history of philosophy in order to appreciate the fundamentally confused character of their enterprise. Working philosophers rarely want to evaluate their own assumptions. Usually, those assumptions, even if borrowed from the current literature, are serving them very well. They chiefly want to defend their assumptions, draw inferences from them, and challenge the inferences that other philosophers draw from *their* assumptions. So the question whether the increasingly professionalized and specialized history of philosophy has any importance for non-historians is still in need of an answer, one that does not put the capacity for foundational self-criticism of the average working philosopher so severely to the test.

While Margaret Wilson's view that science–philosophy relations are crucial to the answer, and that what used to be called 'philosophy' has diverged into experimental and theoretical science and philosophy, seems entirely right, neither claim implies that contemporary philosophical inquiry is necessarily confused. Philosophy is largely, if not exclusively, concerned with the re-processing

of experiential *and* scientific truth (or 'truth', just as you like) into an intuitively graspable picture, often with normative implications, and also with making clear precisely what inferences cannot be drawn from empirical results and what questions remain unanswered. This was its task in the seventeenth century, when fields such as epistemology, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of science came into existence, and in the eighteenth century, when modern moral theory came into existence, and it is still its task. While it is sometimes suggested that philosophy is concerned with the regimentation of our intuitions about the world, not our knowledge of the world, this view seems untenable. We cannot both admit that our intuitions about the world may be delusory and suppose that our re-processing of them is worthwhile. Our intuitions are worth systematizing only to the extent that they constitute, or probably constitute, knowledge. The natural and to some extent the social sciences are our chief, if not our only, sources of knowledge, and contact with contemporary science is necessary for philosophy to evolve.

This claim might sound like scientism of the most egregious sort. But what is envisioned is not a handmaidenly role for philosophy, the role that Locke modestly assigned to himself. And the view that the role of the philosopher is to forage for material to shape into his or her particular construction does not exclude the history of philosophy. For scientific data have no value to philosophers unless there are pre-existing philosophical schemata on which to hang them and to adapt and remould. An epistemologist, a philosopher of mind, or an ethicist, for that matter, who tries to operate without a set of inherited philosophical categories (*binary* categories at that) can only produce a *précis* or a synthesis of scientific work, not a true piece of epistemology, philosophy of mind, or ethics. A philosophical theory—and such theories are valued, both by their inventors and by their audiences—is a set of doctrines expressed in a familiar language, the language of truth and error, appearance and reality, obligations and permissions, and so on, and forced into consistency. Scientists may or may not have some use for our re-processed versions of their discoveries, but non-scientists do; our editors and publishers leave us in no doubt about this. The history of philosophy has accordingly a discipline-centring role to play in philosophy, though this is not necessarily to say that non-historians should care more about or engage more with the history of philosophy.

Arguably, they should leave the history of philosophy for the most part to the specialist, and give over the time saved to contact with the natural and social sciences.

The remainder of this essay falls into three parts. Part I discusses some disciplinary features of the history of philosophy as a subfield of philosophy. Part II recounts some broad features of the development of the field and the self-understanding of its practitioners. Part III concerns the relation of historians and non-historians in philosophy departments and takes up a few points from Tom Sorell's discussion of the uses of history in moral theory, in the preceding chapter.

I

Anglophone historians of modern philosophy know the following facts about their field. It has only recently emerged as a specialized subdiscipline; it has in a few years acquired standards for argumentation and scholarship that are as strong, and, in the case of scholarship standards, perhaps stronger than the corresponding requirements in other subdisciplines. Further, it falls short on some objective indicators of prestige.

There is no Oxford Chair or Reader in the history of modern philosophy, as there are Chairs and Readers in logic, moral philosophy, philosophy of mind, applied ethics, and metaphysics. The history of philosophy Chair has traditionally been occupied by a specialist in ancient philosophy. The American Philosophical Association can fill a ballroom with a symposium on virtue ethics, but not with a symposium on Locke. The highest-ranked philosophy departments in North America produce few Ph.D.s who acquire visible and lucrative positions in the history of modern philosophy. The history of philosophy is more feminized than is epistemology or metaphysics, as if more suitable for patient and detail-minded persons.

These observations may sound harsh, and they are less true than they once were; but they are hardly contestable. The cohort that received its postgraduate training in the 1970s was not steeped in the study of the philosophy of the past. It is interesting to note that many of the participants in the conference on which this book is based, including Dan Garber, Susan James, Tom Sorell, and myself,

did not write B.Phil., D.Phil., or Ph.D. theses in the history of philosophy. Our education emphasized mathematical and philosophical logic and philosophy of language, epistemology, moral and political philosophy, and philosophy of science. The few students who were writing historical Ph.D. theses seemed to belong to a different intellectual world from ours, and they could expect to be narrowly queried in the job market-place as to whether they were interested in philosophy or only in its history. Intellectual history, or the history of ideas, was seen as sharply distinguished from philosophy.

Historians, as many of us saw it, were strangely interested in someone else's wrong theory. We were interested in getting our own right theory, whether it concerned the reference of proper names, confirmation, determinism, consequentialism, the existence of mathematical objects, equality and justice, or one of any of a number of such topics, or at least in making our own significant emendation to an existing theory. Our work was exciting and absorbing, in the way that mathematical proof, scientific discovery, and puzzle solving are exciting and absorbing, and in ways that communicate themselves easily. The history of philosophy did not seem to contain well-defined, solvable problems. While some historical texts were acknowledged to be useful or even essential for getting a grip on some basic and perhaps solvable problems, such as personal identity, and for learning how to recognize argumentative structures that might recur in contemporary arguments, a good undergraduate education, it was assumed, should have taken care of that. We were brought up to have a strong preference for research perceived as involving invention and discovery over research perceived as involving appreciation and criticism of what someone else had said. Although we approached our non-historical problems through a close study of recent texts—that is, someone else's wrong theory—and although we were no more insightful or inventive than the history of philosophy students, our view of the historian was something like the view of the observer of the stocking-machine that Denis Diderot describes in his *Encyclopedia* article 'Stockings'. Diderot says:

Those who don't have enough genius to invent something similar but who have enough intelligence to understand it, fall into profound astonishment at the sight of the practically infinite number of little

components of which the stocking machine is composed and of the great number of their diverse and extraordinary movements.³

The historian seemed to be just such an observer of another philosopher's problem-generating-and-solving machine. Awed by the complexity of Descartes's *Meditations*, Locke's *Essay*, or Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, or one of the other great machines of history, the historian tried to understand and explain how stockings came out of the machine, what design features of the machine were especially praiseworthy, and which were sub-optimal or idly spinning wheels. While no one doubted that this took specialized training and intelligence, 'twould be a nobler thing to invent a stocking-machine than to understand how one worked. And one might as well have hung a sign around one's neck that said 'I am a mediocrity' as admit to an interest in the philosophical machines of Schopenhauer or Malebranche.

Esteem for Philosopher X, one might observe, is contingent on there being commentators who are inspired to try to understand and explain X's invention to others, to praise and criticize its design features. This activation of other minds is necessary and sufficient for fame and fortune. But it is rare that a work that is a commentary on another work, rather than a commentary on the world, attracts a large body of commentary of its own. While citation rates for certain historiographical studies may seem impressive, they do not signify the same kind of engagement as that which is possible with the semi-enigmatic and indefinitely rereadable 'originary' text. Commentaries are useful guidebooks to the landscape, not landscapes to be explored.

The notion that historians are intellectually inferior to non-historians is on the face of it absurd. On any formal parameter—originality, cogency, coherence, logical acuity—there is no reason for non-historian B to outperform historian A, unless further assumptions about selection and self-sorting are built in. But it is easy to build in these assumptions. A hierarchy of valuations can influence the composition of a field and can distort judgements regarding individuals as well. If a subdiscipline is judged to be of lesser interest and importance, the best and brightest students will not be encouraged to enter it, thereby altering its composition. Those who

³ Denis Diderot, *Textes choisies de l'Encyclopédie*, 2nd edn. (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1962), p. 61.

do enter it will be noted to have entered a field not populated by the best and the brightest. Gilbert Harman's celebrated stance against strengthening curricular requirements in the history of philosophy at Princeton in the 1980s, extensively discussed by Sorell in his chapter, did not reflect a blind prejudice. It can be explained as the result of an understandable preference for originary versus commentary work, combined with a realistic assessment of what administrative decisions would most likely ensure good career outcomes for students.

Given this state of affairs, it is remarkable how many well-known philosophers of the 1970s and 1980s worked and wrote on both non-historical and historical philosophical topics. The presumption of a divide between originary and secondary philosophy, with the greater value assigned to invention versus commentary, did not prevent first-rate minds from being attracted to the history of philosophy.⁴ Another highly influential group worked in indifference to the distinction between intellectual history and the history of philosophy.⁵ After reaching its nadir in the 1960s and early 1970s, the fortunes of the subfield began to rise. Most of the younger generation of historians of philosophy have received a level of training in languages, archival research, and comparison of texts that bears no comparison to that of the preceding generation of virtual autodidacts in the historiography of philosophy.

II

The study of the history of philosophy has passed through several phases, separated by several turning-points. For a time, historical texts were conceived as sources of transmissible wisdom contained in *teachings* and *doctrines*; later they were seen as a repository of interesting, though mostly dubious or unsustainable, *distinctions* and *arguments*; still later, they were seen as articulating philosophical *systems*, understood as context-bound, para-scientific theoretical representations. While current history of philosophy

⁴ Including Jonathan Bennett, John Cottingham, George Pitcher, Bernard Williams, Harry Frankfurt, Barry Stroud, and many others.

⁵ Including Richard Popkin, Harry Bracken, John Yolton, Ed Curley, Jerome Schneewind, Richard Rorty, and Quentin Skinner.

publications still fall into each of these categories, the third conception can be fairly said to be dominant.⁶

1. *Transmissible wisdom*

There have always been readers who look into philosophy books for political and personal guidance, and the old philosophers have more to offer on this score because of the multiplicity of advisory roles they formerly filled. Eminent representatives of this historiographical tradition were Richard McKeon at the University of Chicago, the editor and proponent of Aristotle, and Alan Bloom, the Plato exegete. Modern philosophy had, at the same institution, Leo Strauss. Strauss propounded a programme of interpretation according to which many of the important philosophers of the past were opponents of democracy, superstition, equality, and common opinion, threatened by censorship, but able to communicate with astute readers. On this view, philosophy was indispensable in the formation of the class consciousness of the upcoming ruling elite.

The history of philosophy as transmissible wisdom was attacked, root and branch, by Quentin Skinner⁷ in a landmark article in which he made the following points: (1) Belief formation depends on a variety of cultural sources besides the writings of canonical philosophers. (2) The social and political problems of contemporary life are different from those faced by philosophers of the past. Past philosophers do not have advice for us. (3) The canonical philosophers no more intended to talk to each other than to talk to us. They were speaking to particular audiences, whose composition it is essential to determine to find out what they meant. (4) The historian's aim is the proper interpretation of a text, where this means understanding what the author meant to communicate to his own audience, given the range of their background assumptions and

⁶ A fourth phase of postmodernist commentary 'deconstructs' philosophers' writings as *unsystems*, as incoherent bodies of semi-empirical fantasy, permeated by anxiety, desire, resentment, and other conflicting and compensatory impulses. Examples of the genre are Michel Foucault on Bentham, Gilles Deleuze on Spinoza, Michelle le Doeuff on Rousseau and Sartre, Gerard Edelman and the Boehme brothers on Kant, Hiram Caton on Descartes, etc.

⁷ Quentin Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', originally published in *History and Theory*, 8 (1969), 3–53; repr. James Tully (ed.), *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 29–67.

presuppositions. Skinner found particularly detestable the habit of mining historical sources for material confirming the commentator's own political and moral prejudices.

Skinner preserved a shred of the philosophy-as-wisdom tradition, arguing that the study of past thinkers can be useful to us. Acquaintance with different systems of belief might have a salutary effect, he thought, in helping us to understand the contingency of our present arrangements. Our current array of presentable beliefs and viable institutions represents a series of selections, each of them made at certain forks in the road when competing visions of politics and society were in play. Acquaintance with the variety of possible, and once actual, beliefs and institutions undermines grandiose notions of destiny and inevitability and makes room for rational assessment.

2. *Distinctions and arguments*

Ordinary language philosophy, advanced in different ways by Wittgenstein, Austin, and Ryle, focused a new kind of analytical interest on historical texts, which they treated as nests of conceptual confusion and misappropriation of language. The charge was that past philosophers had introduced or claimed for systematic philosophy terms such as 'see', 'voluntary', and 'self', indifferent to their range of uses and meanings, later introducing neologisms such as 'sense-datum'. Imitating scientists, but without having a genuine technical terminology, they had distorted and circumscribed ordinary usage, and their 'theoretical' statements were, as a result, unintelligible or false. If a philosophical theory of vision entails that we do not see stars (since any star might have ceased to exist hundreds or millions of years ago), it is absurd. Philosophers, it was argued, cannot advance theories; they can at best clarify ordinary usage, showing the range and flexibility of our language and dispelling the puzzlement that arises when we attempt to theorize about our experience with the help of these terms of art.

The ordinary language movement entailed a rejection of the philosophy-as-wisdom tradition. But the analytic philosophy that succeeded it embraced theory construction, representing itself as a positive enterprise that could test propositions against 'ordinary' intuition to reveal the underlying systematicity of our thinking. Past philosophers, it was now thought, had been engaged in the same

constructive enterprise. They had produced a range of arguments for their views, some good, but many problematic or obviously bad. Their projects were well motivated, but it was important to analyse their arguments regarding perception, the will, causation, and so on, to avoid reproducing their mistakes.

What Germans call the *Wahrheitsanspruch*—the aspiration to or claim on the truth—has always been a feature of philosophy, but this truth had been conceived as static and as discovered only by geniuses in the view of philosophy as transmissible wisdom. The new version of philosophical truth posited it as the result of a slow process that replaced less adequate theories by more adequate theories, theories that fit ordinary intuitions better. Philosophy was a progressive discipline, which sought truth by refuting previous error. (Karl Popper had shown that refutation was easier than confirmation.) One did not have to be a genius to make genuine discoveries, and other philosophers could help.

This new understanding of the discipline reflected several developments. Wartime governments understood the transformative results that could be obtained quickly by organizing intelligent people and paying them to think, and post-war governments invested heavily in advanced education. Formal logic, for reasons not unrelated to wartime mobilization, made unprecedented progress between the time of Russell and Whitehead and the late 1970s. This was an era in which philosophy achieved what Tom Sorell refers to in his chapter as definite results in philosophical and formal logic—proofs of consistency and completeness, Church's thesis, Gödel's theorem, the Barcan formula, rigid designators, the behaviour of referring expressions in opaque contexts, and so on. Series such as the International Library of Scientific Method and the Arguments of the Philosophers reinforced the idea that analytic philosophy was able to make discoveries outside the laboratory, as logic and mathematics did. Another feature of those years was the organization of an academic meritocracy. No longer did self-selection or socio-economic class determine who became a professor. Entry was determined by the assessment of young philosophers and their performance on various tests. Skills that were easily tested for, such as a facility with logic, were taken as diagnostic of overall ability. The Great Man Exam used at Princeton as a screening device at the end of the first term (sparking debates over whether Frege was sufficiently old and great) was not aimed at

eliminating from the programme insensitive readers of historical texts. It was the exception that proved the rule; once beyond it, a student need have no more to do with the history of philosophy.

In short, the historiography of modern philosophy was not a favoured subfield in the third quarter of the twentieth century. The intellectual gratification of non-utilitarian basic inquiry involving tractable problems, the contagious excitement of group problem-solving enterprises, the relative ease of engaging with and assessing the quality of a non-historical mind in the newly minted meritocratic university, and the lack of appeal of the earlier image of the philosopher as venerable greybeard and wise counsellor all favoured non-historical inquiry.

3. *Belief systems*

The rise in the fortunes of history of philosophy parallels the rise in the fortunes of the history of science. Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, first published in 1962, made the history of science interesting, in a way it had not been earlier. It stimulated the formation of departments and publications, brought forward charismatic figures, and de-feminized the discipline. Kuhn's book probably accomplished nearly as much for the history of philosophy as it did for the history of science in the anglophone world.

Structure was invention and discovery, not commentary. Kuhn claimed to have found out how science progressed. There were paradigms; these replaced each other through a process of anomaly accumulation, the proliferation of rival theories, Gestalt switches, and the shuffling off of the mortal coil by the stubbornly resistant. A point that came through strongly in *Structure* was this: a philosopher who had studied closely the history of science had been able to determine how science—our science, modern science—made contact with the world and supplied truth (or again 'truth'). Those of us who had been trying to unravel the paradoxes of confirmation, settle on the necessary and sufficient conditions of causal determination, or evaluate psychologism in mathematics hadn't even come close.

Indeed, we learned from reading *Structure* that what we analytic philosophers were doing had a name, and it was not a glamorous name. We were engaged in a form of thought-experimental 'normal science'. We were not working out the true theories of reference, the

existence of mathematical objects, and causation. We were not even emulating mathematicians, who produced stable results. We were solving puzzles in eventually-to-be-discarded paradigms. We were accumulating anomalies. We were toilers, obeying the strict protocols of our discipline, and sticking to the problems that had been assigned to us by our elders.

Kuhn's book had, in short, the effect of knocking the ordinary enterprise down to size. At the same time, it ennobled past efforts. The great scientists of the past were seen to have had coherent world-views into which they had tried to fit the data available to them, and the historian's research focused on reassembling and representing their systems as paradigmatic, on finding a theory of the text. This approach to the history of science had been anticipated by Ludwig Fleck, by Walter Pagel, and by H el ene Metzger. European historians of philosophy took it for granted. But Kuhn introduced these ideas into mainstream anglophone philosophy in a way that was capable of preserving a good deal of the distinction between intellectual history, which dealt with movements, themes, influence, reaction, and *belles lettres*, and the history of science. Nor was the history of science mere reportage and evaluation: the historian studied, narrowly, a thing-in-the-world, a belief system, its rise, consolidation, transformation, internal tensions, external inadequacies, collapse, and replacement. What one said about these matters was of a theoretical nature; it could be true or false. And this possibility opened up corresponding possibilities in the historiography of modern philosophy that had not been there earlier.⁸

Meanwhile, there was a drive to understand the history of modern philosophy as directly related to the seventeenth-century Scientific Revolution. The big-picture studies of Edwin Burt and Charles Coulton Gillespie gave way to the more detailed examinations of Peter Alexander and Maurice Mandelbaum on Boyle and Locke. Gerd Buchdahl surveyed the field from Descartes to Kant in *Metaphysics and Modern Science*, and John Schuster's underground classic on Descartes's formation as a theorist of the natural world offered a new mode of access to familiar texts that

⁸ The analogies between new approaches to the history of science and the possibility of new approaches to the history of philosophy were noted by Richard Rorty in 'The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres', in Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (eds.), *Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 49–76, p. 50.

had nothing in common with the wisdom-seeking or analytical traditions. In accord with Skinnerian principles, the aim was to reconstruct (rationally reconstruct, it was sometimes said) the edifice in the mind of the author, to understand why it had seemed, for a variety of reasons, well constructed and sound, and to make the best possible case for it. Donald Davidson's principle of charity was sometimes invoked. Like an anthropologist faced with an alien belief system that she is tempted to dismiss as superstitious nonsense, the historian is advised to try to interpret her subject's statements so that the majority of his beliefs can be seen to be reasonable.

The interpretive-contextual approach is now strongly favoured by journal editors, by supervisors, and by many students in the field. There is a strong sense that this methodology has given the field not only stability and standards, but purpose. At the same time, the elevation of the history of modern philosophy into a specialist discipline in which hard-won knowledge of historical context plays a decisive role in interpretation has come at a price: namely, a certain disconnection from the other subfields of philosophy.

III

Tom Sorell, in his chapter in this volume, takes up the question of the relation of historians of philosophy to other philosophers, arguing that 'the history of philosophy is useful and relevant even when philosophy is thought to be ... the activity of solving ahistorically formulated problems'. Like Margaret Wilson, Sorell is interested in this context in the place of historians in philosophy departments and their contribution to progress in the wider discipline, not in defending the historiography of philosophy as an autonomous, self-justifying, specialist activity.

It is easier to make the case that historians benefit from their contact with non-historians and by their non-historical training and academic experience than to make the reverse case. Current pre-occupations direct attention to unexplored texts and parts of texts. Externalism in the philosophy of language has motivated a rereading of parts of Leibniz's long-neglected *New Essays*; problems of content in the philosophy of mind lead back to Descartes's theory of perception; virtue ethics to Book II of Hume's *Treatise*; and

tolerance and repression to Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, suggesting new treatments of those texts. Historical scholarship, *pace* Skinner, is revived by approaching old texts with modern problems in mind. But do non-historians benefit from their contact with specialist historians? This is less clear.

Philosophy students all have to read and discuss *something*, as Sorell points out, and this something should be standardized, so that conversation is focused and rewarding. Primary works in the history of philosophy offer an entrée into problems of language, mind, and morals, and are so standardized that little time has to be spent deciding which authors and even which books and chapters are worthwhile. The student, it is thought, acquires transferable skills by having to analyse and criticize the distinctions and arguments contained in them, and a future non-historian can learn by imitation how to construct and defend his own theory and spot the weaknesses in others' theories. Argument patterns that recur frequently in contemporary texts can be mastered: for example, the sceptical argument from the common element according to which if A and B are subjectively indistinguishable events, objects, or experiences as far as S is concerned, S is precluded from truly asserting that A and not B is occurring, is there, or is happening to S. And, as Sorell points out, a student who reads Putnam's discussion of 'brains-in-a-vat' without realizing its relationship to Descartes's evil demon argument has missed something.

But it is not clear that the student who understands the Putnam paper well but has never heard of the evil demon has a philosophical deficit, as opposed to a cultural deficit. And we don't really know whether the development of analytical skills proceeds faster when historical texts are used. The standardization provided by the canon is useful, but it is not clear that the rigidity of the common core is really conducive to philosophical progress. Why not think that if we wish to make real progress in the non-historical branches of philosophy, we should minimize the exposure of students at all levels to its history, precisely as scientists and mathematicians do? Why should we imbue them with errors, prejudices, and misleading schemata, allowing these to lodge in their minds, like Bacon's idols? Locke, Leibniz, and Kant, after all, were engaged with the sciences of their time: medicine, economics, mechanics, anthropology, the science of life, and cosmology. Why not simply replace the history component of philosophy courses with an empirical component?

In epistemology, one could use, say, Dretske and Lehrer *plus* some more recent work from the empirical theory of perception and the theory of judgement. In ethics, one could read some Scanlon or Nagel *plus* some up-to-date sociology, economics, and game-theory. This recommendation cannot be dismissed out of hand. Further arguments for keeping the history of philosophy books on the shelf, and in the curriculum, and for keeping historians of philosophy in philosophy departments are needed.

For convenience, we might distinguish three levels of engagement with the history of philosophy: casual, curricular, and specialist. By 'casual engagement' is meant the kind of reading that involves forays into Hume, Kant, or Aristotle, for mental stimulation and in the hope of finding a provocative thought or a striking or illustrative quotation. That reason is by and large the slave of the passions: that we do not observe the necessity or power alleged in causal relations, that our minds are better known than our bodies, that there exists a social contract limiting aggression, that the good man can or cannot be harmed, and other such interesting ideas abound in the old texts, and are still worth thinking about. One can imagine a natural scientist reading the history of her field for comparable *aperçus*, or deriving inspiration from trying to follow Newton's or Pasteur's treatment of a problem in their own words.

Most non-historians find this casual use of the canonical texts at least occasionally rewarding. It does not require any study of the secondary literature, any consultation with specialists, or any attempt to understand a system as a whole. The books needed are all in the most modest college library, if they are not on one's shelf already. Casual engagement with the history of philosophy requires no investment or commitment; it does not put the history of philosophy into competition with other subdisciplines. Curricular engagement does require investment and commitment, and is accordingly problematic.

One legitimate reason for curricular inclusion of the history of philosophy at all levels, postgraduate as well as undergraduate, is that it is an established subfield for future specialists, along with decision theory, philosophy of mind, aesthetics, and so on. Some students will eventually want to enter it; they cannot come to the realization that they want to enter it unless exposed to intensive teaching. Yet this argument for strong investment in the teaching

of the history of philosophy by every philosophy faculty has its limitations. It might be pointed out that the history of mathematics and the history of physics are interesting and worthy disciplines to which some students will always be drawn. But it is not incumbent on every mathematics and physics department to provide substantial numbers of courses in the history of the discipline. These offerings can be provided by a very few institutions that can specialize in the history of science. And one might propose that the history of philosophy should be treated in the same way, leaving most departments principally in the business of teaching non-historical courses and supervising non-historical students.

What militates to some extent against this proposal is the centrality of the history of philosophy for establishing philosophy's role *vis-à-vis* the sciences, as suggested earlier. Mathematics and physics do not need to remain connected with their own histories, because their methodology is secure and autonomous. Mathematicians process thoughts into mathematical theories and proofs; scientists process experimentally derived data into scientific forms. But philosophers are incapable of processing data, including the data of scientific theories, into philosophy without historical anchoring. Historical texts establish the outlines of a philosophical problem, marking it off from empirical problems, practical or social problems, and also from insoluble problems that do not belong to philosophy at all, such as the meaning of life, that no existing set of methods is adequate to address.

At the same time, the hiring, outfitting, and maintenance of specialists seems to go well beyond what is required to define the discipline. The history of philosophy is an expensive subfield, requiring travel to collections and the purchase of expensive out-of-print sources. The hiring of specialists implies interaction and some degree of competition and co-operation. Historians and non-historians inhabiting the same department are expected to attend one another's talks and take an interest in one another's work, to select and examine students together, come to agreement on hiring priorities, develop curricula with both historical and non-historical readings lists, and so on.

The question of integration has become quite pressing. For the introduction of more exacting standards of scholarship into the historiography of philosophy has undoubtedly had the effect of alienating it from 'the rest of philosophy'. Ideally, one can understand

and assess to some extent the main thesis of a colloquium paper without having to spend half a day in the library to see if what the speaker said could possibly be true. Yet few colloquium papers in the history of philosophy that are not framed in the strictly analytic tradition of detecting failed entailments can actually be assessed by persons trained at spotting content-independent errors of reasoning. Non-historians in different fields in the same department can often help each other with their work; whereas helping behaviour between historians and non-historians does not manifest itself as readily. However, the argument that historians are difficult to understand, evaluate, and be helped by, and that they should not be invited to give talks or be hired in large numbers is not convincing, in so far as most established subfields, including some of the most prestigious, pose the same problems.

But what use are historians? Nietzsche, a brilliant literary historian himself, suggested they were toxic: 'There is a degree of insomnia, of rumination, of historical sense which injures every living being and finally destroys it, be it a man, a people or a culture.' But precisely the reverse is true. The introduction of new data revitalizes exhausted lines of inquiry, and new data can be historical, in the form of facts about how people formerly lived and behaved and what they formerly thought, as well as non-historical. Sorell describes our understanding of the problem of exigency in moral theory as deepened through the reintroduction of historical texts into the discussion. A recent line of criticism is dedicated to showing that Kantianism and utilitarianism are exigent moralities that require too much of human beings, whether it is perfect veracity or impartial concern for everyone's interests. In Aristotle, Sorell points out, ethical discourse is organized around the notion of personal well-being, which virtuous conduct is thought to maximize, not around the notion of universal laws and regulations governing behaviour: 'Even if Aristotle is not an antidote to impersonal moral philosophy,' he says, 'it may be that there is some route to an antidote from Aristotle's concept of living well, broadly but perhaps anachronistically interpreted.' Not only does the appeal to a great past philosopher give resistance to exigent moralities' legitimacy—for the fact that this rival framework is available shows that it continues to be *interesting* and to some extent compelling—it supplies content.

This point suggests a role for what might be called ‘non-aligned’ history of philosophy. Some moral philosophers write in a way relatively uninflected by the history of the subject. Others, such as Annette Baier, Barbara Hermann, Christine Korsgaard, and Charles Taylor, understand themselves as developers of a particular tradition in ethics—Humean, Kantian, or Hegelian. A third group of moral philosophers appeals individually to the history of the subject without being exclusive advocates of any particular philosophers; they are ‘non-aligned’. At the same time, they rely on the Lákatos–Skinner conception of history as a repository of undeveloped alternatives, abandoned research programmes, that can be recovered and revived.

Because they are not patient developers and expositors of a tradition, non-aligned moral theorists who appeal to past philosophers face criticisms of superficiality or impressionism by more specialized historians. Yet their recollection of discarded and alien systems is effective. A memorable example is Bernard Williams’s discussion of archaic concepts of agency in *Shame and Necessity*⁹ and his suggestion that the notion of character-as-fate captures a feature of our ethical lives that was not simply forgotten but denied and overwritten. Elsewhere, Williams has tried to show how the dominant theoretical frameworks of moral philosophy have been shaped by the scientific (Cartesian) ideal of total systems and—perhaps—by the social and colonial impositions of the British Empire.¹⁰ There is no inevitability to the canon; it is the product of selection, accumulated decisions, the weight and authority of the past being only one factor, if a heavy one. By recalling and reclaiming earlier traditions, the suggestion is, we can correct for some modernist excesses in moral theory—its demandingness, hyperrationality, and insistence on uniformity of conduct—that are the philosophical equivalent of the boring International Style in office buildings.

This notion of how non-aligned historical inquiry can contribute to modern theory is compelling, but several cautions are in order.

⁹ Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

¹⁰ Williams describes utilitarianism with some justification as ‘Government House Morality’; on the basis for the connection see Eric Stokes, *The British Utilitarians and India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982).

First, non-aligned historical inquiry encourages selective reading for self-justifying purposes of the sort proscribed by Skinner for good reason; it is incompatible with an objective approach to the study of historical texts and is frequently ideological and obscurantist. To the extent that moral theory is anyway prescriptive, this objection may not be considered very powerful, but morally persuasive texts should not work by rhetorical means alone. Second, if moral frameworks are historically contingent, argument is needed to show why earlier, discarded ones are actually better than later ones. Sorell quotes in this context the late Kathleen Wilkes's remark that it is essential to realize 'that Aristotle—and Plato—wrote at a time when the distinction between the moral (other-regarding) and prudential (self-regarding) virtues had not yet been framed, and, perhaps more importantly, that they would have denied any reality or importance to the distinction had it been explicitly presented to them'.¹¹ This can be construed as an invitation in the spirit of Williams (whether or not Wilkes meant to imply this) that we are freer than we think to reject the Kantian distinction between morality and self-advancement and the debasement of the latter.

Sorell comments that we moderns cannot so easily forget what we have been taught. '[I]t is possible', he says, 'that Williams's search for an alternative to impersonal morality is precisely a disguised wish to unlearn what is a settled part of our thinking.' There are reasons, after all, why virtue ethics came to seem inadequate as popular culture, democracy, and capitalism gained strength. At the same time, it is easy to come away from Williams's writings with the mistaken idea that impartial beneficence and dutiful conduct are late-arriving preoccupations in ethics, and that the conflict most of us feel between selfish impulses and differential concern for kith and kin and the demands posited in modern moral theories is an outgrowth of Kant's and Bentham's enthusiasm for punishment and total systems. This is untrue—as only historical research can show. Impersonal ideals have always occasioned psychological disquiet; yet rules mandating veracity, loyalty, and the mitigation of undeserved suffering are found in every literate society. 'Regardless of the disruption of the socioeconomic operations of a society that the implementation of some measures of social justice may have

¹¹ Quoted by Tom Sorell from A. Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 354.

caused', writes K. D. Irani in his Introduction to *Social Justice in the Ancient World*,

The values inherent in them have always been appreciated and progressively implemented in all civilizations. But alongside there have always been reservations about applying the rules of social justice . . . because they entail the imposition of responsibility upon society as a whole or an individual to remedy the undeserved suffering of someone. And although one may feel that the remedying of the undeserved suffering was valuable, one must realize that it is achieved at the expense of a society or an individual who has to provide the resources.¹²

It is accordingly interesting, but for some purposes irrelevant, that neither Hume nor Aristotle discusses impersonal justice under the heading of 'ethics' or the 'theory of morals', and that Kant and Bentham try to unify the personal ethical realm with the realm of obligations to strangers. Hume has a decent impersonal ethical theory, only he calls it a theory of justice and discusses it separately from the social virtues and moral sentiments, since his point is that justice compensates for partiality, thereby supplying the defects of the affections.¹³

The discovery of continuities between past and present can seem to limit our current options of change and contingency, to expand them. But this is not entirely true either; for we cannot see that a problem is insoluble in the terms in which it has been stated until we become aware of how many times it has been stated in those terms. Conversely, as soon as we discover that a philosophical stance that seemed to express a newly discovered and at the same time deep truth corresponds to a personal idiosyncrasy or a historical fashion, something of its appeal is lost. The concern with happiness and autonomy, exemplified in Williams's 'Gauguin' figure in *Moral Luck*,¹⁴ is as historically contingent, as is the faith in all-embracing systems based in a few simple principles, or the Prussian philosopher Kant's alleged *délire de toucher*. As Frederic Mount pointed out in his remarkable study of love and the family, happiness and flight were nineteenth-century obsessions occasioned by legal and social repression that virtually dictated the form of the novel

¹² *Social Justice in the Ancient World*, ed. K. D. Irani and Morris Silver (Westport, Conn., and London: Greenwood Press, 1995), p. 8.

¹³ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), Bk. III, Pt. II, §II, pp. 495 ff.

¹⁴ Reprinted in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

and the personal narrative.¹⁵ Gauguin tells one truth about us, an important truth and one perhaps more important than is normally acknowledged, but it is not the whole truth, and perhaps not even the overriding truth.

Sorell is surely right to suggest that Aristotle's moral philosophy has been influential in the evolution of modern concepts of well-being. Williams's own critique of utilitarianism, and the collaboration of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum on capability theory, offer striking examples.¹⁶ Yet these examples do not establish that moral philosophers ought to bring themselves into more extended contact with the history of philosophy and with specialist historians of philosophy. Rather, they could be taken to suggest that economists and politicians can benefit from at least a casual acquaintance with the history of philosophy, and that philosophers, who can be assumed already to have a basic acquaintance, would do well to broaden their own acquaintance with social science. A non-aligned appeal to past philosophy is not the only feature that distinguishes the work of the three philosophers mentioned above; it is their engagement outside philosophy in fields as diverse as literature, politics, economics, social history, and—famously—the history of art.

Whereas modern epistemology and philosophy of mind increasingly seek out the results of neighbouring sciences, much moral philosophy resists involvement with anthropology, biology, or psychology, citing the is–ought distinction as a decisive reason for disregarding available information about human behaviour and ideation. Perhaps the moral philosophy of the past too is understudied by contemporary theorists. Perhaps, as Margaret Wilson suggested, an investigation of past controversies and their relation to the new data-sources of *their* time would reveal the groundlessness of some of our current debates. But such self-undermining investigations are only for the strong-willed; meanwhile the relation between the plentiful data-sources of our time and our moral and social theories is open for exploration.

¹⁵ Frederic Mount, *The Subversive Family: An Alternative History of Love and Marriage* (London: Unwin, 1982), p. 139.

¹⁶ Martha Nussbaum, 'Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism', *Political Theory*, 20 (1992), 202–46; see also the papers in and Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen (eds.), *The Quality of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

The History of Philosophy as Philosophy

GARY HATFIELD



Philosophers have been talking about their predecessors since before Plato and Aristotle. The history of philosophy as a sub-discipline of philosophy has been recognized since the eighteenth century, when subdivisions beyond the traditional logic, metaphysics, natural philosophy, and moral philosophy became generally established. Philosophers have addressed the *shape* of philosophy's history as a philosophical topic since Kant and Hegel. At the same time, philosophers as diverse as Descartes, Kant, and Russell have made disparaging remarks about the philosophical benefit of studying the history of philosophy, especially, as Russell put it, if done in a manner 'truly historical'.¹ Here, I take 'truly historical' to mean history of philosophy that, in framing its interpretations of past arguments and doctrines, pays considerable attention to the intellectual and cultural context in which past philosophy was produced.

In recent decades, a renewed interest in the history of philosophy has been noted, which implies that interest had previously been in decline. As early as 1970, Michael Ayers could suggest that 'more philosophers are now taking the history of philosophy seriously

¹ Russell (1900), p. v. The other disparaging remarks: Descartes (1637/1985), p. 115; Kant (1783/2002), p. 53. Descartes also characterizes reading past authors positively as affording 'a conversation with the most distinguished men of past ages—indeed, a rehearsed conversation in which these authors reveal to us only the best of their thoughts' (1637/1985, p. 113). When Wiener (1944, p. 262) later criticized Russell's purist split between philosophy and history, Russell (1944, p. 695) endorsed Wiener's (more contextualist) methodology for the history of philosophy. On early history of philosophy, see Passmore (1965), pp. 5–6, 19–22, and Gueroult (1984–8), i. Ancient discussions of predecessors included (constructed) surveys of previous philosophical positions, as in Aristotle, as well as doxographic surveys, as in Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of the Philosophers*; on the variety of such discussions, see Cherniss

than has been the case for some time'.² Since then, further claims of renewal have been made, along with more disparagement. In the past twenty years, appointments in the history of philosophy in major graduate departments have risen (in anglophone universities), especially in early modern philosophy. Ancient philosophy had representatives of historical and philological approaches throughout the twentieth century (in most major universities), as did medieval philosophy (in smaller numbers). The primary change in recent attitudes has concerned early modern philosophy (through Kant). I therefore focus initially on that period and, within it, on 'theoretical' as opposed to moral and political philosophy—on 'metaphysics and epistemology' broadly construed, as we now say.³

(1953) and Gueroult (1984–8), i, chs. 1–2. In antiquity, 'philosophical' (i.e. systematic and theoretical) disciplines could include, beyond those named, mathematical disciplines such as astronomy, and other disciplines organized around principles, such as politics and economics. By the seventeenth century, the 'philosophical' part of the university curriculum was canonically described as the four disciplines listed above (in the text). For an eighteenth-century university course in history of philosophy (offered in 1777, 1778, and subsequently), see Oberhausen and Pozzo (1999), ii, pp. 402, 416, etc.; one criterion for a 'discipline' (or 'subdiscipline') is a subject taught in school. Finally, the variety of activities that have gone under the title of 'philosophy' in the past, or that are retrospectively labelled as 'philosophy' now, reveals that the object of the history of philosophy—past philosophical texts and the intellectual activity that produced them—is not fixed, and is open to discussion (see Mandelbaum 1976; O'Hear 1985); it is therefore part of the meta-philosophy of the history of philosophy to reflect on what past and present philosophy is; but such reflection is typically part of philosophy itself.

² Ayers (1970), p. 38. Ayers's subsequent remarks seem to equate 'history of philosophy' with past philosophy. In this chapter, I distinguish 'the past' from its 'history', restricting the latter term to (a) accounts of the past, and (b) the scholarly activity through which such accounts are produced (see Gracia 1992, pp. 42–55).

³ This limitation reflects my own interests and knowledge, as well as the preponderance of contextual work on early modern philosophy during the 1970s and 1980s (and before). Although early modern philosophers distinguished among philosophical disciplines—generically, as above, among logic, metaphysics, physics (or natural philosophy), and morals—the major figures typically were interested in all of the three substantive branches, and many were interested in philosophical method (turning away from traditional logic to other conceptions of the basis for philosophical cognition, on which see Michael (1997) and Owen (1999), chs. 1–3). Philosophers such as Hobbes, Descartes, and Spinoza viewed these branches as related, in that doctrines from metaphysics and natural philosophy were used, and may have been developed for use in, ethics and politics; similarly, Hume developed his 'science of man' partly in the service of ethics and politics. Finally, moral and political philosophers, including John Rawls and his students (Rawls 2000; Reath, Herman, and Korsgaard 1997), have contributed to the revaluing of history, and historians of moral and political philosophy have promoted contextualist methodology (e.g. Schneewind 1998; Skinner 2002).

Although Ayers's remark accurately captures a feeling that the history of philosophy had been in decline during the 1960s, it is important to recall that contextually oriented history of philosophy was being done throughout the twentieth century. Restricting the discussion to the English-speaking world (it should be generally recognized that the history of philosophy was alive and well in France, Germany, and Italy), instances of such history include E. A. Burtt's 1925 book on early modern science and metaphysics; A. B. Gibson's 1932 and S. V. Keeling's 1934 books on Descartes; N. K. Smith's studies, editions, and translations of Descartes, Locke, Hume, and Kant, published between 1902 and 1953; A. O. Lovejoy's 1936 book on the great chain of being (among other works); John Passmore's 1951 book on Hume; John Yolton's 1956 book on Locke; and Richard Popkin's 1960 book on scepticism.⁴ These authors were trained at and held positions at a variety of universities throughout the English-speaking academic world, in Australia, Canada, England, Scotland, the United States, and New Zealand.⁵ In the United States, Columbia and Johns Hopkins were prominent centres for research in the history of philosophy, but in fact such research was widespread in doctoral programmes.⁶

⁴ The works of twentieth-century authors mentioned by name in the body of the text can be found in the list of references.

⁵ Burtt's book arose from his doctoral dissertation at Columbia University. Upon leaving Columbia, he taught first at Chicago and then (from the early 1930s) at Cornell, where he became a co-editor of the *Philosophical Review*, which offered a venue for history of philosophy throughout the twentieth century (Etienne Gilson was an advisory editor in the 1920s and 1930s). Gibson taught at Birmingham and then at Melbourne, Keeling at London, and Smith at Princeton and then Edinburgh (where he became professor). Lovejoy was trained at Berkeley (B.A.), Harvard (M.A.), and the Sorbonne (but he never received the Ph.D.); he taught at Stanford, Washington University in St Louis, Columbia University, and the University of Missouri before settling at Johns Hopkins in 1910. Passmore was trained in Sydney, and taught at Otago before going to the Australian National University in Canberra. Yolton took his M.A. at the University of Cincinnati and his D.Phil. from Oxford in 1952 under the direction of Gilbert Ryle; during the 1950s he held appointments at Johns Hopkins, Princeton, and Kenyon College, and in subsequent decades at the University of Maryland, York University (Ontario), and Rutgers. Popkin received his B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. from Columbia (the last in 1950), studying with John Hermann Randall and Paul Oscar Kristeller; he spent 1945-6 at Yale and studied with the Hume scholar Charles Hendel. He taught at the University of Connecticut, the University of Iowa, and the Claremont Colleges before forging a new department at the University of California, San Diego (1963-73) and then settling at Washington University, St Louis (1973-86).

⁶ Under the guidance of Frederick J. E. Woodbridge and then Randall, the Columbia department was a good place to study history of philosophy during the first half of the

The quality of work of the authors listed, and the continuing influence of many of them, leave no doubt that significant English-language work in history of philosophy was being produced from the turn of the century into the 1950s and beyond. At the same time, Ayers is not alone, or incorrect, in thinking that by 1970 the atmosphere for history was negative, not only in England but also in America.⁷ However, this perception needs to be qualified in several ways. First, the negative attitude was not new, especially in England; in addition to Russell, C. D. Broad and H. H. Price suggested that although the great philosophers of the past should certainly be read and studied, little or nothing of philosophical significance was to be gained by adopting historical or contextual methods.⁸ Second, it seems likely that any decline in the quality and relative quantity of work in the history of philosophy during the

century (and beyond). On Woodbridge, see Delaney (1969), ch. 4. Randall began teaching at Columbia in 1918, took over the course on history of philosophy from Woodbridge in 1925, and was appointed assistant professor in 1926. Richard McKeon, trained by Woodbridge and then Gilson, was at Columbia from 1925 to 1935. From 1918 to 1935 the department published three volumes of *Studies in the History of Ideas*, described as 'studies in the history of philosophy' (Department of Philosophy 1918, p. v). At Johns Hopkins, George Boas joined Lovejoy in 1921, and they founded the History of Ideas Club in 1923 (see Boas *et al.* 1953). Though its graduate programme was not large, the Johns Hopkins department and associated club were significant in promoting study of the history of philosophy (as well as history of ideas and intellectual history more generally; on the 'history of ideas' approach, see n. 9). When Maurice Mandelbaum received the baton many years later (in 1957), Lovejoy had long been emeritus (he died in 1962), and Boas was just retiring. On the ubiquity of historical doctoral dissertations in the United States, see Passmore (1964).

⁷ Hare (1988, p. 11) attributes especially strong anti-historical sentiments to philosophers in the period from World War II to 1980; Popkin (1985) finds them throughout the twentieth century. By contrast, Randall (1963, pp. 82–3) speaks of the 'current disparaging of the history of philosophy in England' and of a post-World War II reaction against history in France, but notes no such general trend in the United States. Mandelbaum (1976, p. 719) notes the development of 'a definitely anti-historical, contemporary form of pseudo-historical writing' among 'recent Anglo-American philosophers', offering as examples some works from after 1950; he stresses that strong historical scholarship had been produced previously.

⁸ Broad (1930), p. 2; Price (1940), p. 3. Broad wrote that 'the minute study of the works of great philosophers from the historical and philological point of view is an innocent and even praiseworthy occupation for learned men. But it is not philosophy; and, to me at least, it is not interesting. My primary interest in this book is to find out what is true and what is false about ethics; and the statements of our authors are important to me only in so far as they suggest possible answers to this question' (1930, p. 2). All the same, his 1930 book contains biographical information on Spinoza and other contextualizing statements (e.g. pp. 53–4, 143). Further, his works on perception (1914) and science (1923) acknowledged the scientific context of, e.g., work on primary

1960s, especially among new Ph.D.s, was due in part to a decline in the teaching (or learning) of important scholarly skills, including the ability to read Latin, French, and German. Third, there were national differences. The anti-historical attitudes of Russell, Broad, Price, and others had more immediate influence in England (despite the ongoing work of G. H. R. Parkinson, W. von Leyden, and others), while the oft-noted ‘analytic’ antipathy to history in the United States arose somewhat later (peaking in the 1960s and early 1970s). These points do not negate the fact of anti-historical sentiment, but they do restrict its spatio-temporal scope.

The fourth and perhaps most important qualification is that, despite the feeling in 1970 that history had previously been looked down upon, the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s saw a blossoming of work in the historiography of philosophy—or the philosophy of the history of philosophy—especially in the United States. This work was in part fostered by Lovejoy and his colleagues (such as George Boas and Philip Wiener) in the history of ideas movement (a movement that spawned much work in the history of philosophy, as well as influencing intellectual history generally). More widely, the historiography of philosophy was pursued by Maurice Mandelbaum at Johns Hopkins, Paul Oscar Kristeller and John Hermann Randall at Columbia, Lewis White Beck at Rochester, Harold R. Smart at Cornell, Haskell Fain at Wisconsin, and James Collins at St Louis University.⁹ To this flourishing in the United States may be added Passmore in Australia, von Leyden at Durham, and W. H. Walsh at

and secondary qualities, in this way differing from the more radically acontextual work of the 1960s and 1970s, and he published additional biographical essays and work in history and philosophy of science (Broad 1952).

⁹ On historiography of the history of philosophy, see Beck (1969); Boas (1944); Collins (1972); Edel (1949); Fain (1970); Kristeller (1946, 1964); Mandelbaum (1965, 1976, 1977); Randall (1939, 1963); Smart (1962); Wiener (1946); and Wiener and Noland (1962); authors such as Mandelbaum and Fain were also deeply interested in the philosophy of history, a topic much discussed in American philosophy during the 1950s and 1960s. Although Passmore (1965, pp. 16–17) disparages Randall’s (1962) historical survey, it is an ambitious contribution to contextual history; none the less, Randall’s (1962, p. 7) attitude is more historicist (‘The problems of one age are ultimately irrelevant to those of another’) than Passmore (or I) would find reasonable, and Randall (1963, chs. 2–3) soon conceded more continuity in philosophical problems than in the earlier quotation (in both places he allowed continuity of ideas and methods). For bibliographies on the historiography of philosophy, see Collins (1972); Walton (1977); Gracia (1992); and Boss (1994). Many of the works named above distinguish history of philosophy, which keeps its focus on philosophical significance

Edinburgh.¹⁰ These authors took a philosophical attitude to the question of the necessity for and philosophical relevance of historically and contextually oriented history of philosophy. The more recent works in this vein, such as the 1978 book by Jonathan Rée, Ayers, and Adam Westoby, articles by Yolton (1975*a*, 1975*b*, 1985, 1986) and Richard Watson (1980), or the 1992 book by Jorge J. E. Gracia, and the collections edited by Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (1984), A. J. Holland (1985), Peter Hare (1988), and T. Z. Lavine and V. Tejera (1989), continue (and sometimes refer to) a well-established literature.

Against this backdrop, there is little basis for today's contextually oriented historians to consider themselves lonely revolutionaries.

and gives greater weight to major figures, from intellectual history, which shows greater interest in the 'common thought' of an age, and tends to flatten out major figures in accordance with how they were read by the lesser lights of a given period (for a critique of the tendency of intellectual history to render 'great texts' as mere historical documents, see LaCapra 1983). History of ideas (as practised by Lovejoy, Boas, and others) promoted a methodology of tracing the path of 'ideas' themselves (philosophical or otherwise), emphasizing the intellectual but not biographical or social context, and focusing on 'unit ideas', such as 'nature', 'soul', 'idea', or 'reason' (Boas 1944, p. 142), whether embedded in unconscious assumptions or explicit principles (Lovejoy 1936, ch. 1). This approach downplayed personal biography, the internal integrity of the thought of the individuals who were the vehicles of the ideas, and the social and cultural context of those individuals (factors often considered important by intellectual historians and contextualist historians of philosophy); but it encouraged a search for connections across disciplinary boundaries, so that philosophical ideas were examined in a wider context that included religious, scientific, and literary ideas (providing a healthy example for intellectual history and history of philosophy). Finally, the history of philosophy was constantly pursued at various of the major Roman Catholic universities (with something of a focus on medieval philosophy); this fact is evident in the series *Studies in Philosophy* and the *History of Philosophy*, published by the Catholic University of America Press since 1961, and in earlier lists from the same publisher, from the University of Notre Dame Press, and from Marquette University Press.

¹⁰ Passmore (1963, 1964, 1965); von Leyden (1954); Walsh (1965). The work of non-English speakers was published in translation, e.g. Gueroult (1969); Tatarkiewicz (1957). Essays by European authors were published in English as a *Festschrift* for Cassirer, by Klibansky and Paton (1936). Walton's (1977) bibliography lists works in English, French, German, Italian, Latin, and Spanish from 1377 to 1976. Additional works in French and German may be found in Beelman (2001). See also Gueroult (1979, 1984–8). On earlier historiographical discussions in Germany (1760s to 1830s), see Mandelbaum (1976); Mann (1996); and Piaia (2001), the last of which claims (against a 'received view') that Brucker (1742–67) engaged in more than doxography, explicitly discussing (a) the histories of various philosophical schools or 'sects', (b) the history of doctrines (and of individual philosophical disciplines), and (c) the effects of historical circumstances on the thought of individual persons. On Brucker, see also Hatfield (1996*b*).

Nor should they bemoan a lack of appreciation from ahistorical colleagues. As in the past, the only remedy for lack of appreciation is to do good work and make its significance accessible to non-specialists, including not only other philosophers but also the wider audience of humanists, scientists, and readers more generally (there are of course no guarantees). Here I want to consider ways in which the study of past philosophy has been used and is used in philosophy, and to make a case for the philosophical value and necessity of a contextually oriented approach. I shall consider some uses of past texts and of history that reveal limits to non-contextual history, including Strawson's Kant, Rorty's grand diagnosis of the Western tradition, and Friedman on Kant's philosophy of mathematics. I shall then consider ways in which the history of philosophy may become philosophically deeper by becoming more historical, and instances in which history of philosophy of various stripes has or may deliver a philosophical pay-off. Along the way, I shall urge historians of philosophy to attend not only to individual philosophers and their problems and projects, but also to the larger shape of the history of philosophy and its narrative themes.

I. PHILOSOPHICAL USES OF PAST PHILOSOPHICAL TEXTS

More than any other discipline, philosophy uses the main texts of past philosophy as an introduction, at both the bachelor's and doctoral levels. It would be odd for someone to achieve a Ph.D. in philosophy without having studied in some depth one or more of the great philosophers of the past, such as Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Hume, or Kant. Moreover, the texts and (presumed) positions of past philosophers are often used to locate or frame present contributions to philosophy, and perhaps even to supply candidate solutions to today's philosophical problems.

Philosophers make many uses of past texts, and so they should. Leaving aside non-essential uses, such as using a thick text for a doorstep or using editions in various colours as shelf decoration, properly philosophical uses can vary widely. A philosopher might simply skip and skim through some great work, using it as a sort of muse, without seeing herself as interpreting the text or assessing *its* arguments; her sole interest would be to prompt some ideas of

her own.¹¹ A different use would be to read through a past text without paying close attention to its historical context or its author's aims, in order to find potential answers to present philosophical problems and to assess them for their strength or weakness. In this approach, it is common to 'fix up' past positions by ignoring parts thought to be weak, such as the 'psychological' portions of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (in Strawson's reading), or to downplay some aspects, such as Berkeley's concern with spirit as an active substance (in Pappas's work on *Berkeley's Thought*).¹² Such approaches may pay close attention to the entire text, and attempt to give it a coherent reading using concepts and terminology from the interpreter's own time, as in Price's 'fixing up' of Hume as a sense-data philosopher.¹³ Because neither the museful nor the fixer-upper use finds it necessary or desirable to attend to historical context, I classify them as *non-contextual* and *non-historical* uses (excluding them from the 'history of philosophy' proper).

Other philosophical users of past texts consider it essential to attend to historical context. These readers believe that the philosophical benefit of studying such texts is likely to increase through such attention.

Those who hold this view need not agree on the ultimate aim of reading historically, or on the extent of the relevant historical

¹¹ Such 'museful' reading was common in the 1960s and 1970s, often focusing on 'known' problems in landmark texts, read out of context, such as the famous bit of Locke's *Essay* on primary and secondary qualities (as in Mundle 1971, pp. 40–1). J. L. Mackie (1976) considers isolated 'problems' in Locke's *Essay*, divorced from any attempt to 'study his philosophy as a whole' (p. 1).

¹² Strawson (1966), pp. 31–2; Pappas (2000), ch. 1. Pappas does distinguish between assumptions widely held in Berkeley's time and positions that would be accepted now, thereby gesturing toward context.

¹³ Price (1940), p. 23, where the term 'sense-datum' is introduced in paraphrasing Hume's position, without fanfare, and is used subsequently to develop Hume's problems and position. Works such as Price's are scholarly in the sense of taking into account the relevant major works—in this case, all of Book I of Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* and all of his *Inquiry concerning Human Understanding*. Yet Price makes clear that his intent is to construct a positive theory on Hume's behalf (1940, p. 4); characteristically, he finds no contradiction in saying that his aim has been to 'expound Hume's own theory as fully and clearly as may be' (p. 227), while reporting that, with respect to the positive theories he has constructed as 'Hume's own', he does not assert 'that Hume himself held either of them' (p. 220). Not all interpreters who focus on internal readings (leaving aside any special study of the larger intellectual or cultural context) are fixer-uppers; some endeavour to reconstruct an author's aims on the author's own terms, thus providing historical context through the author's own text, as in Dryer's (1966) reading of Kant's first *Critique*.

context. Some may simply realize that, because language changes over time and because philosophers in different periods have different background knowledge or beliefs, even to read the words on the page with comprehension necessitates some degree of immersion in the literature surrounding a given text. Thus, to understand Descartes's use of the term 'a priori', it helps to be acquainted with a standard Aristotelian usage, meaning 'reasoning from cause to effect', by contrast with 'a posteriori' reasoning from effect to cause. Similarly, Kant's use of the term 'physiology' in its root sense (stemming from Greek *physis*, or nature) to mean 'science or doctrine concerning nature in general' would be badly misread if taken as referring to bodily physiology, or, in his phrase about Locke's 'physiology of the human understanding', to brain physiology.¹⁴ One might, of course, be well aware of the need for historical context to gain better access to past texts while still wanting to use those texts primarily as a source of raw material for solutions or answers to present philosophical problems. This would be historically sensitive reading in the service of fixer-upper ends.¹⁵

Beyond this sort of aim, there are historically sensitive practices of reading that are also historically oriented in their philosophical methodology. By 'historically oriented philosophical methodology' I mean taking past texts seriously on their own terms, seeking to understand the problems and projects of past philosophy as they were, instead of only seeking a reading that solves a current philosophical problem. Such approaches need not be uncritical or non-evaluative, but their evaluations and criticisms will, in the first instance, be rendered according to standards implicit or explicit at the time the work was written. Discerning and employing such standards is itself no small task, requiring considerable philosophical work. Moreover, such approaches need not be without contemporary philosophical pay-off. But such pay-off occurs

¹⁴ On 'a priori' in Descartes and other pre-Kantian authors, see Collins (1972), pp. 263–5. On Lockean 'physiology of the human understanding', see Kant (1781/1787/1998), A ix ('A' denotes the pagination of the 1st German edn. of 1781; below, 'B' denotes that of the 2nd edn. of 1787).

¹⁵ The practice of combining historical scholarship with fixer-upper aims is found especially in writings on Kant's works (e.g. Kitcher 1990), presumably because philosophers today find much in Kant worth salvaging, but realize that mining his rich texts is aided by scholarly attention to context.

precisely because one has achieved an acquaintance with past philosophy on its own terms (as far as is possible).¹⁶

Some historically oriented methodologies do repudiate criticism. Their aim is simply to understand. This attitude is often accompanied by a historicist outlook—the belief that the philosophy of each age is (or should be seen as) simply an expression of the culture of the time, having no significance except as evidence about past thought. Such an outlook is more common among intellectual historians than historians of philosophy. Even so, such an attitude does not rule out all philosophical uses for history of philosophy, for even if past problems showed no real continuity with those of the present, we might still trace the previous evolution of our problems in order to isolate aspects that are vestiges of the past.¹⁷

Although I wouldn't want to rule out a radically historicist historiography of philosophy by *fiat*, I doubt the plausibility of the view that no philosophical topics or problems persist across long stretches of time, and I doubt that all past standards of evaluation

¹⁶ On historically oriented methodology, see Collins (1972); Gracia (1992); Kristeller (1985); Mandelbaum (1976, 1977); Skinner (2002), ch. 4; and Yolton (1986). Those adopting such an approach often hold that in working on contemporary philosophical problems, it is preferable to speak in one's own voice, rather than to engage in a kind of ventriloquism using a name from the past. Still, it can be reasonable to develop 'Humean' or 'Kantian' or 'Jamesian' positions, placing oneself in a tradition while acknowledging that one has departed from, and may be addressing other issues than, past authors.

¹⁷ Passmore (1965, pp. 8–18) disparagingly portrays historicist approaches as described in this paragraph as 'display[ing] philosophical theories in a cultural museum as representative expressions of a period' (p. 18). Elsewhere, he contrasts (philosophically uncritical) 'scholarship *about* philosophy' with (a) 'dialectical' treatments of past philosophers as though they were contemporaries, and (b) 'philosophical scholarship', which is carried out in a critical philosophical spirit and with a primary interest in philosophical content (1964, pp. 3–5). Mandelbaum (1965, pp. 46–66) criticizes historicist approaches that assume a social and cultural 'monism'. Collins (1972, pp. 14–22) criticizes purely historical approaches as philosophically unsatisfying, attributing them to an untenable 'purist split' between philosophical analysis and historical exegesis. Kristeller (1985, p. 621) urges a separation between 'interpretation' and 'criticism', but he includes among allegedly non-critical acts of interpretation 'analysing' the thought of past authors, identifying 'basic insights' and 'basic assumptions', and attending to 'contradictions and inconsistencies'. These phrases describe *critical* history of philosophy; his distinction between interpretation and criticism apparently applies to interpreting past positions so as to render them acceptable for wholesale adoption in the present. Gracia (1992, p. 111) uses the term 'historicism' more broadly than Passmore, to name the view that philosophy and history of philosophy are interdependent; he treats the 'historicism' criticized by Passmore as a confusion into which historically oriented philosophers sometimes fall (p. 122). In my

are totally foreign to current standards.¹⁸ I would instead make the relation of past and present problems and standards into an object of investigation in its own right. A narrowly historicist approach would preclude that. So I will leave aside the historicist approach, and consider historically oriented approaches that aim for a present-day pay-off to be gained from historical understanding.

Several sorts of pay-off may be envisioned. One is simply to gain a genuine understanding of the landmark positions that frame contemporary discussions. Here, the idea is that, in making use of past philosophy, discovering Kant's actual position (e.g.) on the nature of analytic judgements will be of more use than simply translating his position into a recent idiom. Accordingly, one would see Kantian analyticity as applying to concepts and judgements (taken as cognitive acts) and would be wary of interpretations in terms of sentences or word meanings.¹⁹ We can thereby come to appreciate both the similarities and the differences between Kant's and more recent notions of analyticity. Seeing the differences enables us to ask what changed and why. We gain not only a more accurate fix on a landmark but also the potential of greater self-understanding through history.

Better understanding of the structure and development of past philosophy can yield further benefits. A thorough investigation of individual texts or philosophers may reveal assumptions that are deeply embedded, unargued, and even unavowed. Examination of the historical progression of such assumptions may allow us to gain new perspective on current assumptions, or to question general platitudes. Here, the unit of analysis extends beyond the individual text or philosopher to the historical development of philosophical traditions. One use of such an examination would be to diagnose current philosophical ills, as Richard Rorty aimed to do in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. More generally, examination of the shape

experience, many intellectual historians and historians of science today adopt the sort of historicist attitude that seeks to understand past thought while avoiding the critical approach of most historians of philosophy; this attitude suits their aim of understanding tendencies of thought, or the relation of thoughts (or other 'products') to social, economic, and cultural factors, as opposed to critically engaging the content of past philosophy or science in its own right.

¹⁸ On change and continuity, see Randall (1963) and Schneewind (1998), pp. 550–3. On standards of evaluation and the comparability of human mentalities (and their products) over time, see Gracia (1992), pp. 72–86; Mann (1996), pp. 194–5; and Wood (2002).

¹⁹ See Beck (1955, 1956).

of the history of philosophy, relating project to project, trend to trend, tradition to tradition, involves a search for philosophical structure in that history. Finding such structure would certainly add to our knowledge of what philosophy is and can be.²⁰

This taxonomy of uses of historically oriented methods is not exhaustive, but it captures some main instances of recent practice, as examples will illustrate.

2. FIXING UP KANT

P. F. Strawson described his book on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, entitled *The Bounds of Sense*, as follows: 'it is by no means a work of historical-philosophical scholarship. I have not been assiduous in studying the writings of Kant's lesser predecessors, his own minor works or the very numerous commentaries which two succeeding centuries have produced.'²¹ Here Strawson lists some

²⁰ Let me clarify my distinction among (a) historicist enterprises (intellectual history), (b) history of philosophy, and (c) presentist musings or fixings-up, in relation to recent discussions. I view history of philosophy as critically and philosophically engaging the work of past philosophers, but in a spirit that takes seriously the aims, assumptions, and state of knowledge of past authors. Though evaluative, it does not adopt the principle that past arguments should be construed, whenever possible, so that they solve present problems; so it does not formulate its initial evaluation using that standard; it does not seek to 'fix up' past works during their interpretation. Thus, I view history of philosophy as more critically engaged than Bernard Williams's 'history of ideas' (1978, p. 9), but reject his proposal that 'history of philosophy' should from the outset reconstruct past positions to address today's problems (p. 10). (Of course, we who do the reconstructing are working today, and we may apply our work to contemporary problems; see sections 4 and 8 below.) For similar reasons, I do not include what Sleigh (1990, pp. 2-4) calls 'philosophical history' within history of philosophy; but I also hold that genuine history of philosophy (in what he overly modestly calls the 'exegetical' mode) cannot establish the 'facts' or 'explain' the positions of past authors without critically engaging and rethinking the philosophical content of those positions: there is no such thing as setting forth 'the plain facts about what an author thought and said' (p. 3) without substantial (historically sensitive) philosophical reconstruction. By way of examples, I do not count Strawson (1966) or Bennett (1971) as works in the history of philosophy, but do include Dyer (1966). Bernard Williams (1978) is a hybrid; his chapters 2-3 follow the presentism described in his preface, but the remaining chapters become ever more historical and contextual. Bennett (2001) has come to acknowledge the importance of context, and now sees a need to balance knowledge of 'historical setting' with an attitude of 'collegial' argument with past philosophers as if they were present (i. 1). He uses context in a piecemeal way that avoids treating single works as integrated wholes, so his writing seems to record museful free associations on isolated historical facts and bits of text.

²¹ Strawson (1966), p. 11.

criteria that a historically oriented approach today might ideally be expected to meet, but he also indicates that he is not going that route. His intent is to read and reread the *Critique* so as to produce 'an uncluttered and unified interpretation'. He wants to interpret the doctrines in a way that emphasizes what can be made 'acceptable' while jettisoning what cannot be repaired. Acceptable by what standard? By the standards of philosophy as Strawson sees them; indeed, by standards of argument such as those exhibited in his previous book, *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*, which broached many themes found in his Kant book.

Strawson says that the aim of his book is to present an interpretation of 'the system of thought which the *Critique* contains' that is 'at least strongly supported by the text as it stands'. But he also makes clear that this interpretation will 'show how certain great parts of the structure can be held apart from each other, while showing also how, within the system itself, they are conceived of as related'. Here, he is talking about keeping the doctrine of transcendental idealism apart from the conceptual analysis of the conditions of experience, while also explaining why Kant might have seen a need to connect them. He further indicates that he has 'tried to give decisive reasons for rejecting some parts altogether'.²² Here, he means the whole of what he terms 'transcendental psychology', which includes Kant's discussion of various faculties of cognition (sensibility, understanding, reason) and the central role that Kant gives to the notion of synthesis in some main arguments (in the Deduction and Analytic of Principles). What is to replace Kant's detailed discussions of judgement as synthesis? Analysis of 'our ordinary reports of what we see, feel, hear, etc.' (a popular mid-twentieth-century philosophical idiom). Indeed, he asserts as a philosophical axiom (as it were) that 'no faithful reports of these experiences are in general possible which do not make use of the concepts of the objects which our experiences are experiences of' (a conclusion of *Individuals*).²³

Strawson suggests that Kant, in the Deduction of the categories, argued that the conditions on any possible experience (like ours) are the conditions for objective judgements (or objective descriptions)

²² The previous quotations are from *ibid.*

²³ Quotations from Strawson (1966), p. 32; the corresponding discussion occurs in Strawson (1959), ch. 2.

of a uniquely ordered spatio-temporal world of objects. To conceive of experience as a sequence of representations is, it turns out, to presuppose that the conditions have been met for experiencing an objectively ordered world. Strawson's reconstruction is a generally plausible, and philosophically interesting, construal of local features of Kant's argument. Similarly, Strawson's discussion of the law of cause as a condition on objective experience may well reveal something about Kant's own position.²⁴ Strawson has perhaps repackaged certain Kantian insights about experience and its conceptual structure. To be sure, his book does not show that Kant understood or developed these insights in a Strawsonian manner. Still, besides being philosophically interesting in its own right, Strawson's book offers material that might be used by someone who was trying to understand Kant—even by those trying to read him in context.

None the less, Strawson's book would not help in reading many parts of Kant's text, or in interpreting many of its central doctrines, for Strawson ignores or rejects these. He mentions (but provides little discussion of) Kant's primary objective in the first *Critique*: to discern the limits to traditional metaphysics. Indeed, Strawson provides no general characterization of traditional metaphysics at all, but simply lists some doctrines that Kant himself names (concerning the immaterial soul, the structure and existence of the cosmos, and the existence of God). It is here especially that some attention to historical context might have helped him to see what Kant was after. Strawson instead renders Kant's project in terms of the familiar mid-twentieth-century idiom of seeking a 'principle of significance' to govern 'what we can say'.²⁵ He thus ignores Kant's own way of framing the bounds of sense: that is, through a strict limit on any use of the faculty of understanding independently of the senses, and a strict limit on treating sensory knowledge as determining the (unknown) properties of things in themselves. Rather, the bounding arises from Strawson's conceptual analysis of ordinary perceptual reports.

Strawson virtually ignores the place of synthetic a priori judgments in Kant. Kant, of course, considered this notion to be absolutely essential to his entire project. He rightly complained of an early review of the *Critique* (Christian Garve's review as revised by

²⁴ Strawson (1966), Pt. II, chs. 2–3.

²⁵ Strawson (1966), p. 16.

J. G. Feder, published anonymously in 1782) that, in ignoring the synthetic a priori, it failed to address the central topic of his work; he complained that the review 'did not say a word about the possibility of synthetic cognition *a priori*, which was the real problem, on the solution of which the fate of metaphysics wholly rests, and to which my *Critique* . . . was entirely directed'.²⁶

Kant is not to be treated as an absolute authority, even in identifying the central point of his own work. At the same time, his assertions on this topic should be taken seriously; they should not be cast off lightly, and they should at least be explained. The most historically sensitive section of Strawson's work, Part V on the role of the phenomenal in Kant's conception of geometry, might well have sustained some discussion of the synthetic a priori, had Strawson looked more fully into Kant's account of the structure of Euclid's proofs. In section 5 (below), we will see that Kant offered an insightful analysis of the synthetic basis for geometrical proofs of Euclid's kind.

In the end, Strawson's book does not provide a reading of the *Critique of Pure Reason* as an integrated philosophical work. It offers a set of philosophical arguments that show us how to relate selected portions of Kant's text to Strawson's own views. This approach contrasts with contextually sensitive readings, as developed by Beck, Gerd Buchdahl, Karl Ameriks, Patricia Kitcher, and a new generation that includes Lanier Anderson, Lorne Falkenstein, and Lisa Shabel. These philosophers allow us to understand Kant on his own terms, to see how his work changed philosophy, to know where we differ from him, and to find where we might want to continue his project, suitably modified.

3. DIAGNOSING PAST ERRORS

In the past two decades, the most ambitious attempt to use contextually oriented history for philosophical ends is Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, which attempts to diagnose the central error of Western philosophy (as regards metaphysics and epistemology) from Plato onwards, focusing on Descartes, Locke, and Kant. According to Rorty, these philosophers developed a

²⁶ Kant (1783/2002), p. 164.

notion of knowledge as a mental ‘mirroring’ of reality. Philosophy’s task was to assess the ‘accuracy of representation’ of this mirroring, both in general and in the various domains of knowledge. Locke allegedly rendered this task as a natural-scientific project, while Kant helped set up philosophy as a ‘tribunal of pure reason’²⁷ before which other disciplines were to submit their credentials in order to receive their licences.

The accuracy of Rorty’s picture of the history of ancient and early modern philosophy has frequently been challenged.²⁸ His rendering of the philosophers named is at best an outdated caricature, at worst a ‘just so’ story fabricated to portray the ‘authority’ of past philosophy as resting on a rhetorical ploy that would fail in the sophisticated present. The moral of his tale is that philosophy today can make no direct contribution to intellectual discussion. Its role can only be to ‘edify’, by describing the results of one (non-philosophical) area of discourse to the participants of another (non-philosophical) area.

Here is an example of Rorty’s history. In a section on ‘Epistemology and Philosophy’s Self-Image’, he uses Descartes and Hobbes to exemplify the aims of early modern epistemology. According to Rorty, Descartes and Hobbes were out to ‘make the intellectual world safe for Copernicus and Galileo’. When these philosophers rejected the (Aristotelian) philosophy of the schools, ‘they did not think of themselves as substituting a new and better kind of philosophy—a better theory of knowledge, or a better metaphysics, or a better ethics’; nor did they think of themselves as offering ‘“philosophical systems”’, but as contributing to the efflorescence of research in mathematics and mechanics’. In Rorty’s view, neither Descartes nor Hobbes distinguished ‘philosophy’ from ‘science’; they aimed mainly at effecting a separation between ‘ecclesiastical institutions’, on the one hand, and ‘science and scholarship’, on the other.²⁹

Rorty’s statements reveal his awareness that seventeenth-century philosophers were deeply involved in developing a new science, and that both Descartes and Hobbes addressed ecclesiastical authority. But his general characterization of their work badly misses the

²⁷ Rorty (1979), p. 139; more generally, see chs. 1, 3.

²⁸ See Hatfield (2001a) and the literature cited therein, and Piaia (2001).

²⁹ The quotations in this paragraph are from Rorty (1979), pp. 131–2.

mark. Hobbes wrote works on optics, but made no significant contributions to science and was not much of a mathematician; he was complimentary toward Galileo, but offered his own arguments for a corpuscular conception of matter. Although Descartes was an original mathematician and did some work in mechanics, he did not think much of Galileo's law for falling bodies, and had already formulated his own laws of motion when Galileo's work was published. Moreover, each of their approaches is nothing if not systematic. It is true that they used the term 'philosophy' to mean systematic knowledge in general, as indeed the word was then commonly defined. But it is not true that they, or their century, did not recognize distinctions among 'philosophical' disciplines—that is, among the various theoretical bodies of knowledge. Descartes explicitly differentiated the disciplines listed in his famous tree of knowledge: metaphysics as the roots, physics as the trunk, and medicine, mechanics, and morals as the branches. Although he held that metaphysics could provide principles for physics, he distinguished the two subject areas. Metaphysics was more general, encompassing the 'first elements' of everything, including questions about the essences and existence of God and the soul. Descartes explicitly sought to place the new science on a new and better metaphysical foundation, in order (as he revealed in correspondence) to replace the Aristotelian scheme.³⁰

Examples could be multiplied of Rorty's lack of immersion in the work of the philosophers about whom he writes. Instead, I want to highlight two ironies concerning his work.

First, he intends to divert philosophy from its alleged role of imperious judge to that of conversational participant. Had he examined the work of early modern philosophy more fully, he would have found that the specifically philosophical portions of their work *did* engage their times. Descartes's metaphysics was aimed toward founding a new science of nature—not by engaging in rhetorical battle with the Roman Church, but by establishing, in a systematic philosophical manner, the fundamental principles of the new physics. Today we may doubt that Descartes accomplished his aim in the intended manner; for instance, we might question whether he actually could derive his specific laws of motion from

³⁰ On the tree of knowledge, see Descartes (1647/1985), pp. 186–7. On Hobbes's philosophy, see Sorell (1996); on Descartes, see Hatfield (2003).

metaphysical principles, as he said. But we should not doubt that Descartes provides (as do Locke, Kant, and others) a model of the philosopher as an intellectually engaged participant, not an aloof certifier of mirrors seeking to dupe the rest of culture into buying a mirror metaphor. A deeper pursuit of contextual history might have revealed a model from the past to aid Rorty in his effort to encourage philosophers to engage the intellectual and cultural work of their own times.

Second, although Rorty's historiography is avowedly historicist, his historical narrative portrays a near perennial task for philosophy in its first 2,500 years: the assessment of knower as mirrorer. Rorty reports that he found teachers as diverse as Richard McKeon, Rudolf Carnap, and Charles Hartshorne to be 'saying the same thing: that a "philosophical problem" was a product of the unconscious adoption of the assumptions built into the vocabulary in which the problem was stated—assumptions which were to be questioned before the problem itself was taken seriously'. Accordingly, 'philosophical problems' appear or disappear, and change their shapes 'as a result of new assumptions or vocabularies'. Rorty endorses a conception of philosophy's history 'as a series, not of alternative solutions to the same problems, but of quite different sets of problems'.³¹ He adopts the 'historicism' I described in section 1.

Yet Rorty's book seeks to trace the single image or idea of the 'glassy essence' of the mind from Plato through Descartes, Locke, and Kant, into its linguistic transformation in the twentieth century.³² In this story, the vocabulary changes, but the problems (and many of the solutions) remain the same: the problems pertain to the epistemology of mirroring. In the name of historicism, Rorty has flattened out the history of philosophy. He has failed to see how it could be true both that philosophy had been concerned since the time of Plato with questions about the knower's relation to the known, and also that the theories and purposes of philosophers had changed from epoch to epoch, or even from writer to writer. Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, and Kant each had a relationship to the new science, but the relationships differed. Descartes, for instance, thought that metaphysics could provide a priori foundations for the new science, discernible through pure intellect. Locke, by contrast,

³¹ The quotations in this paragraph are from Rorty (1979), p. xiii.

³² Rorty (1979), chs. 1, 3–6.

cast philosophy as an 'under-laborer' to the sciences, and he denied that the source of knowledge allegedly used by Descartes, the pure intellect operating independently of the senses, even exists. But he shared with Descartes an interest in the implications of a corpuscular view of matter—which he introduced as the best hypothesis available for the description of sensory perception.³³

Rorty's failure to capture the aims or diagnose the ills of Western philosophy does not show that history cannot provide diagnostic results, or that works of ambitious historical sweep should be avoided. But it does suggest that such efforts should draw on the extant work in history of philosophy. That type of work was in a comparative slump during the late 1960s to mid-1970s, when Rorty wrote his book, and in any case he chose to wave off its recent results.³⁴ A final irony is that Rorty's image of the philosophy of the past is remarkably similar to the actual practice of the detached and imperious analytic philosophers of the 1960s, the very time when he framed his project.³⁵

4. CONTEXTUAL HISTORY

It is sometimes said that there will always be work to do in the history of philosophy, if only to reread past philosophy in terms of (ever-changing) current problems and standards. And indeed the themes addressed by historians of philosophy often relate to topics currently favoured in philosophy more generally. Thus, Woodbridge's naturalism, together with Cohen's presence at City College, gave the philosophy of the sciences a presence at Columbia, where Burt produced a history of early modern metaphysics and science.³⁶ In the first half of the twentieth century, sense-data epistemology was a major contemporary topic, and many of the great

³³ On philosophy as an under-labourer, Locke (1690/1979), *Epistle*, p. 11; on corpuscularianism as a hypothesis, Bk. IV, ch. 3, art. 16; on sensory qualities and the corpuscular account, Bk. II, ch. 8.

³⁴ Rorty (1979), pp. 49–50 n. 19, the remarks on O'Neil (1974) and Yolton (1975*b*).

³⁵ One feature of such philosophy was the willingness to use 'conceptual' arguments based on 'ordinary' understanding to allegedly undermine whole areas of learning, as in, e.g., revealing the 'impossibility' of a scientific psychology (Davidson 1974). For an early dissent from the appeal to the 'ordinary', see Russell (1953).

³⁶ Morris Cohen at City College of New York published in philosophy of science during the 1910s and 1920s (see Cohen 1931 and Kuhn 1957); he was a presence at

philosophers, including Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, were treated as sense-data theorists. Many philosophers held that if a theory of sense-data as the primary objects of knowledge were combined with realism about ordinary physical objects, it would be difficult or impossible to avoid scepticism about the external world, and early modern philosophers from Descartes onward came to be seen as sceptics or sceptic-slayers.³⁷ Finally, philosophy of mind and cognition have been popular in recent decades, and of late the history of theories of mind has been undergoing a renewal.

The mere fact that contemporary interests are brought to bear in historical interpretation does not by itself cast doubt upon the interpretation. Each case must be examined on its own, to determine the extent to which current tastes are simply influencing the topics chosen for examination, and the extent to which past texts are being bent, stretched, or discarded to fit a Procrustean bed. Certainly, we can easily expose as distortion any interpretation that has Descartes setting as his primary problem that of inferring the external world from sensory impressions. Similarly, a careful reading of the first edition of Kant's first *Critique* indicates that, contrary to common assumption, he originally saw Hume as an ally who needed help, rather than a sceptical enemy who needed defeating.³⁸

Columbia (as Burt attests: 1925, preface). Ernest Nagel, a prominent twentieth-century philosopher of science, studied at City College and completed his Ph.D. at Columbia in 1931, where he joined the faculty.

³⁷ Sense-data theory, as developed by Moore (1913–14) and Russell (1912), analysed what is 'immediately known' in perception. These authors raised the problem of whether external objects must be 'inferred' from sense-data, which are representations of them (a 'representative' theory of perception), and if so, whether that would make such objects unknowable (external-world scepticism). Russell (1914) sought to avoid such scepticism by developing sense-data theory into a form of 'realism' in which the sense-datum is the primary (and easily knowable) object of knowledge, from which 'physical objects' are logically constructed. Many philosophers attributed a representative theory to Descartes and/or Locke, and sought ways to avoid that theory (Price 1932, ch. 4) or its sceptical consequences (Broad 1914, ch. 4; 1923, Pt. 2). Hume was treated as a sceptic about external objects (Moore 1909), though Price (1940) adopted a 'fixer-upper' approach, downplaying the sceptical aspects of Hume's position and attributing to him a sophisticated version of phenomenalism (1940, pp. 191–2). Ayer (1958, chs. 2–3), Rorty (1979), Michael Williams (1986, 1991), and others came to read early modern philosophy from Descartes onward as focused on the problem of inferring the external world from sense-data. Meanwhile, Popkin (1960) offered a historical treatment of early modern scepticism. For criticism of the sceptical master narrative for early modern philosophy, see Hatfield (1997, 2001a).

³⁸ On Kant's relation to Hume, see Hatfield (2001b) and Kuehn (2001), pp. 255–65.

The doing of history cannot be insulated from the influence of the present, nor should it be;³⁹ the past remains the past, and we are in the present. None the less, much is to be gained by setting as a goal for history of philosophy as that of accurately portraying the philosophical motives and positions of past authors. This goal involves what I have called 'understanding past philosophy on its own terms'. Even if, owing to the inevitability of historical distance, we cannot fully attain this goal in some absolute sense, it can be approached by adopting some methodological principles. We can read widely, including the major and minor works of individual authors, as well as major and minor predecessors; we can ask what intellectual and philosophical aims individual philosophers had in producing their work; and we can then seek to assess the effectiveness of a philosopher's arguments by the standards of his or her time. These precepts are not intended to be exclusionary; other questions, including purely present-oriented questions, may surely be asked. Rather, these precepts are intended to suggest ways of giving oneself over to the problems and projects of past philosophers in order to establish a basic reading of their works, after which further questions may be posed.

Earlier historiographical writers, including Passmore, identified the 'philosophical problem' as the relevant scale of analysis for a contextual approach. These adherents of the problem-centred approach were not committed to the thesis that there are eternal or unchanging philosophical problems, existing as it were outside history.⁴⁰ Rather, they suggested that in interpreting each philosopher, one should seek to discover the problems that motivated his or her philosophizing. This is good advice: it suggests trying to 'get inside' the philosophical activity of a past author, to 'rethink' the problems that motivated him or her.⁴¹ I have incorporated this advice in my precept to consider the aims of past philosophers.

³⁹ On the inevitability of such influence and ways to keep it within acceptable bounds, see von Leyden (1954) and Collins (1972), ch. 4.

⁴⁰ On the 'problem-centred' approach, see Passmore (1965); on studying 'continuative problems' as one method among others, see Collins (1972, pp. 177–85). For an example of seeking the historical roots of philosophical problems, see Popper (1953). Without affirming 'eternal' problems, these authors acknowledge, or insist on, some historical continuity.

⁴¹ Collingwood (1946, pp. 214–15) promoted 'rethinking' as a general historical method (hence applicable to past philosophy). The question of how this precept relates to his conception that 'All metaphysical questions are historical questions' (1940, p. 49) is intricate; see Martin (1995).

Philosophical aims may have a larger scale than the typical philosophical problem. Philosophers may have *projects*, within which problems cluster, or out of which they arise. Descartes had as a main aim the founding of a new physics (a comprehensive science of nature). Within this overall project, he worked on a number of problems, including characterizing the essence of matter, establishing the relation between mind and matter, and analysing the functioning of the senses. Similarly, Kant had as one main project assessing the possibility of metaphysics. Within this project, he identified a number of problems, including discovering the characteristic structure of metaphysical knowledge (it is synthetic a priori), analysing the possibility and limits of such knowledge, and explaining the persistent antinomies in the ontology of nature.

A historian might on one occasion focus on projects, and on another might use knowledge of the overarching project as a context in exploring a past philosopher's response to a specific problem. In either case, recognition of the past philosopher's overall aims and projects will aid interpretation.

More generally, contextual history of philosophy can look at a wider or narrower context. The minimum aim for a contextual approach must be to consider both the major and minor works of a chosen philosopher, the major and minor predecessors against whom the philosopher reacted, and the contemporaries who formed his or her audience. At least this much is needed in order to read early modern philosophical works with genuine comprehension. The relevant context spreads beyond works that we now consider 'philosophical', to early modern science, mathematics, medicine, law, theology, and letters more generally, and it can extend even further to include social structure, cultural movements, and political events.⁴²

The breadth of the relevant context cannot be fixed ahead of time, and the type of context may vary, depending on the aims of

⁴² In anglophone history of early modern theoretical philosophy (as opposed to political and moral philosophy), the context provided by the new science (including mathematics and medicine) has been most fully explored. Burt (1925), Gibson (1932), Keeling (1934), and Smith (1941, 1953) were including the scientific context before mid-century. In recent years, Buchdahl (1969), Clarke (1982), Friedman (1992), Garber (1992), Gaukroger (1995, 2002), Hatfield (1990, 1992), Rutherford (1995), Watkins (2001), and Catherine Wilson (1995) have addressed the scientific context as well. See Edel (1949) for a penetrating discussion of the interdependence between the

the interpreter. History of philosophy focuses on the philosophical aspects of past texts: it examines the coherence of authors' positions and seeks to understand how authors sought to establish the cognitive force of their positions or theses. It focuses on the intellectual and the cognitive. Even for that purpose, wider aspects of the historical context may need to be taken into account. Some portions of Descartes's published works (and more of his correspondence) cannot be interpreted without knowledge of seventeenth-century Roman Catholic doctrines and their relation to Aristotelian thought; examples include his discussion of the properties of surfaces of bodies (with implicit or explicit connection to the Eucharist) and his discussion of the 'real union' of mind and body.⁴³ His characterization of planetary motion in the *Principles of Philosophy* (Part III) may be illuminated by knowledge of the Church's proscription of the Copernican hypothesis and its condemnation of Galileo. If we turn to moral and political philosophy, then cultural, social, and political contexts are even more deeply involved. Beyond these types of appeal to a wider context, interpreters sometimes invoke 'external factors' to explain how a philosopher could hold to a position on the basis of weak or non-existent cognitive grounds. As I have suggested, this is not the only situation in which the wider context is relevant. Indeed, I suspect that cases in which cognitive factors play no role are rare. More frequently, aspects of the social and cultural context may set part of the philosophical problem space, in which case the philosopher's response is subject to evaluation as philosophy, in terms of coherence and cognitive force.⁴⁴

In any event, each instance of contextual work need not address the wider context. It may instead focus on a single text or part of a

interpretation of ideas (including philosophical and scientific ideas) and knowledge of their social and cultural context.

⁴³ Examples requiring special attention to these doctrines are found in the *Objections and Replies to the Meditations* (Descartes 1641/1984, pp. 173–8, 292–3), and in *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet* (1648/1985).

⁴⁴ Loeb (1981, pp. 15–16) invokes 'extraphilosophical factors' to explain (seemingly unargued) metaphysical commitments of Descartes, Leibniz, and others. In my own work (Hatfield 2003), I have found it philosophically and historically more fruitful to treat the sorts of commitments in question, such as mind–body distinction and interaction, or the existence of an infinite substance, as philosophical theses that Descartes intended to establish on rational grounds alone, and to evaluate his position in that light. Further, I find that his doctrine of the creation of the eternal truths can best be

text, simply to establish a historically and philosophically viable reading, drawing on contextual background knowledge, as required. There is need for work at a variety of scales, directed at a variety of audiences. Some work will be written for other specialists in the history of philosophy. But that should not be the exclusive or ultimate audience for historians of philosophy. They should usually strive to make their work accessible and interesting to the larger group of philosophers, and often to readers more generally.⁴⁵

5. READING FORWARD, READING BACKWARD

Historians of philosophy differ in their strategies for seeking a context. Some interpreters, such as Gaukroger or Buchdahl, read forward: they take the period preceding and surrounding a given author as the primary context. Others employ a strategy of reading backward. Friedman, in *Kant and the Exact Sciences*, uses some preceding material (especially in considering Kant's Newtonianism). But in addressing Kant's philosophy of mathematics, he reads backward from the perspective of late-nineteenth-century developments in mathematics and logic. He adopts attitudes that were not available before the late nineteenth century about the relation between logic and mathematics and about the subject-matter of mathematics itself, and he then interprets Kant by

understood philosophically in light of his conception of the relation between metaphysics and theology (Hatfield 1993).

⁴⁵ Passmore (1964) argued that in the several decades preceding his writing, 'a distinct class of philosopher scholars' (p. 5) was found in America (as opposed to Great Britain). These interpreters were philosophically competent, but they specialized in history rather than working on contemporary problems (though he acknowledged that some of the best historians, such as Lovejoy, did both). Even their best works were, in his view, 'written by philosophical scholars for other philosophical scholars, not by more scholarly philosophers for less scholarly philosophers' (p. 6). I hold that work written for other specialists is needed and desired, but I recommend that historians of philosophy, having established their contextual methods, should make a special effort to convey the philosophical interest and benefit of their work to the wider body of philosophers. That will require historians of philosophy to be trained in and to engage present-day philosophy that relates to the topics of their historical interests.

considering how his work anticipated or fell short of the standards set by these ways of thinking.

A primary aspect of Friedman's reconstruction concerns Kant's proposal that geometrical proofs require appeal to spatial intuition. Kant makes the point most clearly in the Doctrine of Method in the first *Critique*, where he argues that, in geometry, synthetic procedures relying on spatial intuition are needed; discursive logic and the analysis of concepts are insufficient by themselves.⁴⁶ Friedman sees this appeal to spatial intuition as arising because the logical resources available to Kant (monadic logic) were inadequate for logically constructing continuous magnitude (either the real number line, or a weaker subset of the reals, the rationals together with square roots). For example, if Kant had been asked to defend the proposition that a line-segment crossing the circumference of a circle (it starts inside and ends outside the circle) intersects that circumference, he could only have appealed to constructive procedures that relied on spatial structure. After geometry had been interpreted on an algebraic foundation in the nineteenth century, so that line-segments and arcs of circles were constituted as loci of point co-ordinates, a proof of this intersection could be provided algebraically.⁴⁷ If one wished in this context to interpret the real number line logically, one could construct a point-space with irrational co-ordinates (and thus betweenness relations appropriately dense for the problem) by employing the dependence relations for universal and existential quantifiers of modern polyadic logic. But Friedman has Kant realizing that his own (monadic) logical resources could not establish such a point-space, and turning to iterative constructive procedures (in a spatial medium) to get it done. Accordingly, Kant would demonstrate the appropriate infinity of points, including the point of intersection, through infinitely (or indefinitely) iterated procedures of construction (constructing one

⁴⁶ Kant (1781/1787/1998), A 712–37/B 740–65.

⁴⁷ It is sometimes mistakenly supposed that Descartes created analytic or algebraic geometry, in the sense that he thought of geometry as resting upon and being defined by algebraic relations. Rather, he developed techniques that permitted this creation to be completed by the nineteenth century. Descartes could have demonstrated the point of intersection of a circle and a line-segment by providing algebraic co-ordinates, but he would have seen no point in doing so. He regarded geometrical objects and constructions as primary, and his algebraic techniques as aids for when problems became too protracted for constructive techniques; see Hatfield (2003), Appendix, and the literature cited there.

point, then another, with compass-and-straight-edge procedures that include square-root line-lengths).⁴⁸

This retrospective reading ignores the facts that, in Kant's time, geometry was commonly considered to be more basic than algebra, and geometrical structures were not thought to be composed of or constructed from points or point-sets. The idea of deriving all geometrical structures from algebraic relations was foreign to mathematics, certainly at the basic level at which Kant taught and understood mathematics. (Euler and others were laying the foundation for algebraization, but Kant didn't contend with that level of mathematics.)

In the *Critique*, Kant offered a good philosophical reconstruction of the actual procedures of proof used in Euclid's geometry and its common eighteenth-century expressions. Lisa Shabel has shown that these procedures did not rely primarily on logical structure, but often drew upon the spatial relations exhibited in diagrams constructible with only compass and straight-edge. These constructive procedures were not used to demonstrate the existence of an infinite structure; infinite spatial structure (or continuous, in the sense of unbroken) was assumed. For example, if a proof required placing a point on a line-segment between its two end-points, the procedure relied on the assumed spatial structure of the line-segment. That is, it was taken as given that all points of the segment lie *between* the two end-points; a point located anywhere on the segment was already known to be between the end-points, and its existence need not be proved. As Shabel argues, Kant's discussions in the *Critique* captured the ineliminable role of such appeals to spatial structure in the proofs of the extant Euclidean geometry. In this context, questions about the existence of the point where a line crosses a circle do not arise; such problems first arise with the nineteenth-century reconception of geometry in algebraic terms.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Friedman (1992), ch. 1. Friedman is sensitive to charges of anachronism, especially regarding the logical form of Kant's argument; my criticism alleges anachronism about the subject-matter and problems of geometry. Friedman does 'read forward' from earlier discussions of the method of fluxions to Kant's invocation of 'flowing quantities' (1992, p. 74).

⁴⁹ On Kant's analysis of Euclidean proofs, see Shabel (2003). On Friedman's historical methodology, see Hatfield (1996a). On the changes in geometry, see Hatfield (2003), Appendix, and the literature cited there. Neither Shabel nor I deny that Kant appealed to iterative procedures of construction; only that he used them to prove the existence of a dense ordering of points.

A reconstruction of Kant's philosophy of mathematics should, at the outset, pay close attention to the actual mathematical conceptions and practices of Kant and his predecessors. By allowing a later understanding of the problems and methods of geometry to set the context, Friedman missed fundamental aspects of Kant's theory and achievement. Whereas Kant appealed to spatial intuition because he recognized the role of spatial structure in Euclid's proofs, Friedman instead sees him as responding to questions that arose only fifty or one hundred years later by employing a counterpart to modern logical techniques. In writing the history and philosophy of mathematics, it will be more fruitful to read forward, by asking how the problems and methods of geometry were conceived at one time and then came to be reconceived later. Kant's position will not be most fruitfully characterized as 'not yet using' the later methods, or as 'using this work-around' to solve the later problems. Taking earlier mathematics and philosophy on their own terms will help locate the specific problems and opportunities that motivated or afforded later developments.

I do not suggest that reading backward is never useful. I do suggest that reading forward is more often useful in setting context. Reading backward should come later, in posing questions about shapes and themes in history.

6. EXPANDING CONTEXTS, SEEKING HISTORICAL THEMES

The 'context' for reading early modern philosophy can be as narrow as the text surrounding a passage (or the corpus containing a work), and (in the limit) as broad as human history itself. Initial steps in expanding the context of early modern philosophy came from taking seriously the aims of philosophers as expressed in their works. Such 'internal' contexts would have been sufficient (even if other evidence were not available) for expanding the context of early modern metaphysics and epistemology to include relations to mathematics, physics, and other scientific areas such as biology, physiology, or psychology. An internal context is also sufficient for expanding consideration of early modern theories of mind to include theories of the senses, of cognition more generally, and of

the passions and emotions.⁵⁰ Further extension from within is in order. Religion and theology are major presences in early modern philosophical texts. Rather than seeing them as encumbrances to be overcome (one common view), or as sources of arguments to be retrieved by today's believers (another trend), one might make the relations among philosophy, religion, and theology an object of investigation in its own right.⁵¹

There is more to history of philosophy than taking the contexts of individual works or authors into account in reconstructing or explaining their positions. Other units of investigation can be defined, including ideas and themes. One sort of thematic investigation would follow key philosophical ideas or subject areas over decades or centuries. These might include basic philosophical notions, such as conceptions of knowledge and its forms, technical notions, such as 'a priori' and 'a posteriori' or 'analysis' and 'synthesis', or general categories, such as 'metaphysics' or even 'philosophy'. Such basic work in 'philosophical history of ideas' is needed to support contextual work in the history of philosophy. But it can be of interest in its own right, in uncovering conceptual changes and their philosophical significance. Louis Loeb's examination of causation and substance in early modern philosophy is a recent example of this sort of thematic history.

Other work can attend to the ways in which philosophers have been read or 'received'. To understand seventeenth-century Aristotelianism and its opponents, an interpreter must distinguish the local Aristotelianism from the historical Aristotle. The same goes for every major figure. Histories of how the works of key figures were received, initially and over the centuries, are of great interest.⁵² Kant's own presentation of his critical philosophy was altered as he responded to its initial reception. His works have been constantly studied since their appearance, with differing emphases. The historical work of untangling these threads can provide distance from today's locally received readings of Kant, as well as

⁵⁰ Descartes, for example, wrote not only on metaphysics, mathematics, and physics, but also on physiology, theory of mind and cognition, and the passions and emotions; for recent work on these topics, see Gaukroger (1998); Gaukroger, Schuster, and Sutton (2000); Hatfield (1992); and Sutton (1998).

⁵¹ Recent work in this direction includes Jolley (1998) and Popkin (1998), as well as Funkenstein (1986) on theology, philosophy, and science.

⁵² Examples of work on reception include Aarsleff (1971); Clarke (1989); Fieser (2000); Verbeek (1992); Schmaltz (2002); and Watson (1987).

presenting various possibilities, live or not, for interpreting or adapting his work.⁵³

Additional historical and thematic connections should be sought across the boundaries of traditional periods. The relation between early modern philosophy and nineteenth-century philosophy might be taken beyond obvious connections such as that between Kant and German idealism, or between Locke and Hume and the two Mills. By the early twentieth century, the gross structure of periods and themes used in presenting the history of modern philosophy (into the nineteenth century) had solidified. Looking back now from the early twenty-first century, we may reconsider these received views and ask how the story continues. The impact of Darwinism on philosophy might be studied more fully. Links between the flourishing American philosophy before 1930 and the philosophy and science of the preceding century might be investigated.⁵⁴ The development of history of philosophy in America throughout the twentieth century deserves further exploration.⁵⁵

In moving beyond contextual readings of individual texts or authors, the history of philosophy will develop historical accounts and explanations of larger movements of ideas. As history of *philosophy*, these accounts will focus on internal intellectual factors. As *history* of philosophy, they will, as needed, relate these factors to wider historical factors and trends.

⁵³ On Kant's reception, see Ameriks (2003); Hatfield (1990, 2001b); and Sassen (2000).

⁵⁴ Works pursuing some of these themes in twentieth-century philosophy include Cunningham (1996); Delaney (1969); Reynolds (2002); D. J. Wilson (1990); and R. J. Wilson (1989); as in the latter two instances, often such work has been undertaken by intellectual historians rather than historians of philosophy.

⁵⁵ Passmore (1964), in surveying philosophical scholarship in America (read: scholarship in history of philosophy), commended some work in ancient and medieval philosophy (by Paul Shorey, Harold Cherniss, Gregory Vlastos, H. A. Wolfson, and Julius Weinberg), but found the record in modern philosophy 'more than a little disappointing' (p. 84). He praised Randall (1940), Burt, Wolfson, and Beck, and had measured praise for Popkin and Yolton (pp. 77, 85–6, 91, 95); he missed Gewirth's (1941a, 1941b, 1943) seminal articles on Descartes (the first two of which were originally published under the name 'Gewirtz'), though he did notice his work on Marsilius of Padua (Passmore 1964, p. 74). Passmore explained American 'erudition' and 'philosophical scholarship' as resulting from the large number of doctoral dissertations produced under pressure to seek 'originality'; as he saw it, this led to a focus on minor figures (otherwise little studied), yielding many 'one-book' philosophers who publish their dissertations and vanish (1964, p. 28). Grudgingly, he allowed that on occasion the 'drudgery' of slogging through minor philosophers was rewarded (p. 29).

7. SHAPES OF HISTORY

The positions and arguments of major philosophers are understood within a framework of assumptions, often tacit, about the larger shape of philosophy's past. These assumptions concern the motivating problems, aims, and also the achievements of past philosophers or 'schools' of philosophers. Evaluation of achievements may be expected to vary as the present philosophical climate varies. None the less, historians of philosophy, in pursuing contextual methodology, should seek as much as possible to work upward from past philosophers' own statements in establishing the aims or philosophical motives of individuals or schools. They might also seek, in the first instance, to gauge their evaluations by contextually appropriate standards.

Often, philosophical history has been given shape by dividing philosophers into competing schools, characterized as responding to one or more central problems. Kant divided the philosophers before himself into 'intellectualists' (like Plato) and 'sensualists' (like Epicurus) with regard to the primary object of knowledge, and, with respect to the origin of knowledge, into 'empiricists' (Aristotle and Locke) and 'noologists' (those who follow *nous*, or the intellect: Plato and Leibniz). These dichotomies were to be overcome by, or synthesized in, his own critical philosophy.⁵⁶ Others in Kant's time added a 'sceptical' school. In late-nineteenth-century histories, the period from Descartes to Kant was variously categorized, in terms of nationality; metaphysical versus critical approaches (with Locke, Berkeley, and Hume among the latter); systematic, empirical, and critical approaches; and rationalist, empiricist, sceptical, and critical ones.⁵⁷

In more recent historical narratives, the theme of scepticism has been used to characterize the development of early modern philosophy within a framework of rationalism, empiricism, and critical philosophy. In this shaping of history, Descartes raised a sceptical challenge that he was unable to answer adequately; Locke, Berkeley, and Hume pursued it further, in successive steps; and Kant sought to answer Hume's sceptical challenge with his first *Critique*. As an

⁵⁶ Kant (1781/1787/1998), A 853-4/B 881-2.

⁵⁷ Höffding (1900); Falckenberg (1897); Ueberweg (1880); and Weber (1896).

organizing theme for early modern philosophy, scepticism has obvious limits, since Spinoza, Leibniz, and Locke paid scant attention to it, Descartes used scepticism as a tool but was not seriously threatened by it, and Kant had little interest in discussing scepticism about the external world until he was accused of it in early reviews of his first *Critique*.⁵⁸ Further, Berkeley's classification as an empiricist, proto-Humean sceptic can be challenged, notwithstanding his use of certain Lockean principles and Hume's subsequent use of Berkeleyan arguments. Berkeley affirmed a 'notion' of spirit as an active substance, upon which he sought to establish an immaterialist metaphysics—not a particularly 'empiricist' project.

Given the renewed interest in history of philosophy, there has in fact been surprisingly little explicit discussion of periodization, classification, and narrative themes. If the sceptical master narrative for early modern philosophy is abandoned (as it should be, while acknowledging various sceptical traditions), new themes and shapes will need to be developed. These should take into account the early modern penchant for investigating the power and scope of human understanding (which doesn't require sceptical motivation), the relations between philosophy and the sciences, and developments in value theory.

The shape of philosophy's history from the late nineteenth to the end of the twentieth century has yet to be formed. In anglophone scholarship, efforts toward creating this history include work in the history of 'analytic' philosophy and the history of the philosophy of science. The task is large, and the surface has barely been scratched. In the history of analytic philosophy, beyond the emphasis on logic and language as pursued by Michael Dummett and others,⁵⁹ further themes need investigating. These should address the widespread philosophical interest, in the first half of the twentieth century, in sense perception, knowledge, and mind. Perhaps as a result of the ensconcement of behaviourist attitudes within later analytic philosophy,⁶⁰ little attention has been paid to early-twentieth-century theories of mind and the mind-body relation. One context for these topics is the writings of the neo-Kantians on the distinction between

⁵⁸ Although reference to sceptical currents (or a 'sceptical school') in modern philosophy rightly has a long history, the sceptical master narrative has its limits (see n. 37 above).

⁵⁹ Dummett (1994); see also papers in Floyd and Shieh (2001).

⁶⁰ See Hatfield (2002).

the *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften*.⁶¹ Thus far, work on the history of the philosophy of science in the twentieth century has focused mainly on the Vienna Circle and its surroundings.⁶² The topic might be widened to include American approaches initiated before 1930 and carried on afterward, French work in history and philosophy of science, and the ongoing relation between science and metaphysics.⁶³ Sufficient critical distance from the reflexive charge of 'psychologism' may have been attained by now to permit the extensive turn-of-the-century relations between philosophy and psychology to be studied on their own terms, and in a way that recognizes the many influences of the new psychology on philosophy at this time.⁶⁴

As philosophers, historians of philosophy should be prepared to examine their enterprise philosophically. Discussions in the earlier historiographical literature on the methodology of interpreting particular texts have continued in recent work. However, larger questions about periodization and narrative themes, also raised in the earlier literature, have not been vigorously pursued. The recent bounty of work in the history of philosophy should provide the materials needed to support explicit reflection on the shapes of philosophical history.

As philosophers, historians of philosophy should also be prepared to relate the positions of the past (contextually understood)

⁶¹ Anderson (1994) and Makkreel (1992).

⁶² Recent work may be found in Giere and Richardson (1996) and Heidelberger and Stadler (2002).

⁶³ Beyond C. S. Peirce and Morris Cohen, who focused on mathematics and physical science, many American philosophers at the turn of the century (including Dewey and James) were interested in naturalism concerning the mind, or in naturalism more generally (e.g. Sellars 1922), which led them into topics from philosophy of biology and philosophy of psychology, and/or into scientifically informed metaphysics. Furthermore, work in general philosophy of science had been proceeding outside Vienna. Nagel's (1929) article on 'Nature and Convention' mentioned several recent authors, including N. R. Campbell, P. Bridgman, E. Dupreel, C. Eddington, Einstein, F. Gonseth, Peirce, Planck, Poincaré, Reichenbach, and Russell. Of these, only Reichenbach was connected with Vienna (via Berlin), and he was cited for his work on theories of space and time. Campbell and Eddington were cited the most frequently. In English-, French-, and German-language works, philosophical analyses of science—by philosophers and philosophical scientists—were extant from the beginning of the century (and before).

⁶⁴ On the various notions of psychologism at the turn of the century, see Kusch (1995). On this and the other topics described in the above paragraph, Baldwin (2003) will aid further work.

to the positions of the present, and to offer to present-day philosophy insights gleaned from history on both the structures of and solutions to philosophical problems.

8. PHILOSOPHICAL PAY-OFFS

In section 1 I alluded to various philosophical pay-offs from 'historical' history of philosophy. Taking philosophy of mind as my object, I will sketch examples of two sorts of pay-off: understanding landmark positions and questioning embedded assumptions or platitudes. The examples involve early modern and nineteenth-century texts, which are often used to set 'standard' problems or positions in contemporary philosophy. In such cases, historically sensitive readings are directly relevant to contemporary work.

In recent philosophy of mind, terms such as 'intentionality', 'introspection', and 'naturalism' are frequently employed. Often, such terms are introduced and defined with a glance back at a historical figure. Thus, in discussing introspection and self-knowledge, it is common to speak of a 'Cartesian model' of the mind, and to invoke the 'introspective psychology' of Wilhelm Wundt. This Cartesian model maintains that the contents of the mind are 'transparently' and 'incorrigibly' known.⁶⁵ Transparency means that there can be nothing in the mind that is hidden or unavailable to direct inspection and cognitive apprehension. Incorrigibility means that we cannot make mistakes about what is present in our own mind. The defeat of these two theses is often linked with rejecting a notion of phenomenal content as something more than the bare representation of physical objects or bodily states. Allegedly, these epistemological theses were the main support for the notion that there is an 'inner' domain of phenomenal content. Here, Wundtian introspection may be invoked as a last gasp of the Cartesian model.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ e.g. Moran (2001), pp. 1–12. Shoemaker (1996, pp. 224–5) distinguishes 'Cartesian' incorrigibility from the 'perceptual model'; Moran (2001, p. 12) attributes the 'perceptual model' to Descartes, but wonders whether he held to full transparency. On characterizing 'inner perception', see also Lyons (1986), pp. 2–3, 151–2; Rey (1997), pp. 136–7; and Tye (1995), pp. 30–1. Some authors credit the rise of introspection to Locke or Hume. ⁶⁶ e.g. Lyons (1986), pp. 2–6; Rey (1997), pp. 136–7.

The historical attributions to Descartes and Wundt are at best caricatures, at worst grossly in error. Quotations can indeed be produced from Descartes's works that seem to affirm both positions. But in fact Descartes admitted—or insisted—that people can be mistaken about the content of their own minds: e.g. about whether they are having a clear and distinct perception. He also allowed that activities may occur in the mind that are so rapid or so dim as to go unnoticed.⁶⁷ Similarly, Wundt did not suppose that, when introspecting a sensory state, a subject is aware of some inner state that is unrelated to the perception of an external object. Rather, he saw such introspection as a special attitude taken toward the perception of an external object. If someone who is looking at an object is asked to report its colour or match its colour to a set of standard colours, Wundt took these acts to yield introspective reports of current experience. At the same time, he acknowledged that the perception of colour involves a special sensory quality that depends on the perceiving subject. Physical objects are presented by means of subjectively conditioned sensory experiences. The introspective attitude focuses on the subjective character of sensation, rather than seeking to abstract from it, as in physical observation.⁶⁸

This is not the place to develop these interpretations of Descartes and Wundt in detail, and I certainly do not mean to imply that there are no problems with the positions they take. But if the alleged positions of these figures are used in contemporary philosophy of mind as objects to be criticized, or as examples of positions that have been surpassed, then a difficulty arises if they did not hold the

⁶⁷ Descartes 1637/1985, p. 122; 1641/1984, pp. 25, 295; also 1991, pp. 356–7, where he distinguishes reflective awareness from bare consciousness. Of course, Descartes did hold that clear and distinct perceptions themselves cannot be mistaken, and he offered procedures for ascertaining that one is having them (see Hatfield 2003, pp. 145–6, 199–200). Passages suggesting 'transparency' include Descartes 1641/1984, pp. 33–4, 171.

⁶⁸ Wundt (1901/1902), pp. 1–6, 9–12, 24–6. Brentano (1874/1995, pp. 29–36) likewise rejected a perceptual model; he distinguished 'inner observation'—understood by analogy with external perception of objects—from 'inner perception', which is awareness of mental phenomena that does not involve directed attention. He considered perception-like 'observation' of one's mental states while they occur to be unachievable; such observation is available only through memory (reflection). Lyons (1986, pp. 3–5) is sensitive to aspects of these two positions, but he ends up assimilating Wundt and all pre-Jamesian psychologists to an 'inner sense' position (p. 151), without commenting on Wundt's explicit denials.

positions attributed to them. Of course, one may be able to find someone else who held the position targeted. But if Descartes or Wundt held positions that are less implausible than the ones being shot down, then today's philosophers would be in danger of choosing the weaker opponent—an *ineffective* procedure at best. By offering an easily refuted caricature, a contemporary philosopher claims a comparative advantage. But the refutation of a straw position leaves open the possibility that the 'advantage' is spurious. This outcome can derail the study of live alternatives, by enshrining the common 'knowledge' that a particular position has been decisively set aside.

A similar situation arises with the term 'intentionality', frequently invoked in contemporary philosophy of mind but rarely discussed in systematic fashion. The term is introduced, often with a reference to Brentano, and is said to denote a relation of 'aboutness' or 'representation', or a 'directedness' of the mind to its object. In recent 'intentionalist' theories of sensory qualities, intentionalism is alleged to do away with qualia or intrinsic features of phenomenal states.⁶⁹ Brentano held no such doctrine, and found no incompatibility between his notion of the intentional and the distinction, commonly held in the nineteenth century, between primary and secondary qualities.⁷⁰ Here, historical work might well enrich contemporary discussions of intentionality, and augment the surprisingly small amount of direct discussion of the notion, even by those who label themselves 'intentionalists'.

Finally, in contemporary discussion, 'naturalism' about the mental is frequently assumed to imply physicalism or materialism, so that offering a naturalistic account of the intentional is considered as tantamount to reducing that notion to non-intentional terms (usually, to physical or material terms). Are mentalistic notions such as (unreduced) intentionality non-natural? They have not always been regarded as such. Many early modern authors, even dualists,

⁶⁹ Brentano-citing 'intentionalists' who understand their intentionalism as obviating a need for phenomenal qualities include Dretske (1995, pp. 28–34 (including a comparatively extensive discussion of intentionality) and ch. 2); and Tye (1995, chs. 4–5), though he says Brentano is too obscure to interpret (1995, p. 95). Lyons (1995) is an exception, both in appreciating Brentano's position and in exploring the concept of intentionality in detail.

⁷⁰ Brentano (1874/1995), pp. 88–91 and 99–100; on p. 100, the view held by some 'at the present time' amounts to the distinction between primary and secondary qualities.

saw mind as a part of nature, as did major nineteenth-century physiologist-philosophers. Some twentieth-century philosophers, including John Dewey and Ernest Nagel, have distinguished naturalism about the mental from materialism.⁷¹ Again, this is not the place to argue for such a distinction, but historical investigation of the notion of the natural as it has been applied (or not) to the mental (and to the mind–brain relation) could help to sort out these matters philosophically.

Most philosophers grant that past philosophical texts demand philosophical skills from their interpreters. Many would allow that there is plenty of work to be done in interpreting past philosophy and comprehending its history. However, across the twentieth century, philosophers disputed whether historically oriented interpretations have their own philosophical value. I would urge that such interpretations are essential to the health of ongoing philosophy. Philosophy without history may not be completely blind, but it is likely to be extremely near-sighted, bumbling about as it attempts to orient itself in its own evolving problem space. It is not required, for philosophy to get its bearings, that every philosopher become a historian. But all of us may need to draw from the work of our historically oriented colleagues. Which makes it all the more desirable for historians of philosophy to take pains to render the interest and the results of their work readily accessible to other philosophers.⁷²

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⁷¹ Dewey, Hook, and Nagel (1945); see also Woodbridge (1926). On earlier naturalism about the mind, see Hatfield (1997).

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What's Philosophical about the History of Philosophy?

DANIEL GARBER



Virtually every fellow historian of philosophy I know would agree to the proposition that analytic philosophers should take the history of philosophy seriously. But, at the same time, virtually every historian of philosophy I know has at one time or another been involved in a heated conversation on the subject, and been forced to defend the philosophical relevance of the history of philosophy to a benighted colleague who simply can't see the point. This is my main topic for this essay: what might we tell our analytic colleagues when they complain about having to have historians of philosophy on their faculty, or history courses in their curriculum? What can we say about why they *should* take the study of the history of philosophy more seriously?

There isn't a single answer to this question, of course. There are many styles of doing history of philosophy, some of which have more obvious relevance to the practice of analytic philosophy than do others. My own preference is for a genuinely historical history of philosophy. I will try to make clearer what exactly this means as this essay progresses. But I like history, exploring old and archaic views of the world, views of the world that we can now say with some certainty are false, and I enjoy exploring them in the very particular social, political, and intellectual contexts in which they arose and lived. In short, I am something of an antiquarian, and proud of it. Actually, the kind of studies that I favour are quite diverse; to study the details of an archaic doctrine with loving care, for example, is something quite different from studying the social context of its introduction. But ignoring these (and other) differences, let me call the kind of history of philosophy that I favour an antiquarian approach to the history of philosophy. In many

circles, 'antiquarian' is often a pejorative term, but no matter. I suspect that many historians of philosophy oppose the kind of antiquarian history that I favour; though we all may like Bach, some may prefer to hear Bach on an eighteenth-century harpsichord, and others may prefer a modern piano. I take it to be a subsidiary goal of this essay to convince other kinds of historians of philosophy of the philosophical relevance of my kind of history.

I should say from the start that my own interest in the history of philosophy is not directly dependent on any connections it may or may not have with systematic philosophy, analytic or otherwise. One cannot deny that there is a subject there, philosophy as it was practised in the past, and that just as one can take a rigorously historical approach to any other aspect of the past, one can take a rigorously historical approach to past philosophy as well. People do histories of all sorts of things, including politics, military strategy, theatre, table manners, corkscrews. Why not a real history of *philosophy*? It might not interest *everyone*, but then nothing does. As Burton Dreben famously remarked, garbage is garbage, but the history of garbage is scholarship. And if I choose to waste my time in this particular way, no one can tell me that I shouldn't do it. As long as I have my own community of similarly inclined colleagues, I'm happy. Yet, I would argue, the antiquarian history of philosophy does have its philosophical significance, even for analytic philosophers.

Analytic philosophy doesn't mix well with the history of philosophy, particularly the kind of antiquarian history of philosophy that I favour. Of course, a judgement like this depends upon what one means by analytic philosophy. While the term has become rather diffuse of late, analytic philosophy was originally intended to be a way of doing philosophy that solves philosophical problems through logical analysis. A paradigm of this style of philosophy might be Frege's *Foundations of Arithmetic* or Russell's early essays, such as 'On Denoting', or Carnap's classic 'The Overcoming of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language'. As practised more recently, analytic philosophy seems less a definite programme for doing philosophy through logical analysis than an approach to philosophy that values rigorous argumentation and clear thinking. In either case there seems to be little use for the history of philosophy. By itself, the history of philosophy would seem to contribute little if anything to the solution of problems through analysis or

through clear thinking: what seems to count in analytic philosophy is the argument, not its pedigree. (In recent years there has emerged another kind of analytic philosopher, one who uses the history of philosophy to situate his own views. I have in mind here John McDowell in particular, who uses Cartesianism as a kind of foil against which to present his own philosophical views, and draws from earlier philosophers such as Kant and Hegel for his own positive views.¹ Whether McDowell and his followers are genuinely analytic in the sense I have been discussing is not very interesting as a question. McDowell's work does raise interesting questions about the use of history of philosophy, or better, historical mythology in philosophy, but I won't deal with them in this essay.)

On the analytic conception of philosophy, there *might* be *some* room for Jonathan Bennett's so-called collegial approach to the history of philosophy, perhaps. On that approach, Bennett writes, 'one studies the texts in the spirit of a colleague, and antagonist, a student, a teacher—aiming to learn as much philosophy as one can from studying them'. Bennett continues, quoting Grice with approval: 'I treat those who are great but dead as if they were great and living, as persons who have something to say to us *now*.'² This, indeed, has been a main approach to history by philosophers past. Plato, Aristotle, and St Thomas referred regularly to their predecessors, discussing their views, subjecting them to critique and keeping what was valuable. Modern philosophy was born with the rejection of the history of philosophy, and the status of the study of past philosophy has been problematic ever since. In his *Discourse on the Method*, Descartes began by rejecting what he learned in school in favour of what he could discover for himself through reason and experience. But the rejection of history didn't last long. The history of philosophy was of particular importance to Kant, for

¹ See e.g. John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), where the names of Kant and Hegel come up often. See also John McDowell, 'Naturalism in the Philosophy of Mind', in David MacArthur and Mario De Caro (eds.), *Naturalism in Question* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, forthcoming). In that essay, McDowell discusses naturalism in relation to a 'Cartesian' philosophy of mind which, he frankly acknowledges, may not be the view held by the historical Descartes.

² See the Introduction to vol. 1 of Jonathan Bennett, *Learning from Six Philosophers: Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley, Hume*, 2 vols. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). The quotations are from p. 1.

example, who used history of philosophy, from Descartes to Hume, as a way of placing himself at the culmination of European thought. (In so doing, by the way, he created historical categories that still haunt the modern historian of philosophy, categories that we are still trying to escape.) Hegel made the history of philosophy even more central to his thought. And so it went, and in the view of some contemporary philosophers, so it continues. But the ways in which these philosophers used the history of philosophy were very much in the spirit of Bennett's collegial approach: earlier figures were seen as sources of arguments and positions to challenge or from which to borrow. What I want to argue for is the philosophical significance of a more antiquarian approach to the subject.

I shall begin with a few remarks about just what I mean by the antiquarian history of philosophy. Then I will try to show the contribution that the antiquarian history of philosophy can make to philosophy itself, and make some suggestions about what one might say to a sceptical colleague.

AN ANTIQUARIAN'S DESCARTES

To illustrate the approach that I have in mind, let me summarize some work that I have been doing recently. I want to discuss where the study of Descartes's philosophy has led me, from the *Meditations*, to his larger thought, to his intellectual circle, and ultimately to the larger social and cultural context of his thought.

Let us begin with the *Meditations*. I don't have to remind you about the philosophical interest of the *Meditations*, the sceptical arguments that begin the journey, the *cogito* and the idea of beginning the reconstruction of the world from the self, the proofs for the existence of God and the validation of reason that is supposed to derive from that (as well as the circularity that threatens to overturn the whole enterprise), the proof of the distinction between mind and body, and the proof for the existence of the external world. All of these are standard questions in Descartes's thought, and all are well worth spending time with. But the *Meditations* are just one small part of Descartes's thought. *Why stop here?*

The metaphysics and epistemology of the *Meditations* were not meant as a free-standing philosophical project, but as the prelude to

what we would now call a scientific system. As he wrote in the preface to the French edition of his *Principia Philosophiae*:

Thus the whole of philosophy is like a tree. The roots are metaphysics, the trunk is physics, and the branches emerging from the trunk are all the other sciences, which may be reduced to three principal ones, namely medicine, mechanics and morals.³

In the *Meditations*, Descartes established that the essence of body is extension, that bodies are simply the objects of geometry made real, and thus that they contain nothing but geometrical properties, size, shape, and motion. As a consequence, everything in the physical world must be explained in terms of size, shape, and motion alone. The laws of motion come next, derived from God's immutability. Descartes then attempted to show (with much waving of hands, perhaps) how from an initial chaos created by God, the current state of the world will evolve through the mediation of the laws of motion alone, including animals and human beings.

Descartes thought that human bodies, like all other living bodies, can be understood entirely in terms of their physical composition—that is, the size, shape, and motion of the parts that make them up. In particular, he denied that one must appeal to a soul to explain phenomena such as growth, nutrition, reproduction, and involuntary motion. Human beings differ from other animals for Descartes, of course, by virtue of the fact that they have incorporeal souls. It is important here that we realize that Descartes's discussion of the soul was very much part and parcel of his larger scientific programme: it was an integral part of his account of the way the world is, part of his explanation of the phenomena of nature. Indeed, for Descartes, the whole system was of a piece, and it was all philosophy: the distinction between philosophy and science that we generally take for granted comes only much later in the history of thought. It seems obvious to me that if we are genuinely to appreciate Descartes's philosophical thought taken narrowly, we

³ René Descartes, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, new edn., 11 vols. (Paris: CNRS/Vrin, 1964–74), vol. IXB, p. 13. Further citations from Descartes will be to this edition, abbreviated 'AT', followed by the volume and page number. Translations are taken from René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, ed. and trans. Robert Stoothoff, John Cottingham, Dugald Murdoch and (vol. 3) Anthony Kenny, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). Since this edition is keyed to AT, I won't cite it separately.

must see how it functions in his larger thought, even if that leads us into areas that we are inclined to think of as crossing disciplinary boundaries, from philosophy into science.⁴

But why stop here, at the boundaries of Descartes's philosophy, taken broadly? Descartes, of course, did not write in a vacuum. His thought was intended as an alternative to what he learned in school. In Descartes's day (and for many years before, as well as for some years after), every European schoolboy learned his philosophy from textbooks that were imbued with the philosophy of Aristotle as filtered through the thought of Christian thinkers such as St Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus. Descartes had been a student at the Jesuit college of La Flèche, which followed a strict Aristotelian curriculum, dictated by the Order's headquarters in Rome. It was against this doctrine that Descartes was directing his thought. In contrast to Aristotelian explanations of physical phenomena in terms of matter and form, the inherent and irreducible tendencies to behave in one way or another, Descartes tried to explain phenomena as we explain the behaviour of machines, in terms of size, shape, and motion of parts.⁵

But why stop here, with Descartes's relation to the schoolmen? Descartes was by no means the only philosopher to be seeking alternatives to the Aristotelianism of the schools. Others who agreed with Descartes in explaining the world in terms of matter in motion included Thomas Hobbes (who considered himself as much a natural philosopher as a political philosopher), Pierre Gassendi, and, in different ways, Marin Mersenne and Galileo. Indeed, in a way, Descartes fits into a tradition of mathematical thought about physical matters ('mixed mathematics' or 'middle sciences', what we would call applied mathematics) that can be traced back through Galileo to the great mathematicians and humanists of sixteenth-century Italy who revived the thought of Archimedes and other ancients. But not all opponents of Aristotle were as quantitatively inclined as were Descartes and his circle. Competing with what was to become the 'mechanical philosophy' later in the

⁴ This is one of the main themes of Daniel Garber, *Descartes' Metaphysical Physics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁵ Descartes's relations to the scholastic tradition are pursued in Roger Ariew, *Descartes and the Last Scholastics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), and Dennis Des Chene, *Physiologia: Natural Philosophy in Late Aristotelian and Cartesian Thought* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

century were so-called Italian Naturalists such as Telesio, Campanella, Patrizi, and Bruno, Chemical Philosophers in the school of Paracelsus and others, astrologers, and a variety of other assorted thinkers. While the so-called mechanists, the ancestors of modern mathematical physicists, are most visible to us, in Descartes's day it wasn't at all clear who was going to win.

These excursions outside of Descartes's texts are also important for understanding Descartes's thought. To understand the views and arguments that Descartes puts forward, we have to understand what they were directed against. First of all, we must understand the Aristotelian views that he (and others) were opposing, why they thought them wrong, and how his own views were intended to improve upon the Aristotelian philosophy. But it is just as important to understand how Descartes separated himself from the thinkers whom we are now inclined to see as his friends. For this reason I have been working hard to understand how exactly Descartes distinguished himself from the Galilean programme for a mathematical theory of motion and mechanics, and how Descartes's natural philosophy was different from the atomist programme of Gassendi and the much more geometrical conception of the world that was put forward in Hobbes's materialistic world-view, among others.⁶

But why stop here, with the larger *intellectual* context of Descartes's philosophy? Descartes's philosophy represented a rejection not only of Aristotle and Aristotelianism, but of an entire intellectual tradition based on authority. In rejecting his education, Descartes was rejecting his teachers, the institution of the university, and the whole intellectual tradition based on authority. This is one of the important meanings of the geometrical idea in Descartes, as well as in Galileo, Hobbes, and Mersenne: it allows one to set aside history, tradition, and authority, and gives everyone an equal right to their opinions.

It is not surprising that this kind of intellectual move was seen as threatening. First of all, it was threatening to the universities, who had a great deal invested in the intellectual *status quo*: they were the authorities under attack. (Though it is interesting in this connection

⁶ For a discussion of Descartes's programme in relation to that of Galileo, see Daniel Garber, 'A Different Descartes: Descartes and the Programme for a Mathematical Physics in his Correspondence', in John Sutton, Stephen Gaukroger, and John A. Schuster (eds.), *Descartes' Natural Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 113–30.

to note that when Descartes published the *Discourse* and the scientific essays that accompanied it, he promptly sent a copy to his old teachers at La Flèche, with a flattering note, 'you probably don't remember me, I'm René Descartes, and I was in your class 20 years ago...'.⁷ In addition, if the Aristotelian curriculum had to be abandoned, and replaced by who knew what, there would be chaos at the universities. Not only was the basic arts curriculum grounded in Aristotle, but the curricula of the higher faculties of Medicine and Theology would also have to be substantially revised. Furthermore, individual teachers would have to throw away the lecture notes that they had carefully developed, and write new ones, from scratch.

But even more generally, the new anti-Aristotelian ideas were considered quite threatening to society. Let me relate an event that I find especially revealing in this regard. In late August 1624, a group of three disputants (whom I shall call the Gang of Three) put up posters at the street corners of Paris, inviting people to a public disputation. On those posters were fourteen anti-Aristotelian theses, mainly against the Aristotelian physics of matter and form and in favour of an atomist conception of physics. The posters announced a public forum in which the Three claimed that they were going to defend those theses and refute Aristotle. Close to a thousand people gathered at the chosen site, the palace of the late Queen Marguérite, the late ex-wife of the assassinated King Henry IV. However, the Parlement of Paris got wind of the event, and before it happened, prevented the Gang of Three from holding it. After the crowd dispersed, the Three were arrested, tried, and, on advice from the Faculty of Theology of the University of Paris (the Doctors of the Sorbonne), sentenced to banishment from Paris, on pain of corporal punishment. As a consequence of the deliberations, the Parlement declared formally that it was forbidden to speak against the approved authors, particularly Aristotle.⁸

In this case we have the civil government, the university, and the Church coming together to condemn those who would reject Aristotle. Why? Behind this event (and much else in the intellectual life of the period) is the experience of the religious wars of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. In this context, the new

⁷ See AT I 383–4.

⁸ This legal judgment was historically very significant. Though it wasn't directed against Descartes (who wasn't to publish for thirteen years), it was later used against his followers. See Ariew, *Descartes and the Last Scholastics*, pp. 174–5.

anti-Aristotelian philosophies seemed every bit as dangerous to the public welfare as the heresies of Luther and Calvin. In an age in which intellectual innovation had led to such disastrous consequences, intellectual conservatism must have looked enormously attractive.⁹

But why stop here? . . . We could go further afield in trying to build broader and broader historical contexts in which to understand Descartes's thought. We started with a perfectly reasonable goal, from a philosophical point of view: to understanding Descartes's *Meditations*. And somehow we wound up quite far away, discussing people posting theses on street corners, court cases, and religious wars. The starting place was certainly of philosophical interest, but what about where we ended up? Have we been led away from philosophy and into an alien land? As an antiquarian, I find these broader and broader excursions into history endlessly fascinating. But I can see certain readers becoming more and more impatient: where is the philosophical interest in all of this? How can one justify asking other philosophers to engage in such studies, to have people like me in their departments, to ask students to take courses on such subjects?

WHAT'S PHILOSOPHICAL ABOUT THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY?

So what *is* philosophically interesting about this antiquarian kind of history of philosophy? What should we tell our sceptical analytic philosopher, the one who would deny that the history of philosophy has any relevance to his work?

I certainly don't want to deny that the history of philosophy is important as a source of arguments and positions, either for us to adopt, or for us to consider and reject, as Bennett's collegial historian of philosophy might insist. The arguments and positions of past philosophers may indeed resonate with current concerns, and may in a very direct way enter into debates of current concern,

⁹ This event and its historical context are discussed in Daniel Garber, 'Defending Aristotle/Defending Society in Early 17th Century Paris', in Claus Zittel and Wolfgang Detel (eds.), *Wissensideale und Wissenskulturen in der frühen Neuzeit (Ideals and Culture of Knowledge in Early Modern Europe)* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 2002), pp. 135–60.

particularly in ethics and political philosophy. But in order to mine the past for arguments and positions of contemporary interest, as the collegial historian of philosophy wants to do, we must read the history of philosophy through our own philosophical categories. We must also ignore the particular social and political circumstances that accompany past thought: though the larger social context may be of interest to an antiquarian like me, it is not of interest to the collegial historian of philosophy who seeks the eternal and timeless wisdom of past thinkers.

But treating the history of philosophy in this way blinds us to some of its most interesting features. There is much anxiety about where philosophy is going now, what we are supposed to be doing as philosophers. Times like these inevitably raise the question of what philosophy is and what its future may be. At this time it is also very easy to become anxious about whether what we are doing really matters in the larger scheme of things, how we fit into the larger cultural context in which we work. At this juncture it is particularly important for philosophy to recover its past, its *real* past. The collegial history of philosophy reinforces our current predicament, replaying on the historical stage our current philosophical conceptions. Ironically enough, the antiquarian history of philosophy can help us to look at philosophy itself and its relations with other disciplines and with the larger world in a fresh new way.

It is often taken for granted that the discipline of philosophy that we practise today is substantially the same as it was in past times. It is this assumption that underlies the way in which philosophers have generally used the history of philosophy as a source of arguments and problems for their current work. But a careful and genuinely historical study of early modern philosophy gives us a rather different conception of the subject, something from which we as philosophers in the twenty-first century can learn.

I certainly do not mean to deny that there are individual questions that are common for earlier thinkers and for us. Take, for example, scepticism and the question of the grounds of knowledge. For someone writing in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century, scepticism was a major challenge. But, I would claim, it was not the *same* challenge for them as it is for us. For someone writing in that period, Marin Mersenne, for example (to choose someone for whom scepticism was a central question), it was a response to the problem that after centuries of trying to sort out

competing and radically different ways of understanding the world—Aristotelianism, Platonism, the Chemical Philosophy, Atomism—it still seemed as if there were no grounds for choosing one over another.¹⁰ The problem of scepticism was a pressing problem, a challenge to the very intelligibility of the world. For us, it is quite different, I think. Whatever the philosophical sceptic decides, the world of science goes its merry way. Detached from the larger issues of understanding the world (and the larger cultural issues that this entailed), the problem of scepticism has become a philosophical problem in the modern sense.

Or consider the closely related problem of the validation of knowledge in Descartes that I touched on earlier. For us, the epistemological problem, the problem of the nature of knowledge and its justification, is a paradigmatic philosophical question. But it is important to note here that Descartes's conception of the problem was very different from the later philosophical conception of the problem. For Descartes, the problem of knowledge wasn't an abstract philosophical problem, a general concern about what we are justified in knowing. For Descartes it was closely connected with the Aristotelian physics that he wanted to reject, and the mechanist physics that he wanted to build. Descartes advanced the conception of knowledge that he wanted to defend and validate not for what we would think of as purely philosophical motives. His point was, at least in good part, to undermine the generally empiricist epistemological assumptions that lead toward Aristotelianism and to replace them with an epistemology of clear and distinct perception that will underlie a fundamentally Cartesian world of geometrical bodies in motion. The over-dependence on the senses leads us directly to an Aristotelian conception of the world, where bodies have innate tendencies to rise or fall, where some things are really hot and other things really cold, some really wet and others really dry. When we base our beliefs on clear and distinct perceptions, though, we discover that the essence of body is extension alone, and that the tendencies and sensory qualities that we tend to attribute to body are simply impositions of mind on matter. Descartes's point in

¹⁰ See e.g. Marin Mersenne, *La Verité des sciences: contre les septiques [sic] ou pyrrhoniens* (Paris: Chez Toussainct du Bray, 1625). That work is a dialogue between the Christian philosopher (a stand-in for Mersenne himself), the sceptic, and the alchemist.

validating clear and distinct perceptions wasn't to answer abstract and purely philosophical worries about scepticism and the possibility of knowledge, but to ground a particular conception of the physical world—what we would call a genuine scientific programme.¹¹

Or consider the problem of the freedom of the will, for us a paradigmatic metaphysical problem. For the seventeenth century, on the other hand, it was deeply connected with the problem of how to fit human beings into a developing mechanist conception of the physical world governed by deterministic laws of nature. Philosophers today generally take the physical world as fixed, and outside the domain of their interest and competence, when they discuss problems such as freedom of the will. But in the early modern period, the world was at least as much at stake for the philosopher. To understand our place in the world, the philosopher had to come to an understanding both of us and of the world. For Descartes, as for his Aristotelian teachers, the study of human beings, including their minds as well as their bodies, was a part of natural philosophy, physics. The problem he and his contemporaries faced was to come to a conception of the world that made sense of the laws and principles that govern inanimate nature at the very same time as they made sense of the human beings who live in that world.¹²

In this way a careful, contextual study of the history of philosophy will show the way in which the very scope of the term 'philosophy' has changed between Descartes's time and our own. Even though in many cases one can find problems in earlier thinkers that are obviously co-ordinate to problems in contemporary philosophy, most often they are not found in the same intellectual and cultural context. It is not unimportant that the problems of knowledge and scepticism, mind and freedom, were situated in the seventeenth century as part of a larger enterprise that included what we would call science and theology, and that this larger enterprise was the domain of philosophy.

There is a widespread picture of the historical development of the discipline of philosophy. On that picture, when we look back into

¹¹ This reading of Descartes is elaborated in Daniel Garber, '*Semel in Vita*: The Scientific Background to Descartes' *Meditations*', in Daniel Garber, *Descartes Embodied: Reading Cartesian Philosophy through Cartesian Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 221–56.

¹² On this question, see Daniel Garber, 'Mind, Body, and the Laws of Nature in Descartes and Leibniz', in *Descartes Embodied*, pp. 133–67.

the history of philosophy, we can always find a central core of philosophy and philosophical problems, where these notions are understood in something resembling the modern sense. According to this picture, other fields were allied with this philosophical core: physics, psychology, biology, etc. (This is nicely illustrated in the popular seventeenth-century philosophical textbook by Eustachius a Sancto Paulo, the *Summa philosophicæ quadripartita*, first published in Paris in 1609, but widely reprinted throughout the seventeenth century. As the title says, the book is divided into four parts. Three of them are recognizably philosophical by our lights: the logic, ethics, and metaphysics. But the fourth (and by far the longest) part is the physics. The physics contains discussions of body (matter and form), causation, space, and time, but it also contains discussions of the planets and the stars, of plants and animals, of human biology and psychology. In this respect it was quite typical of the period.) But, the story goes, as these other disciplines became mature, they peeled off and became independent sciences, leaving the core philosophical problems to continue as they always have.

There is something that is right about this picture, of course, but there is also something that is very wrong. The reconfiguration of the notion of philosophy constitutes a new entity: in a sense, the formation of a new natural kind. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that what we call philosophy today would not have been recognized as an autonomous subject in the seventeenth century. The fact that physics and theology, psychology and biology were part of the disciplinary mix that included what we now think of as philosophical problems is not at all incidental: it is part of what defined those philosophical problems as the problems that they were.

It is interesting to note that, in a way, one can see in certain trends in philosophy a return to the spirit of the seventeenth century, where philosophy is taken to be much more closely related to the special sciences than it was, say, fifty years ago. In philosophy of mind, it is impossible to work without a serious knowledge of real psychology, neurophysiology, and computer science. In philosophy of physics or philosophy of biology, it is now impossible to work without a serious knowledge of real physics or biology. Even so, I think that there are differences between then and now: you can't go home again. For us, now, there is a philosophical perspective on psychology or biology or physics. But this, at least implicitly, recognizes a certain disciplinary difference between the philosopher

and the practitioner of the appropriate science. Certainly, there is a difference in community: the philosopher of physics speaks largely to philosophers, and goes to philosophy meetings, and while he may speak to physicists, it is as an outsider, in general. But in the seventeenth century, there simply *was no difference*: the physicist *was* a philosopher. This, I claim, suggests a very different conception of what the subject of philosophy was. It also suggests a very different conception of what physics was. When a Descartes or a Leibniz worried about how to understand the physical world, part of getting it right involved understanding how we as human beings fit into the world. The science of physics could not be torn off from the rest of the mix: it was all part of the same larger enterprise.

But the antiquarian history of philosophy gives us other interesting insights. Consider, for example, the opponents of the Gang of Three, whom I discussed earlier. To be sure, many people genuinely thought that the Aristotelian philosophy was true, and that the kind of atomism that the Gang of Three wanted to substitute for it was false. But it wasn't entirely a matter of reason and argument: the arguments that they offered in favour of Aristotle were, bluntly, *ad hoc*, *ad hominem*, and thoroughly worthy of being dismissed.¹³ Be that as it may, the quality of the argumentation here is to some extent beside the point: in this particular situation, the arguments weren't just moves in an honest search after the truth, but at least in part stand-ins for ideological battles between cultural and political conservatives and their opponents. Furthermore, to give up Aristotelianism and adopt one of its opponents would have caused major disruption in the world of the university. If losing an

¹³ For a collection of such arguments against innovation and for Aristotelianism, see Jean-Baptiste Morin, *Refutation des theses erroneës d'Anthoine Villon dit le Soldat Philosophe, & Estienne de Claves medecin chymiste . . . ou sont doctement traictez les vrays principes des corps & plusieurs autres beaux pointcs de la nature; & prouëe la solidité de la doctrine d'Aristôte* (Paris: Chez l'auteur, 1624). This pamphlet was written in response to the Gang of Three incident discussed earlier. Among many tendentious arguments, one especially stands out. Morin seems to take as basic and beyond serious question the Aristotelian view that 'matter . . . and form united are the essence of body as such' (p. 36). He thus argues that without matter and form, there can be no bodies. And so, he argues, since the Gang of Three deny matter and form, for them the human being isn't a body. This leads to the denial of God. For if man is not a body, then neither is Jesus Christ. So, if there is no matter and form, Christ must have been lying when he declared, 'this is my body'. And if God can lie, then there is no God (pp. 48–9). Thus heresy, blasphemy, and atheism follow 'très-euidemment' from the doctrines of these philosophers.

argument has such serious consequences in the real world, one may overvalue one's own weak arguments and undervalue the stronger arguments advanced by one's opponents. The epistemological lesson is important: argument, even philosophical argument, is not always the disinterested seeking after truth. In the real world, arguments are offered, debates take place, in a larger social context, even in philosophy. This affects the arguments given, how they are read and interpreted, and how their strength is evaluated.

Here is another, different instance of the way in which philosophy fits into a larger social context. I discussed how, for Descartes, the problem of knowledge was closely connected with the problem of arguing for his own mechanist conception of the world and against the Aristotelian philosophy of the schools. But, in this way, it was also connected with the larger reform of the university and of knowledge in general, and all that this meant. It was part and parcel of the general overthrow of the dominant intellectual system, and of the authoritarianism on which it was built. The rejection of the senses and the call for an epistemology grounded in clear and distinct perception was a call to reject the authority of books and teachers, of Aristotle and the university. In this way it was the first step in a rather concrete and ambitious attempt at reforming knowledge, reforming education, and, in an important sense, reforming society as well. In Part II of the *Discourse*, Descartes compared his reform of knowledge to the rebuilding of a city from the ground up. Noting that 'ancient cities which have gradually grown from mere villages into large towns are usually ill-proportioned, compared with those orderly towns which planners lay out as they fancy on level ground', he noted: 'I thought that I could not do better than undertake to get rid of [my former beliefs], all at one go, in order to replace them afterwards with better ones.'¹⁴ This is an analogy with profound political implications. Descartes explicitly denied that he meant the reform in this political sense. He wrote:

I cannot by any means approve of those meddlesome and restless characters who, called neither by birth nor by fortune to the management of public affairs, are yet forever thinking up some new reform. And if I thought this book contained the slightest ground for suspecting me of such folly, I would be very reluctant to permit its publication.¹⁵

¹⁴ AT VI 13.

¹⁵ AT VI 14.

But he cannot have been ignorant of the larger social and even political implications of his project.

Descartes wasn't the only one to situate his project for the reform of philosophy in these larger social and political terms. Descartes's contemporary, Thomas Hobbes, was if anything even more explicit. At the end of Part IV of his *Leviathan*, chapters usually skipped over by readers more interested in his political thought, Hobbes argues that Aristotelian metaphysics, in particular the, for him, wrong-headed doctrine of separated essences, souls that survive the death of the body, and other incorporeal substances, is the support of an evil political system that undermines legitimate rulers. The institution that benefits from the support of the Aristotelian philosophy is, of course, the Catholic Church, otherwise known in Hobbes's thought as the 'Kingdom of Darkness'. Hobbes writes:

But to what purpose . . . is such subtlety in a work of this nature, where I pretend to nothing but what is necessary to the doctrine of government and obedience? It is to this purpose: that men may no longer suffer themselves to be abused by them that by this doctrine of *separated essences*, built on the vain philosophy of Aristotle, would fright them from obeying the laws of their country with empty names, as men fright birds from the corn with an empty doublet, a hat, and a crooked stick . . . [W]ho will not obey a priest, that can make God, rather than his sovereign, nay than God himself? Or who that is in fear of ghosts will not bear great respect to those that can make the holy water that drives them from him?¹⁶

In this way Hobbes presents his own materialist philosophy (to Protestant England, of course) as an antidote to a Papism that threatens to undermine the stability of the state—indeed, that had succeeded in undermining the stability of Europe as a whole, from his point of view. For Hobbes, as for Descartes, philosophy matters; philosophy is connected with larger issues.

I think that I have given enough examples of the sorts of things that one might learn from an antiquarian history of philosophy. But, one might well ask, why are these insights of any interest to the practising analytic philosopher? What is it that one might say to that sceptical analytic colleague, who is still, no doubt, unsympathetic toward the history of philosophy?

¹⁶ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. E. M. Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1994), ch. 46, p. 460.

I will not pretend that my version of the history of philosophy is in any *direct* way of importance to him or his students: it won't give them the keys to solving hard problems in metaphysics or epistemology or the philosophy of language. But the study of the history of philosophy gives us something else. Part of being a good philosopher is being reflective about what exactly philosophy is, what kinds of questions it treats, what kind of an enterprise it is, how it relates to other intellectual—and non-intellectual—enterprises. The philosopher who does not reflect on what he is doing is, in a sense, trapped in current practice. This may be satisfactory for what we might call normal philosophy, the 'normal scientific' phase of philosophical research, to use the Kuhnian terminology. When we are dealing with philosophical problems within a single and well-defined paradigm, we don't need to reflect on what exactly philosophy is. But in times like these, where the analytic paradigm is in what many consider a crisis, we need to think larger thoughts; we need a larger vision of what we are doing. It is this that the antiquarian can provide. As I said earlier, it is ironic but true that it is the most history-bound historian of philosophy who can provide the philosopher with fresh views of the subject. He can show the philosopher alternative ways of conceiving what philosophy is. Realizing how philosophical problems, as well as the very concept of philosophy, have changed over the years can help us free ourselves from the tyranny of the present, essentialism with respect to the notion of philosophy itself. It can also allow us to see some of the philosophical problems that grip us in new ways. But philosophy does not take place in a vacuum. Much of the vitality of past philosophy has derived from the larger context in which it is done, from the other disciplines with which it has been associated, from the social and political issues with which it has been connected. The antiquarian can remind us about how philosophy has, in the past, connected with this larger world outside of philosophy proper. Making us aware of this can make us look more carefully at our own current situation, at what our relations to the larger world really are, and can make us aware of what the possibilities for the future might be.

What, then, can the historian of philosophy say to the analytic philosopher? Don't study history of philosophy with the idea that it will help you solve any particular problem that interests you. It probably won't. But if a good philosopher is one who is reflective

about his practice and his discipline, then the good philosopher is one who understands the larger historical context of what he is doing. In this way, the history of philosophy should be a part of every philosopher's education, even that of the analytic philosophers who think that they need it least. That is not why I, as an antiquarian, pursue the kinds of studies that I do. I do them simply because I find them fascinating. But this larger perspective is something that I am happy to offer my analytic colleagues and their students.

In this way, I maintain, the history of philosophy, the *antiquarian* history of philosophy, may help us to rethink what philosophy might become in these uncertain times. Thomas Kuhn opens *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* with the following statement: 'History, if viewed as a repository for more than anecdote or chronology, could produce a decisive transformation in the image of science by which we are now possessed.'¹⁷ I hope that it isn't too pretentious to end my polemic with a paraphrase of that statement: History of philosophy, if viewed as a repository for more than assorted arguments and errors, could produce a decisive transformation in the image of philosophy by which we are now possessed.

¹⁷ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd edn. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 1.

*The Ideology of Context: Uses and
Abuses of Context in the
Historiography of Philosophy*

YVES CHARLES ZARKA*



INTRODUCTION

Methodological considerations are, as we know, often superficial and pointless. This is so when they are seen as a means of introducing us to the knowledge of a given subject-matter. They are superficial because they stand apart from what is being studied, and pointless because they are forgotten as soon as the serious business starts—that is, at the point where knowledge begins its work. Spinoza and Hegel in particular taught us that considerations of method draw us away from what we are studying rather than into it. This is why, for them, method correctly understood is not prior to knowledge, but part and parcel of it; it is the self-reflection of knowledge doing its work.

Now it seems to me that it is the same for methodological reflections on the historiography of philosophy as for other disciplines: they are often superficial and pointless. For example, someone will use arguments to define the way in which history—here, the history of philosophy—ought to be written; but as soon as it comes to putting that method into practice, will return to the most traditional and scholastic of historiographies. Another will think he has brought about a revolution in the field by passing from a study of great texts by great philosophers to the consideration of a much bigger number of lesser philosophies, and thence to the consideration of the socio-political context in which a philosophical thought emerged. He will think this without realizing that he is repeating things which have been said again and again for decades.

* Translated from the French by Edward Hughes.

If reflections on the historiography of philosophy are to avoid such emptiness, it will only be by taking account of philosophy itself. To ask questions about the historiography of philosophy is also to ask questions about what philosophy is, or, more precisely, what a philosophical text is. These questions are important at a time when the status of philosophy and its relationship to other forms of knowledge is becoming problematical.

Is a philosophical text different from other texts? Does it derive purely from a historical discipline? Alternatively, is not its truly philosophical meaning revealed only when it is placed in a philosophical perspective?

Having chosen to write on 'the ideology of context', I do not intend to call into question the use of context in the historiography of philosophy. On the contrary, I believe that the use of context is necessary and even, from a certain point of view, indispensable when writing the history of philosophy. But I also believe that when we cross a certain threshold, we pass from the use of context to its abuse, and even perhaps from its abuse to ideology. It is this shift from a legitimate use of context to an ideological use that I wish to focus on here. This will require me to show how ideological contextualism provides a false representation of philosophy. But I should also like to go further, first by reopening some questions on the problematical relationship between philosophy and the history of philosophy, and secondly by defining the idea of a philosophical history of philosophy.

1. FROM THE LEGITIMATE USE OF CONTEXT TO ITS IDEOLOGICAL USE

The object of the historiography of philosophy is philosophy, or, more exactly, philosophy's past—philosophical texts from the past. This statement is not as tautological as it may sound. For the historiographer, philosophy is texts first of all, texts which lead to other texts. To ask questions about the historiography of philosophy is to ask questions about the particular status of a philosophical text, a text in which the thought or thoughts of a philosopher are unfolded. The question at this level is to find out whether a philosophical text is just one text among others, or if we should accord it

a special status. The historian of the novel could ask the same question about the status of a fictional text.

A. In one sense the answer to this question should be affirmative: a philosophical text has no privileged status over other texts (fiction, poetry, history, and so on). Like any other text, it is produced at a moment in human history, in a particular society which is confronted by specific problems. It goes without saying that philosophical thoughts do not come into being in some kind of heaven of ideas which is indifferent to worldly events.

In other words, a philosophical text needs to be placed in the context in which it was written in order to be understood. Certain aspects of its meaning depend, often directly, on a knowledge of polemics, power relationships, and institutional issues, as well as the positions of other philosophers or the state of scientific development at the time. At this level, the use of context is both necessary and legitimate. Two points, however, need to be borne in mind.

First, context is never simple. It has dimensions which are economic (as Marxist historians have insisted), socio-political, and institutional. It brings into play power relationships, even perhaps the existence of persecution of independent thought. Context also includes the various intellectual and doctrinal milieux which may be close to the philosopher or further away in both time and space. It is important to put these contextual dimensions into some sort of hierarchy in order to define the complex context of a thought.

Second, context always has to be reconstructed. It is never given. In other words, the context is no simpler than the text. Just as the text has to be interpreted, so the context has to be reconstructed. A better way of putting it would be to say that the interpretation of the text (or in any event, of some of its elements) and the historical reconstruction of the context interact. The text is necessary for the reconstruction of the context, and vice versa. I am thinking particularly of Leo Strauss's formidable analyses of persecution and the art of writing. The relationships between context and text have to be, in a certain way, deciphered simultaneously.

The reference to Leo Strauss is important here, because he brought clearly to the fore two historiographical principles of philosophy: (1) the historian must endeavour to understand an author as he understood himself, and not better than he understood himself. This consideration gives us the foundation for the necessity

of the reference to context. (2) The fact that a philosophy was elaborated at a particular moment in history and in a particular society does not imply that the content of that philosophy is merely the expression of that historical moment. The meaning of a philosophy cannot be pinned down so simply to the time in which it appeared.

B. It is therefore important, in a second sense, to say that a philosophical text has a singularity which makes it philosophical. Were we to fail to recognize this, the history of philosophy would be nothing but a part of cultural history. In that case, what would be lost would be philosophy itself. We would be witnesses to a very strange operation whereby the historiographer would be suppressing the singularity of the very object whose history he claims to be writing—somewhat like the ethnologist whose very presence destabilizes the society he intends to describe. The historian of philosophy should be something other than an ethnologist of philosophy.

We pass from the legitimate use of context to its ideological use when we employ it unilaterally, considering it to be the key to all the philosophical text's dimensions. This position comes down to saying that the meaning and the issues of a philosophical work are confined to the era in which it was produced. And in certain cases, this comes down to treating a philosophical work as if it were just a tract. This can easily be illustrated by certain interpretations of Hobbes and Descartes.

Actually, the task of the historian of philosophy is also (and principally) to elucidate or to draw out the singularity of a philosophical approach: to return, that is, to the same object as the original philosopher. I will come back to this point in the third part of this essay, where I speak about the object of enunciation.

The ideological use of context rests on three presuppositions and is supported by a theoretical interest. What are the presuppositions of this ideology?

- (a) The separation of philosophy and the history of philosophy: the history of philosophy is said to derive solely from the discipline of history, which has nothing philosophical about it.
- (b) A de-centring of the place where the meaning of the text is found: the meaning of the text, or its truth, is not to be found in the text, but in the context in which it appeared.

- (c) The context is easier to understand than the text. The context derives from factual data, whereas the text always has to be interpreted.

But, as we know, an ideology, even if it is inherent in a certain historiographical practice, is always supported by an interest.

Here the interest is of course a theoretical one. The ideology of context is only a particular version of a historicist vision of the history of philosophy. Now, I believe that historicism in historiography, far from being inevitable, must be fought—not only in the name of philosophy, but also in the name of history. I wish to show how a criticism of the ideology of context enables us to reopen the debate on the problematical character of the relationship between philosophy and the history of philosophy. This problematical character comes from their mutual relationship, which is one both of necessary connection and of tension.

2. PHILOSOPHICAL INTEREST AND HISTORICAL INTEREST

Questioning the problematical character of the relationship between philosophy and its history is nothing new. We are not the first to underline at the same time the discord and the internal connection between philosophy and the history of philosophy. For me it is just a matter of reactivating its problematical character once the ideology of context is deconstructed. This double connection is reflected in the very notion of history of philosophy, which finds itself caught between philosophy, considered in terms of its truth-value and thus ahistoric dimension on the one hand, and history, whose object is that which changes or is transformed, and which thus knows only the transitory. This internal conflict in the very notion of history of philosophy was emphasized and overcome by Hegel by means of a fundamental conciliation between the content of the history of philosophy and that of philosophy itself: 'The same development of thought which is shown in the history of philosophy is shown in philosophy itself, but freed from historical externals, purely in the element of thought.'¹

¹ Hegel, *Encyclopédie des Sciences philosophiques*, i: *La Science de la Logique*, trans. Bernard Bourgeois (Paris: Vrin, 1994), Introduction, pp. 179–80.

Content which is exposed in the form of history, on the one side, can be thought of as a system, on the other. If we think of the status of the history of philosophy nowadays, we could say that what has been retained from Hegel is more the internal conflict which affects his object than the conciliation by which he wished to overcome it. The entire contemporary questioning of the history of philosophy starts from the rupture in the intrinsic connection which Hegel wanted to establish between historical exposition and systematic exposition, as if the requirements of the one were incompatible with those of the other.

None the less, philosophy and history of philosophy after Hegel did not turn their backs on each other as if they were heterogeneous disciplines. This has admittedly sometimes been the case, as today in analytic philosophy (or rather, most of it), which evolves with almost total indifference to the history of philosophy. But this was not always so; indeed, one could even say that this position has had relatively little effect on French research, where historians of philosophy have usually been concerned with the philosophical nature of their work, and where philosophers know that the meaning of a concept is not unaffected by its history. A passage from Émile Boutroux expresses quite well the reasons why, despite all the differences which can be established between philosophy and the history of philosophy, a necessary connection between them exists as well. This text of Boutroux is quoted by Martial Gueroult in his *Philosophy of the History of Philosophy*, but I shall give it the opposite meaning to that which Gueroult accords it. It seems to me that here we find less the echo of Hegelian thought than an attempt to re-forge in a new way the connections between philosophy and the history of philosophy, having recognized the impossibility of restoring the Hegelian conciliation between historical exposition and systematic exposition. Here is Boutroux's text:

The question of the relationship of philosophy to the history of philosophy is, first of all, a vital question. Either philosophy exists as an original science, as all its representatives have thought, and its relation to the history of philosophy is not exterior but essential; or it repudiates all intrinsic connection with the history of philosophy, and in this case it is no longer distinguishable from the positive sciences, it merges into them;

in reality, it fades away. Either it derives its life from the source of the history of philosophy or *it* does not exist.²

Note that in this text it is not the history of philosophy which needs to be given a philosophical character in order to exist, but, on the contrary, it is philosophy which, in order to exist as an original science, needs to recognize its intrinsic connection with the history of philosophy. This connection, as Gueroult rightly notes, is intrinsic, because it involves the autonomy of philosophy, which would be lost if the relationship between philosophy and its history were the same as that of the positive sciences with theirs—that is to say, none at all. The distinguishing feature—and the autonomy—of philosophy, in comparison to the other sciences, derives from the fact that it does not lose its philosophical character when it becomes the object of historical scrutiny. Or rather, if the history of philosophy is possible, it is because we suppose that the philosophy of the past has a permanent historical meaning.

But is not the attempt to maintain an intrinsic link between philosophy and the history of philosophy doomed to failure? For what is the philosophical meaning of any philosophy outside the very act of doing philosophy in the present as part of the search for the truth of things? Is it not an extravagant idea that the philosophical meaning is maintained when one passes from the search for the truth of things to the historical reconstruction of a thought? This would seem to be borne out by the tension between the striving for truth which characterizes every philosophy and places it in opposition to others, on the one hand, and the placing together of different philosophies considered merely as successive doctrines, the understanding of which supposes, precisely, that they not be judged from the point of view of truth and error. To put it another way, while different philosophies are irreducibly diverse in their search for the truth, they lose this irreducibility, becoming moments in a history of philosophy.

This disjunction between philosophical interest and historical interest has been emphasized recently by various philosophical currents, as well as by various historical currents. In a certain

² Émile Boutroux, 'Rôle de l'histoire de la philosophie dans l'étude de la philosophie', Congrès de Genève, 1905; cited by M. Gueroult, *Philosophie de l'histoire de la philosophie* (Paris: Aubier, 1979), p. 20.

manner, the history of concepts as it is thematized by Koselleck³ involves an extension of the historical method to all specialized histories, with the following implication:

There is no such thing as a history which is not, in some way or other, connected to human relationships, to various form of association, or to social stratification; so much so that to characterise history as 'social history' expresses a permanent, irreducible, somehow anthropological claim, which is hidden behind every form of historiography. And there is no such thing as a history which does not have to be conceived as such before it can materialize as history. The study of concepts and their history in language is a minimal condition of historical knowledge, just as much as the definition of history as being linked to human societies.

Seen from this perspective, that of a conjunction between social history and the history of concepts (in the particular sense which Koselleck gives the term), the whole of intellectual production would boil down to the study of the relationships between intellectual and linguistic formations, on the one hand, and a determinate socio-political context, on the other. The connection between the history of concepts and social history is given by Koselleck as a possible way of revoking 'the concepts of the history of ideas and intellectual history which were studied independently of their socio-political context, in a way for their own value'.

Now, if we apply this perspective to the history of philosophy, we can see that there is no reason to give it any special status. The history of philosophy should in fact be subject to the same procedures as all other specialized forms of history. Here, as elsewhere, we would have to deal with linguistic and conceptual formations only as branches of political, economic, and social history. The general principles of history would apply to philosophy, just as to any other activity of the human mind. But then, what would be left not only of philosophy but even of the history of philosophy? As far as philosophy is concerned, the answer would be nothing—or at least, nothing other than an intellectual formation like any other, analysed independently of its value or its truth-purpose. As for the history of philosophy, the answer is also nothing—or at least, nothing other than a representation of the relationship between the history of concepts and social history. In other words, we would

³ Koselleck, 'Histoire sociale et histoire des concepts', in *L'Expérience de l'histoire* (Paris: Gallimard/Le Seuil, 1997), pp. 101–18.

lose all the distinctiveness of both philosophy and the history of philosophy. The first would be reduced to an intellectual formation amongst others, and the second would be swallowed up in the context of history in general. Thus we would find ourselves drawing the final consequences of what Renan characterized as the substitution of historical method for dogmatic method as it took place in the nineteenth century:

The characteristic feature of the nineteenth century is to have substituted historical method for dogmatic method in all forms of study relating to the human mind. Literary criticism is now no more than an exposé of different forms of beauty, that is to say ways in which different families and different ages of humankind have resolved the problem of aesthetics. Philosophy is no more than the list of solutions which have been proposed to solve the problem of philosophy. Theology should now be no more than the history of spontaneous efforts to solve the problem of divinity. History, indeed, is the necessary form for any science relating to that which is subject to the laws of changing and successive forms of life. Criticism's great progress has been to substitute the category of becoming for that of being, the conception of the relative for that of the absolute, movement for immobility. Time was when everything was considered as being: people talked of philosophy, law, politics, art, poetry in an absolute way, now everything is considered as work-in-progress.⁴

It must be underlined once more that the hegemony of historical method has been achieved at a high price. In the case of philosophy and the history of philosophy, the price paid is anything that distinguishes those subjects from any others.

The question which now arises is formulated best by Martial Gueroult: 'Is there the possibility of a history of philosophy which is objectively valid both from the point of view of philosophy and from that of history?' In other words, is it possible to restore the distinguishing features of a history of philosophy which takes on board history's requirement for exactitude, on the one hand, and which maintains the uniqueness of a meaning, a datum, or the value of philosophical truth, on the other? In order to respond positively to this question, one must be able to legitimize the principle of a philosophical history of philosophy without losing the undeniable advantages of the historical method—in other words, without falling into the idealism of a study of philosophical systems as if

⁴ Ernest Renan, *Averroès et l'averroïsme* (1852) (Paris: Calmann Lévy, s.d.), préface, pp. vi–vii.

they existed in an ahistorical heaven of ideas, on the one hand, and without, on the other hand, insinuating a teleological principle at the foundation of the history of philosophy. In order to give meaning to a philosophical history of philosophy, it will help if we distinguish the different registers of which the writing of the history of philosophy needs to take account.

3. PHILOSOPHICAL HISTORIOGRAPHY: ENUNCIATION, UTTERANCE, AND THE OBJECT OF ENUNCIATION

The point of the foregoing reflection on the relationship between historical interest and philosophical interest, or again between the internal requirements of the historical approach and those of the philosophical approach, was to reactivate a problematic which had been put to sleep, as it were, by the ideology of context to the extent that, as we have seen, it presupposes, on the one hand, a separation between philosophy and the history of philosophy, considered as heterogeneous disciplines, and, on the other, a shift in the location of the meaning of a text, away from the text itself and towards its context. But it is not enough to deconstruct the ideology of context and to relate its problematical character to the relationship between philosophy and the history of philosophy. It remains to define, positively this time, if not the rules for the art of writing the history of philosophy, then at least the different registers which that art must necessarily include. These different registers have to take account of the fact that a work of philosophy has a historicity which roots it in a determinate context and, at the same time, transcends that historicity in its philosophical meaning, which cannot be pinned down to the context in which it appeared, and must be capable of being taken up again in a different context—that is, at a different moment in history. Thus, it is both the historicity and the trans-historicity of philosophy which need to be brought out by the history of philosophy. This means trying to define the idea of a historiography of philosophy which is neither the history of ideas, nor the history of concepts, nor contextualism, but which still makes use of what these different methodological approaches have to offer. In other words, it is not a question of suppressing these different methodological approaches in order to substitute an entirely different perspective, but, on the contrary, of giving them a relative

degree of relevance by rethinking them according to the different registers in which the history of philosophy ought to operate. Do not get me wrong: I am not in favour of engineering some sort of eclectic conciliation of these different methodologies, but, on the contrary, of opening—or reopening—the way to a philosophical historiography of philosophy whose distinguishing mark is that it is a philosophical history of philosophy, a history of philosophy which *does* philosophy. And that, obviously, supposes a substantial change in the spirit of the historiographical approach.

For example, philosophical historiography cannot be reduced to a traditional history of ideas. Such a history takes as the immediate object of its investigations the works, doctrines, and intellectual currents which have been laid down like layers of historical sediment; whereas philosophical historiography goes beyond that in order to bring to light, by means of what a text says, the object at which it is aimed, that which it invites us to think about. The history of ideas unrolls the complex course of human thought as if it took place in front of neutral observers. Philosophical historiography, on the contrary, involves a reactivation of the relevant philosophical issue (or issues). For this purpose, it is not enough to expose the argumentative structure or the system of ideas. One has to reproduce the operations which produced a specific configuration of knowledge on the onto-gnoseological, ethico-political, and other, levels. To put it another way, philosophical historiography has to satisfy the requirements for both historical exactitude and philosophical speculation. It must consist in a philosophical interpretation whose singularity is that it is held or joined to the text whose meaning it seeks to bring to light. This supposes that we, today, are able to get at the meaning which a text had in the past, even if incompletely. Without this presupposition, the original tenor of every work of philosophy and, more generally, every product of human thought would be lost to our understanding.

Philosophical historiography, then, involves an approach which considers three registers—distinct registers, although they go together: enunciation (the restoration of the historical conditions in which a text was produced); utterance (the text); and the object of enunciation (that which is given to be thought about in what is said or written). In the first register, there is a legitimate use for context; in the second, it is the linguistic and conceptual apparatus which needs to be elucidated; in the third, it is a question of shifting

the focus from the text or speech as the object of historical consideration to the (philosophical) object of the text or speech. In consequence, philosophical historiography acquires the status of a critical interpretation which combines three approaches. The first restores the historicity of the text by relating the utterance to the enunciation, that is, to the conditions of the context (socio-political and linguistico-semantic) in which the text was produced. The second, in close connection with the first, restores the interest of the text: that is to say, the exact tenor of what was said in its original conditions—material (the establishment of the text), philological, and semantic. The third re-establishes its philosophical meaning by showing the object of enunciation, the object which the text gives us to think about. Philosophical historiography, then, seeks in the end to bring to light what a thinker was giving us to think about when he wrote what he wrote.

In articulating these three registers, or levels, of consideration, it must be noted that there is an interaction between them, of which the second level is the fulcrum. For it is from the text itself that we can reconstruct the context, and it is also from the text that we can arrive at the object which it gives us to think about. In this philosophical historiography, erudition is not a mere preservation of a cultural heritage; rather, it is animated by a new force which associates a concern for historical exactitude with the reactivation of the philosophical issues.

CONCLUSION

In speaking of the ideology of context, I have not intended to suggest that any reference to context is ideological in itself, or that context ought not to play a role in the history of philosophy. Quite the opposite: there is a legitimate use for context, or, rather, *contexts* (historical and socio-political, but also doctrinal, intellectual, semantic, and so on), in elucidating the enunciation which supports the existence of the textual utterance and marks its historicity. To put it another way, reference to context can count as only one phase in writing the history of philosophy: a phase in which the philosophical text is considered as the product of a particular era, in a specific place, in relation to a certain intellectual climate of polemics which involve or do not involve power

relationships, and which is addressed directly or indirectly to a particular audience.

Knowledge of the context, to this extent, is indispensable to the history of philosophy, and constitutes a protection against arbitrary interpretations. Yet, we must note that if the context clarifies the text, the context needs to be reconstructed, and this reconstruction has no guide other than the text itself. Thus, there is an interaction between the text and the context, between the interpretation of the text and the reconstruction of the context.

However, we pass from the necessary and legitimate use of the context to ideology when, going beyond slogans used by some (though they have no impact at all on their real historiographical practice), we move to unilateral contextualism: that is, the idea that the meaning of a work, and in particular a philosophical work, is exhausted in the historical moment in which it appeared. We have seen the disastrous implications of this ideology in the historiography of philosophy, since its principal consequence is the negation of all that makes a philosophical text distinctive. In order to re-establish that distinctiveness, as I have attempted to show, we need to pass from the interaction which takes place between enunciation and utterance (the context and the text) and redirect our attention away from the utterance as object towards the object of the utterance (or of the enunciation). It is at this point that the historiography of philosophy reveals its irreducibly philosophical character.

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Locke, Therapy, and Analysis*

G. A. J. ROGERS



There is no Knowledge of Things conveyed by Men's Words,
when their *Ideas* agree not to the Reality of Things.

Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human
Understanding*, III. x. 25

INTRODUCTION

Philosophers over the millennia have given a series of ways in which we may gain some varying kinds of intellectual therapy from philosophy. Epicurus, like Aristotle, thought that philosophy could bring happiness and contentment. It was a kind of equilibrium in which there was no pain, a mind at ease with itself. The Stoics, too, saw philosophy as a kind of therapy which would calm the passions and lead to a stable and rational life at one with both nature and reason. They often employ the medical metaphor of cure in their positive philosophy.

Therapy, as a medical term, implies an illness. With regard to construing philosophy as a therapy, it is obvious that the illness that stands in need of cure is not a physical one. It must, then, presumably be mental or spiritual. It is the mind that must be in some unsatisfactory state. But the question arises as to what kind of state that would have to be for philosophy to be an appropriate cure? Mentally unsatisfactory conditions have a great range. But philosophy is not usually regarded as a branch of psychotherapy, except perhaps in an extended sense, and the philosopher is not a psychiatrist. So it would

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be easy to be tough-minded and to say that philosophy can have nothing to do with psychiatry and therefore nothing to do with therapy. No doubt some philosophers have been mad or have gone mad—Nietzsche is perhaps the most famous example, though Russell, according to his latest biographer, feared mental illness for himself. Yet philosophers do not seem to be especially prone to mental illness. So if philosophy is to be assessed as a kind of therapy, it looks as though this is at best a kind of metaphor. The intellectual disease for which it might be regarded as a cure is some kind of confusion, an inability to give sense to some proposed solution to a certain kind of claim, often made by another philosopher, but perhaps self-generated. And it has sometimes been said that philosophy is itself a kind of contagious disease passed on from one generation to another.

Much closer to us than the Stoics, it is well known that Wittgenstein, at least sometimes, saw the function of philosophy as therapeutic. It is perhaps Wittgenstein's views on philosophy, at least in the English-speaking world, which have generated much recent interest in philosophy as a kind of therapy. Yet Wittgenstein himself appears always to have been a man tortured by his predispositions. We hear much from his friends about his anger and little about his, as the phrase goes, being at one with the world. Indeed, after reading his biography, it comes as a surprise to find him claiming that he had had a wonderful life! But it is clear that he saw many, perhaps all, the problems of philosophy as resulting from linguistic confusions, confusions which were generated by extending language into areas and issues for which it was not designed. And this was a view which he held right through, from at least the writing of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* of 1922 until his death in 1951. In the former he wrote that 'The object of philosophy is the logical clarification of thoughts. Philosophy is not a theory but an activity. . . . The result of philosophy is not a number of "philosophical propositions", but to make propositions clear. Philosophy should make clear and delimit sharply the thoughts which otherwise are, as it were, opaque and blurred' (*Tractatus*, 4.112, p. 77). Philosophical puzzlement is generated by muddles in language. In similar vein in the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein argues that the puzzles and paradoxes which philosophers find in our concepts are due to our minds being held by a certain picture which misleads us about the nature of reality. In the *Investigations*, for example, Wittgenstein criticizes his earlier self, the self who was the

author of the *Tractatus*, for being held captive by a certain picture of what the general form of a proposition is: 'One thinks that one is tracing the outline of the thing's nature . . . and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it' (PI §114). 'A picture held us captive' (PI §115).¹ And a bit later, 'A main source of our failure to understand is that we do not *command a clear view* of the use of our words' (PI §122). 'Philosophy', he tell us, 'is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language' (PI §109). So philosophy for Wittgenstein has the objective of showing the fly the way out of the fly-bottle (PI §309). Philosophical problems arise when we extend our concepts or words into territory for which they are not designed. What we have to do is to remind ourselves of the normal use to which a particular word (concept) is put and then try to see how our philosophical puzzlement has been generated by extending the use of the word or concept into areas for which it was not designed. Wittgenstein gave the example of the person puzzled about the question 'What is the time on the sun?'. Because we know what it means to say that the time is now 5 o'clock, it also appears to make good sense to say, 'It is also now 5.00 on the sun', because it must be the same time there as here (PI §350). But reflection leads us to see that this is not the case. There is no right answer to the putative question 'What time is it now on the sun?'. Our concepts or language have misled us. Removing such puzzlement is the task of the philosopher: 'The results of philosophy are the uncovering of one or another piece of plain nonsense and of bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language. These bumps make us see the value of the discovery' (PI §119). A philosophical problem, Wittgenstein tells us, has the form: 'I don't know my way about' (PI §123).

It is debatable whether Wittgenstein believed that all philosophical puzzlement took this form, though his words often seem to suggest he did. That philosophy is in a sense a form of therapy for the intellectual tangles in which we find ourselves because we extend language beyond its natural boundaries and thereby generate paradox. But whether all philosophical puzzlement can be resolved in the way he has described is perhaps qualified by his remark that 'There is not *a* philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies' (PI §133). This seems to suggest

¹ Reference to the *Philosophical Investigations* is by section number.

that the same method would not always be appropriate to all philosophical puzzlement. But he seems to have been wedded to the notion that the predominant method in philosophy will be some kind of therapy through considering the logic of ordinary discourse.

It is not my intention in this paper to offer an account of Wittgenstein's views about the nature of philosophy in any detail. To many, his personal range of interest in philosophical matters is regarded as idiosyncratic, and his conception of the range of issues falling within philosophy too narrow. All I shall do is to indicate them sufficiently so that I may compare some of his claims with those of John Locke, as we have them in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. In that work Locke offers us plenty of remarks which provide a theory of language and its connections with philosophy that bear some comparison with twentieth-century analytic philosophy. So the thought is that modern analytic philosophy, of the kind that is associated with Russell, Moore, Wittgenstein, and the slightly later tradition in which the names of Ryle and Austin are the most prominent, has at least some important anticipations in the philosophy of John Locke. Not that I would wish to claim anything as strong as that Locke anticipates Wittgenstein and others in every respect with regard to the nature of philosophical inquiry. For example, Locke never reached anything like, as I take it, the depth of the later Wittgenstein's understanding of the close connection between rule-following and meaning and the enormous implications for philosophical analysis that Wittgenstein's insights have for the nature of communication. Locke is, for one thing, often accused, perhaps unjustly, of providing the paradigm case of a theory of meaning that transgresses Wittgenstein's consideration of the impossibility of a private language. But I venture to suggest that Locke began a journey down a road that leads to, or at least towards, the later philosophy of Wittgenstein, and which is also to be observed in the philosophy of other mid-century philosophers such as Gilbert Ryle.

Before we turn to Locke, however, some words about the change in the way the term 'philosophy' is understood as between the time of Locke and that of Wittgenstein are in order. It would appear that for Wittgenstein the subject-matter of philosophy is much more focused than it was for Locke. For Wittgenstein the subject-matter of philosophy seems to be limited entirely to a consideration of problems generated by confusions in language. 'Philosophy', he writes, 'unties knots in our thinking; hence its result must be simple,

but philosophizing has to be as complicated as the knots it unties' (Zettel, §452). For Locke, by contrast, untying knots was, though important, only one part of philosophy. As he put it in the last chapter of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, called 'Of the Division of the Sciences', all that human beings can understand is either natural philosophy (what we now call the natural sciences), ethics, or logic. The last of these is the subject-matter of his own work, and he characterizes it in this way: the business of logic is to consider the nature of signs which the mind uses to make sense of things around us. These signs are of two sorts: the ideas which we have in our minds and the words with which we convey our ideas to others. This, '*the Doctrine of Signs*', is the third kind of science with which human beings should engage. But the continuity between Locke and Wittgenstein can be seen in another way. Locke saw the inquiry in which he was engaged in the *Essay* as, in some fairly strong sense, an autonomous one. He did not set out to write a comprehensive account of the world in the way in which Descartes did in the *Principles of Philosophy*, or indeed as Hobbes offered in his trilogy of *De Corpore*, *De Homine*, and *De Cive* (or indeed Aristotle in his corpus). Rather, Locke set out, as he tells us, to give an account of the intellectual faculty of understanding and its co-related flaw, misunderstanding.

It might appear from what I have said already that Wittgenstein's view of the nature of philosophy was doomed to make it a very narrow subject, never reaching beyond inquiries into puzzles about words. But this would be profoundly to underestimate its power and certainly to ignore its influence. At least the following areas of philosophy were totally changed by his later thought: philosophy of mind (Ryle, Anscombe, Dennett), philosophy of social science (Winch), philosophy of science (Hanson, Feyerabend), philosophy of religion (Philips), and indeed virtually every other branch of analytic philosophy in the second half of the twentieth century. Similar remarks could be made about Locke's impact on eighteenth-century thought. Its impact pervades every major work in English and not a few in French, German, and Dutch.

In what sense does Locke's account of logic construe it as some kind of therapeutic activity? In the *Epistle to the Reader* at the beginning of the *Essay* Locke makes clear why he thinks his work is important. He describes himself as an under-labourer to the master-builders of the age, such as the 'great' Christian Huygens and the

'incomparable' Isaac Newton—that is to say, to those who were just then building the new natural philosophy. As an under-labourer, Locke is engaged in the third of the three sciences which Locke identified in his last chapter, 'the Nature of Signs, the Mind makes use of for the Understanding of Things' (III. xxi. 4).² His task, he tells us, is that of 'removing some of the Rubbish, that lies in the way to Knowledge' (*ECHU*, p. 10). Locke claims that it is the amount of rubbish that has hindered the advance of knowledge. The rubbish has the form of 'uncouth, affected, or unintelligible Terms, introduced into the Sciences, and there made an Art of, to that Degree, that Philosophy, which is nothing but the true Knowledge of Things, was thought unfit or incapable to be brought into well-bred Company, and polite Conversation' (*ibid.*). The problem is, Locke says, that 'vague and insignificant forms of speech and abuse of language have been accepted for too long as mysteries of science, and words with no meaning have been taken to be deep learning, when in fact they are major hindrances to knowledge. Because so many are deceived by the abuse of language, he has devoted the third book of the *Essay* to words, their misuse, and the remedies for this abuse. In other words, Locke sees Book III of the *Essay* as an attempt to provide therapy for the intellectual confusions that contemporary philosophy, 'the philosophy of the schools', has generated, and which Locke and his virtuoso friends so much despised.

So I wish to argue that Locke saw the argument of his work as providing a kind of intellectual cure for the ills generated by the traditional teaching within the universities. He was not the first to do this. Both Bacon and Descartes saw themselves, at least in part, as engaged in similar programmes of reform. But, where Locke advanced beyond their positions was in the central place he gave to language and its misuse, and the cures for that misuse which he gives in his positive account. He tells us how he came to see the need for such a consideration. He says that after he had considered the nature of our ideas, and before he could turn to an account of our knowledge, 'I found it had so near a connexion with Words, that unless their force and manner of Signification were first well observed, there could be little said clearly and pertinently

² Quotations are from the edition of Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). References are by book, chapter, and section number and/or page number of this edition, abbreviated *ECHU*.

concerning Knowledge: which being conversant about Truth, had constantly to do with Propositions. And though it terminated in Things, yet it was for the most part so much by the intervention of Words, that they seem'd scarce separable from our general Knowledge' (III. ix. 21, p. 488). If we would recognize that many of the world's controversies are to do with 'imperfections of Language', then, he says, peace would have much more chance of succeeding.

CONFUSION AND CLARITY

It was Descartes who had taken philosophy down a new road with his abandonment of traditional syllogistic argument and his claim that the only route to knowledge was through establishing clear and distinct ideas. Locke took over from Descartes this terminology, albeit he claims to modify it. The term 'idea' is predominantly a Cartesian one. No philosopher assigned it such a central role before him, and this term was to dominate philosophy in one form or another for more than 200 years. Its use in conjunction with the terms 'clear' and 'distinct', with their powerful visual implications, added a strong metaphor which encouraged vision to provide the paradigm of knowledge. 'Seeing the truth', and its analogues, becomes the goal of the seeker after knowledge. Locke found Descartes's abandonment of the syllogism as the preferred route to knowledge one with which he was wholly in agreement. Like Descartes, he came to hold that the most certain kind of knowledge was intuitive: the immediate recognition that two ideas agree or disagree one with the other. But in order that such ideas should impact immediately, to give that intuitively grasped knowledge, the ideas themselves must be unambiguous as to their nature. Locke claims that he will not much use the phrase 'clear and distinct' because he finds it imperfectly understood. Instead, he says he will talk of determinate and determined ideas. But in practice he employs the former much more often than the latter. When determinate (or clear and distinct) ideas have a particular sound annexed to them—a word—the word is unambiguous to the user of it and remains unambiguous to the hearer as long as the same idea is thereby generated in the mind of the auditor. Locke is aware that proper communication is not guaranteed. We suppose that the same word signifies the same idea to somebody else, but sometimes we

discover that it does not. But normally we ‘suppose that, the *Idea*, they make it a Sign of, is precisely the same, to which the Understanding Men of that Country apply that Name’ (III. ii. 4, p. 407). But this is our assumption and goes beyond our knowledge until we investigate more closely.

This, then, is the simple account that Locke offers of the connection between ideas and meaning. Its implications will be explored below.

LOCKE AND FREE WILL

Let us now turn, as one example, to Locke’s application of his philosophy to a specific problem on which he claimed to throw some light: the classical problem of free will. Locke’s argument about free will in the *Essay* is very complex and went through several versions in successive editions of his book, and I shall not be examining it in detail. However, I wish to consider its opening move, which illustrates Locke making a claim that, if correct, has a way of disarming the problem of free will in its classical form. It has the form, that is, of providing a solution—a therapy—for an intellectual dispute and resolving it in one direction.

Locke begins from the question ‘*Whether man’s will be free or no*’ (II. xxi. 14, p. 240). His tactic is to attack the question as being ill-formed or incoherent. He says that to ask if the will is free or not is as absurd as to ask if one’s sleep was swift or one’s virtue square. We would dismiss these as unintelligible questions, because ‘the modifications of motion belong not to sleep, nor the difference of Figure to Vertue’ (ibid.). Locke concludes: ‘*Liberty*, which is but a power, belongs only to Agents, and cannot be an attribute or modification of the *Will*, which is also but a Power’ (ibid.). What Locke is claiming here is that the question ‘Do we have free will?’ is ill-formed. It commits what Gilbert Ryle in *The Concept of Mind* was much later to call a category mistake. You cannot ask whether the will is free or unfree any more than you can ask if, say, a thought is a kind of fish, and, when told that it is not, believe that it must therefore be a kind of bird or mammal. As Locke himself explains it:

Tis plain... That the *Will* is nothing but one Power or Ability, and *Freedom* another Power or Ability: So that to ask, whether the *will has*

Freedom, is to ask, whether one Power has another Power, one Ability another Ability; a question at first sight too grossly absurd to make a Dispute or need an Answer. (II. xxi. 16, p. 241)

What are free or unfree are human actions, not human powers. So the question about the will is ill-formed. This move is, of course, not the end of Locke's discussion of the problem of free will. His argument is long, complex, and probably ultimately not a solution. But what is interesting about this first move is that it shifts the discussion in a radical way. Since Aristotle, the problem had largely been seen as one to be understood as if the will was itself a substantive entity, perhaps because it is grammatically a noun, whereas it is in reality only an attribute of the mind.

To identify the classical formulation of the question as ill-formed is to begin to make its solution possible. Although Locke does not refer to him, he would probably have approved of Hobbes's claim that, 'from the use of the word *Free-will*, no Liberty can be inferred of the will, desire, or inclination but the Liberty of the man; which consisteth in this, that he finds no stop, in doing what he has the will, desire, or inclination to doe' (*Leviathan*, p. 108). Locke's discussion does not in itself provide an answer to the question whether human beings are genuinely free or not, but it certainly shifts the way in which a solution may be formulated. As such, it appears to me to be an example of a beginning to a piece of philosophical therapy.

Locke makes some concluding remarks in the chapter on power, which underline the points which I have been making. He considers the nature of an action, and he argues that there are two kinds of action: namely, *motion* and *thinking*. But these so-called actions are themselves of two kinds: passive and active. Thus one physical object moved by another by contact is passive motion, as when a pendulum clock turns the hands round (passive motion), or when I see the moon in the sky, or feel the heat of the sun (passive perceptions over which I have little or no control), this is similarly also a passive action of the mind. Whereas when I deliberately choose to turn my eyes towards the moon or move my body into shade to escape the heat of the sun, these are examples of active powers of perception or motion. But our grammatical categories 'and the common frame of Language' here mislead us, because all are classified as *active*.

It would be possible to draw further comparisons here between Locke's philosophical method and that of Ryle, especially with Ryle's analysis of the nature of mind. The great mistake, Ryle argues in *The Concept of Mind*, is to treat 'mind' as if it were a substance term, whereas it should be treated as a way of referring to a set of properties that human beings normally have as part of their normal (animal) nature. The 'myth of the ghost in the machine' was a typical example of philosophical nonsense of the kind that Locke also attacked (though perhaps without ever identifying this particular one).

MIXED MODES AND CONFUSION

Locke identifies one of the greatest sources of philosophical confusion as lying in our power to invent or create 'mixed modes', which are names of kinds of idea. These are, he says, always complex ideas involving the assembly of two or more simple ideas to which one name is attached. From his empiricist perspective, Locke holds that, whereas simple ideas can never be created by the human mind, complex ideas are not so circumscribed. We can, as we say, create them at will. His first examples are those of *obligation*, *drunkenness*, and *a lie*. The idea of drunkenness, for example, involves the notions of loss of physical or mental capacities as a result of consuming alcohol; a lie involves the deliberate attempt to deceive by telling a falsehood; murder is the deliberate illegal killing of another human being. For Locke the important thing about mixed modes is that we can obtain a knowledge of them without there having to be any thing which actually corresponds to them in the world. We can have the idea of, say, a centaur, or of a utopia, without there having ever been such things in existence. We create the words which correspond to these mixed modes to aid and speed verbal communication. Different communities, different language-users, will have varying stocks of such words.

Mixed modes are to be contrasted with the names of substances. The names of substances are taken to stand for existing things. *Gold*, *elephant*, and *air* are names of real entities.

The usefulness of words for modes is, however, bought at a price. What the substance word 'gold' means is subject to testing. Addition or subtraction to its component ideas or supposed properties may

result from such testing, thereby leading to possible modification of its definition. Thus we add to the properties of gold, and thus to our general idea of gold, through our investigations. We discover, not invent, the fact that it dissolves in one liquid, aqua regia, and not another. Our ideas and words for substances are thus subject to empirical testing, a constant monitoring of the properties that go to make up that substance. But with mixed modes there is no such process. Their meaning is given by the ideas that the first user of the term decides belong to that particular mixed mode. Further, often no check is made to discover if the word is being used with the same sense by different people—too often it is just taken for granted that it is. Thus, Locke gives the example of a dispute amongst a group of distinguished physicians which Locke, as a learned physician himself, attended. The argument was about whether or not any liquor passed through the filaments of the nerves of the body. After listening to the dispute for a while, he proposed that the disputants should consider what the word ‘liqueur’ signified. This was at first taken amiss, because they all thought they knew what it meant. On examination, however, they discovered that there was no settled meaning to which they all subscribed, and they came to see that their dispute was about the signification of the term ‘liqueur’ and not an empirical issue at all. They came to see that it was not easy to determine whether the ‘fluid and subtle Matter passing through the Conduits of the Nerves’ (III. ix. 16) should be called a ‘liqueur’ or not.

A great deal of confusion occurs in our use of language because, for example, our words often refer to two different ideas (that is, the words are ambiguous), or we use two words to refer to the same idea. The way to prevent this, Locke argues, is ‘to collect and unite into our complex Idea, as precisely as it is possible, all those Ingredients, whereby it is differenced from others; and to them so united . . . apply steadily the same Name’ (II. xxix. 12, p. 368). However, this is easier to say than to do as, amongst other reasons, the goal of truth is not always that at which men aim. In modern jargon, people often have agendas which differ from that of truth-serving. These encourage men to speak obscurely for the sake of power or persuasion. It is mixed modes, once again, which are often the culprit. And the explanation for this, Locke holds, is that mixed modes are composed of the voluntary combinations of a precise collection of simple ideas. There is no outside standard with which

to compare our collection of ideas that makes up the mixed mode. They are fixed by language-users and not by nature, and may be fixed differently by different users (cf. II. xxxii. 12, p. 387, etc.). We also tend to obtain a vague understanding of a word which is used for a mixed mode before the ideas they stand for are perfectly known. Indeed, we normally hear the names first, and then afterwards frame the abstract idea: 'What one of a thousand ever frames the abstract *Idea* of *Glory* or *Ambition*, before he has heard the Names of them?' (III. v. 15, p. 437), Locke asks. Constantly, Locke returns to what he sees as the besetting sin of the intelligentsia, the adoption of 'fashionable Sounds' and 'huffing Opinions' which make them think they are talking profoundly when they are in fact talking nonsense (III. v. 16, p. 438).

LANGUAGE AND ITS NATURE

At the beginning of Book III of the *Essay* Locke gives his account of language and its function. Men, being by nature sociable, wish to communicate their ideas to others, and the way in which they do this is by making sounds which stand for or represent those ideas which they have in their minds. The ability to make such sounds we share with parrots, but meaningful communication occurs only when the sounds we use correspond to, and are understood as, signs of the ideas we have in our minds. However, we cannot have sounds for each idea which we have. I could not, for example, have a different idea for each of the thousands of men I have seen. Ideas must therefore be capable of general as well as particular reference. As well as terms for particular objects, we also need general terms of which mixed modes are one kind. As we have already seen, Locke held that mixed modes are a common form of confusion, because they often differ in their constituent ideas in the minds of differing individuals.

Another major cause of confusion, according to Locke, is generated by an error which he believed went back to Aristotle and which was prominent in the philosophy teaching in the schools of the universities. This was the belief in the knowable fixed essences of natural kinds, the natural species often identified by Christian philosophers with the kinds created by God and described in the opening chapters of Genesis. The possibility of such knowledge was

widely accepted by philosophers at least from the later Middle Ages. Locke held that it was a doctrine which rested on serious confusion.

The position which Locke was attacking can be briefly described like this. Correct definitions of the words we use for kinds of natural objects, such as for the various species of animals, plants, kinds of rocks, planets, and so on, which make up the natural world, each have a fixed essence which it is the task of scientific inquiry to establish. To take Locke's favourite example, we have an understanding of gold as having a certain colour, density, malleability, and fusibility, and as capable of being dissolved in aqua regia. But Locke brings to this description of how we reach our understanding of what we take the essence of gold to be the thought that we can never know that our inquiries have correctly and definitively identified the essence of gold. All we can ever do is to identify a minimal essence of any species, including human beings, and never be sure that we know its real essence. As he writes:

For though, perhaps, voluntary Motion, with Sense and Reason, join'd to a Body of a certain shape, be the complex *Idea*, to which I, and others, annex the name *Man*; and so be the *nominal Essence* of the *Species* so called: yet no body will say, that that complex *Idea* is the *real Essence* and Source of all those Operations, which are to be found in any individual of that Sort. (III. vi. 3, pp. 439-40)

Locke's point is both an epistemic and a logical one. The epistemic point is that as a matter of fact we are never in the position of knowing that we have discovered the essential properties of a natural kind or species. We can never be certain that our definition is definitive of any particular object, let alone of a *kind* of object. Secondly, and this is the logical point, properties are necessary only under the description of some sortal term. To put this another way, the assumed necessary properties which go with any particular species are not something inherent in the object as such, but are only necessary *given the assumption that there are such species independent of our general terms*. Locke makes it abundantly clear that he holds that no properties are known by us to be *de re* necessary. He expresses it like this:

That *Essence*, in the ordinary use of the word, relates to *Sorts*, and that it is considered in particular Beings, no farther than as they are ranked into *Sorts*, appears from hence: That take but away the abstract

Ideas, by which we sort Individuals, and rank them under common Names, and then the thought of any thing *essential* to any of them, instantly vanishes: we have no notion of the one without the other. (III. vi. 4, p. 440)

Locke gives as an example the dispute over the essential nature of body, a dispute between the Cartesians, on the one side, and Descartes's opponents, on the other. If body is defined as 'bare extension', then solidity is not essential to it. But if the idea of body is taken to include both solidity and extension, then solidity is essential to it (III. vi. 5, p. 441). We have no way of referring to essential properties except by way of our abstract ideas, Locke claims. And he is surely correct to hold that we can only classify properties as being either essentially or only contingently related to an object of a certain kind by consulting our general conception of objects of that kind.

It is worth adding that the list of properties taken to be definitive might have to be revised in the light of experience both upwards or downwards. Thus, to take a famous example, the view that the essence of swans included the idea of white had to be revised down when so-called black swans were found in Australia.

That which disposes men to assume that their general names identify the real essences of species, he says, is the assumption that nature works regularly in the production of things and sets the boundaries to each of those species by giving exactly the same internal constitution to each individual which we rank under one name. However, this supposition '*that the same precise internal Constitution goes always with the same specifick name, makes Men forward to take those names for the Representatives of those real Essences, though . . . they signify nothing but the complex Ideas they have in their Minds when they use them*' (III. x. 20, p. 502). A not unrelated point was central to Wittgenstein's account of meaning. He argued that human beings have a strong presumption to believe that there is a common set of properties which holds together the use of any general term, and that it is the philosopher's task to find these essential properties. But if we look at some words—perhaps all general terms—we discover that there is no such definitive set of properties which bind them all together. Think, says Wittgenstein, of the word 'game'. If we try to give the defining list of properties, we will always find an example of something which is called a game but which does not have all the standard characteristics. Rather

than assuming that there must be a common set, Wittgenstein urges us to look and see! Locke would certainly have concurred.

ADAM AND THE ANIMALS

The Bible tells us that at the Creation and before the Fall, God required Adam to name the animals. This account was widely accepted within Christian teaching as implying that the names of the animals were definitive and in some way embodied their essence. Combined with Aristotle's account of essence, it became widely accepted within Christendom that the recovery of the first language of God, probably Hebrew, and correctly interpreted, would lead to a knowledge of the essences of the natural kinds, named by Adam.

Locke's rejection of the coherence of such a possibility for men, who as finite creatures could never know they had identified the real essence of any natural object, was, therefore, not just an attack upon philosophical essentialist positions but had a theological dimension as well. It is not surprising, therefore, that those who had aspirations to create a logically perfect language in which to describe nature were hostile to Locke's argument.

Perhaps the most famous response to Locke's rejection of the possibility of our knowledge of essential natures was Leibniz in the *New Essays on Human Understanding*. Leibniz was of course opposed to precise essential natures common to all members of a species, as this was a position which was incompatible with the metaphysical principle that lay at the heart of his system, the Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles. He was therefore sympathetic to part of Locke's claim but not to all of it. He was also alive to the theological implications of any view, one way or the other, on the matter. Both laid traps for the unwary.

THE ABUSE OF WORDS

The cardinal intellectual sin for Locke, as we have already seen, is the use of words without the corresponding clear and distinct ideas. The greater sinners in these areas, he tells us, are the sects of philosophy and religion. He gives examples to illustrate the justice of his charge. The Aristotelian schoolmen talk of substantial forms,

vegetative souls, the abhorrence of a vacuum, intentional species, all terms which, because they have been used for centuries, are assumed to have a clear sense. The Platonists have their soul of the world, and the Epicureans talk of an endeavour towards motion of their atoms. Locke rejects all of this talk: '[T]his Gibberish, serves too well to palliate men's ignorance, and cover their Errours', and comes to be seen as the most important part of language and of university instruction (III. x. 17, p. 499).

The result of this abuse of words is that men are ashamed to acknowledge that they do not understand what another is claiming. The practice of taking words upon trust has spread nowhere as much as amongst men of letters—the intellectual elite of our society—and the 'obstinacy of Disputes, which has so laid waste the intellectual World, is owing to nothing more than this ill use of Words' (III. x. 22, p. 504). Perhaps Locke overstates his case here. But he claims that in his experience the great diversity of opinions amongst men is largely because they use language without their words corresponding to clear and distinct ideas. When and if they do, Locke believes, they will discover that they disagree with each other much less than they suppose.

PHILOSOPHY AS THERAPY

So, finally, where does this leave philosophy as a kind of intellectual therapy so far as Locke is concerned? The answer is that Locke sees his inquiry as providing a course of action which, if implemented, will reduce the amount of philosophical confusion substantially. He is right that the age was one of great philosophical dispute. If he is also correct that the disputes were in large part of the philosophers' own making, as being mostly the product of a failure either to explain in what sense a term is being used, or the failure to begin from agreed definitions, rectifying this by insisting on the precise use of terms will be therapeutic. But, more than this, the philosopher will be forced to consider if he is using a particular term with any precise sense himself. This exercise in self-examination will engender not just a wider clarity, but also a reduction in the amount of poor theory produced. The philosopher will be required to be his own censor as well as demanding more rigorous thought from his fellow philosophers. This is no doubt a lesson which each

generation has to relearn for itself. It is another question as to whether all the questions which philosophers ask are problems which dissolve if subject to such therapeutic treatment.

At the beginning of this paper, Wittgenstein was quoted as saying that the task of the philosopher is to make clear the thoughts that we have which are otherwise vague and fuzzy and due to confusions in our use of language. I hope that enough has been presented to show that in this aspiration he was at least to that extent the successor to Locke in the seventeenth century.

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Richard Burthogge and the Origins of Modern Conceptualism

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Richard Burthogge was an original, subtle, and relatively readable minor philosopher who lived from 1638 to 1705, a close contemporary of Locke, with whom he corresponded. He has claims to be counted the first modern European idealist, but his characterization as an idealist is not as straightforward as it may seem from some of his pronouncements. His theory is quite unlike Berkeley's, although, as some of those few who have discussed him point out, there are some remarkable affinities with Kant. Yet, in some ways he may be more like Locke than like Kant, and in one or two deep ways he is more like Quine than like any of them. Part of my own interest in him is because of his relationship to Locke, but another part, I must confess, is because the question 'Is Burthogge an idealist?' is not so far from the question 'Is Quine an idealist?' I think that the answer to both questions should be 'Yes', despite each philosopher's empiricist proclivities, even stronger in Burthogge than in Quine.

Burthogge felt close enough to Locke, at any rate, to become his admirer and politico-philosophical ally. The younger by about five years, like Locke he came from a West Country Puritan family, with

This paper was delivered on 27 November 2003 as a lecture in memory of Gabriel Nuchelmans, one of the twentieth century's most distinguished historians of philosophical thought. Nuchelmans focused his attention on the philosophy of propositional form, a topic still very much with us and still controversial, central to epistemology, to the philosophy of mind, and to ontology, as well as to philosophical logic. His work covered more than two millennia of theory in extraordinary detail, and he wrote as no mere doxographer. He always sought to get to the philosophical heart of things, and to reveal the patterns within and between philosophical theories. We are seldom left wondering why any particular recorded view was held, however strange and unpersuasive it may now seem to us. What follows owes much to Nuchelmans's scholarship and thought, and not only when it draws directly on his brief, but characteristically perceptive, contextual analysis of the philosophy of Richard Burthogge.

a father who had served as an officer on the side of Parliament. Like Locke, he went to Oxford, studied medicine, and later practised it. Unlike Locke, however, he bothered to qualify as Doctor of Medicine, doing so at Leiden, a university pre-eminent in medicine, distinguished in philosophy, and favoured by English Puritans. Family connections then took him to live with the owners of a country estate near Totnes, in Devonshire, where he married three times, became rich, and took a prominent part in local politics at a time when English politics was largely church politics. Like Locke's, his epistemology grew out of his politico-religious concerns and scientific interests. Like Locke, he disliked Quakers and attacked dogmatism and 'enthusiasm' in both religion and philosophy. Like Locke, he wanted a broad Church of England with few articles of faith. He published a forceful advocacy of religious toleration¹ three years before Locke's was eventually published in England. Those three years, however, reflected a significant difference in their political circumstances. Burthogge wrote under James II's government, with its express approval, and was rewarded by positions in local administration. Locke, at that time in exile in Holland and at least in sympathy with revolution, perhaps among the plotters, declined what was in effect an invitation to return and do the same. Unsurprisingly, Burthogge expressly included Roman Catholics in his argument for a general toleration, whereas for Locke it was always politically necessary to exclude them.²

With that difference went another, for while Locke remained firmly within the Anglican Church, the exigencies of local politics put Burthogge as firmly on the side of the Nonconformists, those who stayed loyal to the clergymen, Presbyterian and Independent, who had been extruded from their livings by the Act of Uniformity of 1662. That does not mean that Burthogge regarded himself as anything but a member of the Church of England, but when in 1677 he wrote in the preliminaries of his first philosophical work, *Organum Vetus et Novum*, 'A persecuting furious Spirit is none of Christ's; [but] Antichrist's',³ he probably had in mind, not so much

¹ Burthogge, *Prudential reasons for repealing the penal laws against recusants, and for a general toleration*, published anonymously, 1687.

² For discussion of Burthogge's political situation and career, see Mark Goldie, 'John Locke's circle and James II', *Historical Journal*, 35 (1992), pp. 557-86.

³ Burthogge, *Organum Vetus et Novum, or A Discourse of Reason and Truth. Wherein The Natural Logick common to Mankind is briefly and plainly described*

Louis XIV or the Spanish Inquisition, as certain local Tories (as they were soon to be called) who, when in power, took the opportunity to impose fines on their Nonconformist opponents, including Burthogge and his wife, in accordance with an oppressive law in better times ignored.

The immediate purpose of *Organum*, however, was to answer critics of Burthogge's earlier essays in biblical hermeneutics and revealed theology. These earlier publications⁴ were on divine justice, purportedly refuting atheist argument. Yet, like Burthogge's last work of 1699, they were surely directed against hard-line Calvinism. Seemingly harsh doctrine was defended in the letter, but interpreted 'reasonably' (if sometimes sophistically) in accordance with the axiom that God cannot justly demand what it is beyond our power to give. Such philosophy as appeared was vaguely Platonist. *Organum*, however, focuses on what it is to be 'reasonable', an inquiry leading into the sketch of a fairly comprehensive epistemology that leaves Platonism behind. This theory is Burthogge's crowning intellectual achievement, as the theory of the *Essay* is Locke's.

Burthogge's main thesis is that all the immediate objects of experience and thought are *entia cogitationis*, 'appearances' to the senses and imagination or to the intellect (*Organum*, p. 14). As such, they owe as much to the faculties through which they are apprehended as to the reality that gives rise to them, and of which they are appearances. The immediate or proper objects of sense are 'sentiments' or sensations caused by 'the impressions of things without upon the sensories': for example, colours, sounds, tastes, and the like, as we perceive them (*ibid.* p. 22). These sensations are perceived as existing in external objects, although whoever thinks clearly about them will recognize that they exist only in the mind (*ibid.* p. 14). More radically, Burthogge holds that, like the proper objects of sense, the proper objects of the understanding, mind, or intellect—namely, notions or ideas of things—are also mind-dependent, being simply the senses or meanings of words. Words

(1678), p. 6. This work is available in its entirety, together with *An Essay upon Reason* (abridged) and *Of the Soul of the World and of Particular Souls* (1699) in *The Philosophical Writings of Richard Burthogge*, ed. M. W. Landes (Chicago: Open Court, 1921). The remark quoted expresses a common sentiment.

⁴ Burthogge, *T'Agathon, or, Divine Goodness Explicated and Vindicated from the Exceptions of the Atheist* (1672), and *Causa Dei, or an Apology for God* (1675).

stand for things, but for things as conceived of in certain ways, as substances, accidents, powers, relations, and so forth. So every object of thought is shaped by the faculty of thought and by its medium, language: notably, by the general notion or category (although 'category' is not a word used by Burthogge) under which the object is distinguished or characterized:

Faculties and Powers, Good, Evil, Virtue, Vice, Verity, Falsity, Relations, Order, Similitude, Whole, Part, Cause, Effect, &c. are Notions; as Whiteness, Blackness, Bitterness, Sweetness, &c. are Sentiments: and the former own no other kind of Existence than the latter, namely an *Objective* (one). (Ibid. p. 15)⁵

'Objective existence' is here used in the ordinary scholastic and Cartesian sense of existence in thought, or 'in the mind', as opposed to being 'formally in the things themselves' (ibid. p. 14). So Burthogge's 'notions' are given a similar status to that of Cartesian ideas 'taken objectively', that is to say, the status of *things as they are conceived of*; although the term 'notions' is also used, understandably if a trifle untidily, for *ways of conceiving of things*. The important lesson is that we must not ascribe independent reality to things as we conceive of them, to intentional or, as Burthogge is fond of calling them, 'cogitable' beings: 'He that looks for Notions in Things, looks behind the Glass for the Image he sees in it' (ibid. p. 16). In other words, a certain kind of metaphysics is misguided, since its supposedly external object is really the structure of our own thought reflected in, or projected on to, the reality that appears to us. Kant's 'Copernican revolution' seems to have been under way in the 1670s.

Burthogge emphasizes that there is a difference between such 'cogitable beings' as are chimerical, or 'mere effects of the Faculties', and such as are grounded in realities as well. The latter are permissibly called 'real', even though they are only 'in the things, . . . as the things relate to our Faculties; that is, not in the things as they are *Things*, but as they are *Objects*' (ibid.). The grounding of notions on realities is always via the process of sensation, in which, Burthogge holds, we are aware of sensations being caused in us by external things: 'so that as Realities are Grounds to Sentiments, so Sentiments are Grounds to Notions' (ibid. p. 22). But certain notions are not so grounded, or not directly. These are 'second

⁵ Burthogge has an idiosyncratic liking for bracketing superfluous words.

notions' or 'notions concerning notions', and include categorial concepts. As further removed from reality, they are less clear and distinct than 'more sensible' first notions (ibid. p. 23). That is to say, presumably, that the meanings of the corresponding terms are less immediately evident, so that there is more danger of confusion in abstract thought that employs such notions than in thought closer to experience. Berkeley and Hume later propound similar views, but the general point that 'second notions' are intelligible only in their parasitic relation to determined 'first notions' is independent of empiricism. At least one Cartesian in Holland, Christopher Wittich, was criticizing Spinoza in the 1670s, and perhaps before that, for confusedly making 'second notions' the starting-point of the argument of *Ethics* despite the fact that such a term as 'substance' has a clear and unarbitrary meaning only as a way of characterizing formal properties shared by the independently identifiable beings, body, mind, and God.⁶

However that may be, Burthogge embraced a strongly empiricist, 'bottom-up' view of the acquisition of concepts, leaving room neither for innate concepts nor even for an intuitive leap from experience to a grasp of essences. Distinct notions can be achieved by definition, but definition simply gives *words* fixed senses. The only definition that can be given of a *thing* is a description of it 'according to the impressions it makes upon our Faculties, and Conceptions it occasions in them' (ibid. p. 36). There is thus no possibility of 'real' definition in the traditional sense. As Burthogge puts it, 'Essential Definitions are non-sense'. All genuine definitions are merely nominal, and the rest is description.

All this leads up to the theory of judgement, truth, and method. Judgement has two stages: first, comparing and considering, or reasoning, followed by the involuntary upshot, either assent or dissent (ibid. p. 42).⁷ The right method of reasoning is according to a kind of natural logic as improved by experience 'without assistance of art' (ibid. p. 45). Proof is showing truth to the mind, and what that involves depends on the nature of truth. Burthogge now considers various theories of truth and of the criterion of truth. It is evidently a presupposition of his discussion that, since notions cannot be compared with bare reality, but only with one another,

⁶ See Theo Verbeek, 'Wittich's Critique of Spinoza', in T.M. Schmalz (ed.), *Receptions of Descartes* (Routledge, forthcoming).

⁷ For the implication of involuntariness, see, e.g., p. 47.

the conception of truth as correspondence with reality, if unexceptionable, is irrelevant to the question of what is shown when 'truth' is shown. So too the scholastic notion of truth as the conformity things have to their archetypes in the divine intellect, which Burthogge calls 'metaphysical truth', is useless to us, since we have no access to the divine Ideas, to God's view of things: 'He must see the Original, and compare the *Copy* with it, that on Knowledge will affirm [the latter] to be true' (ibid. pp. 47-8). Similarly unobservable is Lord Herbert's natural congruity of our faculties to the truth, as manifested in free and fair assent. We have knowledge of the assent, but not of the congruity, and in any case people cheerfully assent to falsehoods (ibid. p. 53).

Another misguided doctrine, adopted by the Cartesians from the Stoics, is that clear and distinct perception is the criterion of truth. Burthogge objects that the question concerns *what* is perceived, not *how* it is perceived. We can as clearly and distinctly perceive that a proposition is false, as that a proposition is true. Moreover, unless truth is a discernible property of the *object* of judgement, i.e. of the proposition in question, there is no way to distinguish something's merely seeming true from its being clearly and distinctly perceived to be true (ibid. pp. 48-51). For a related reason innatism does nothing to explain our knowledge, since it is because of some feature of propositions supposed innate, their evident truth, that we assent to them. Since we can apprehend whatever such evident truth consists in, the hypothesis of innateness becomes redundant (ibid. pp. 59 f.).

Burthogge concludes that the only truth that could be so shown to us as to be the ground of our assent is what he calls 'logical truth'. This he explains as the 'objective Harmony', consistency and coherence 'of things each with other, in the Frame and Scheme of them in our Mindes'. That is to say, rather like Donald Davidson, he offers us a coherence theory of truth, or of the criterion of truth, on the ground that we are locked within the 'objective' or 'notional' world of our beliefs. Since no relation that propositions bear to things in themselves can be manifest to us, manifest truth must lie in coherence. As with a broken plate, when all the pieces fit together perfectly, we can be certain that they are correctly placed; and when some parts of an otherwise coherent scheme are missing, there is probability (ibid. pp. 60-3). From our point of view, Burthogge insists, when every reason is on one side, certainty is as good as

infallibility. The arguments of the philosophical sceptic supply no reason at all to doubt, even about contingent matters of fact. Burthogge sees no such problem as Descartes sees with respect to the *stability* of knowledge. In effect, he sets aside an element in a traditional account of knowledge (*epistēmē*, *scientia*) together with the distinction upon which Descartes lays such emphasis, between moral and metaphysical certainty. He simply dismisses Descartes's 'metaphysical' doubt as 'unreasonable and contradictory' (*ibid.* pp. 67 f.).

Despite this account of what 'logical truth' is, Burthogge evidently takes coherence to be a mark of correspondence. He underpins the principle that the most consistent account is the most probable by an assumption that things in themselves constitute a harmonious system. Accordingly, there is, or should be 'one *Science*... one *Globe of Knowledge*, as there is of *Things*. . . And . . . the more large, general, and comprehensive our *Knowledge* is, the more assured and evident it is. It is in *Science* as it is in *Arch-work*, the *Parts* uphold one another' (*ibid.* p. 64). In reading 'the book of nature', then, we should aim at a coherent and comprehensive interpretation, fitting all the pieces together as 'harmoniously' as we can. That way we maximize the probability that our notions and beliefs correspond in some way to the real order of things.

We should adopt the same method, Burthogge argues, in reading 'the book of God', at the same time recognizing that revealed truths are analogies that have spiritual and moral, rather than speculative, meaning. We cannot expect to understand them individually, or to pick and choose from what are all God's words, but we should interpret them together in whatever way makes them as consistent with one another as possible. His critics, Burthogge concludes, instead of dogmatic denial and appeal to prejudice must 'produce a frame and Scheme of Thoughts more Congruous and Harmonical than mine, [to] account for those Phaenomena which I [have] essay'd to solve'.⁸ So the work ends with sentiments that slot easily into the tradition of probabilist pleas for toleration, from Chillingworth to Locke: 'Men are reasonable Creatures, and

⁸ This general truth 'is evident in the Natural reasonings of Plain and Illiterate, but Understanding men; who not having other Logick but of that kinde, to verifie their Tales, desire but to have them heard out from end to end; and who no otherwise confute their Adversaries, than by telling over again in their own way the whole Relation, that both may be compared' (*ibid.* pp. 63-4).

therefore their Religion must be reasonable' (ibid. p. 70). Assent follows evidence, and, by implication, cannot be forced. In our search for truth we must prefer the best available interpretation of the 'phenomena', or data, whether natural or revealed, but recognize with humility that it is always liable to replacement by something better. All interpretation remains, in principle, open to correction. Philosophical scepticism can be dismissed, it seems, because it does nothing to replace the best available account with something better.

It would appear, then, that, after all, 'manifest' truth is not that manifest, or is not necessarily truth. Burthogge sometimes seems aware of this problem. One of his definitions of truth is 'universal and exact Agreement or Harmony' (ibid. p. 60), a definition that would make truth an ideal to which we aspire, rather like Peirce's notion of the ideal description of the world that would be arrived at, if scientific inquiry continued long enough. But what really matters to Burthogge, perhaps, is not so much what 'truth' is, as what reasonable judgement, reasonable procedure, and reasonable debate may be, in science and in religion, given our strictly mediated access to natural and spiritual reality.

Does all this add up to idealism? It is, I think, relevant to this question, if only to clarify what 'idealism' might best be supposed to be, to consider further the context within which Burthogge formulated his theory, and the direction in which he developed it in his other main philosophical work, *An Essay upon Reason, and the Nature of Spirits. An Essay*, published in 1694 and dedicated to Locke, restates Burthogge's epistemology, with some differences of emphasis. This time it is the preface to a speculative rather than a hermeneutic enterprise, the exposition of a somewhat wild, but not uninteresting, dualist panpsychism in various ways reminiscent of Neoplatonism, of Geulincx, and, as Burthogge recognizes, of Spinoza. But Burthogge's epistemology itself may also owe something to the two Dutch philosophers, as well as to Platonist theory.⁹

As for the latter, a book likely to have been known to Burthogge was by Robert Greville, Second Baron Brooke, a leading and very successful Parliamentary commander in the early stages of the Civil War who was fatally shot in the eye in 1643 after winning the Battle of Lichfield. He was a Puritan and advocate of toleration,

⁹ Or *other* Platonist theory, if we read Geulincx and/or Spinoza as Platonists.

possibly an associate of his contemporary Benjamin Whichcote, the guru of Cambridge Platonism. In 1640 Lord Brooke published an elegantly written essay on truth.¹⁰ This is Platonism taking the form of a strong monism with more than a touch of idealism¹¹: ‘All Being is but one’, Lord Brooke tells us, ‘taking various shapes, sometimes discovering it selfe under one, sometimes under another, whereas it is but one Being’. The diversity lies, not in reality, but in our notions. Time and place are unreal appearances: ‘all things did exist in their Being with God *ab omni aeterno* . . . and this succession is but to our apprehension’. Any approach that divides unitary reality will lead to confusion, for example if you distinguish substance from accident, or, when ‘you see some things precede others, call the one a *cause*, the other an *effect*’. We have to acquiesce in the appearance of such distinctions in ordinary life, but in going beyond ordinary experience in our search for causes and effects, we discover only our ignorance. Brooke seems to be positively against the empirical investigation of nature and explanatory hypotheses. He offers us a vision of a unitary science, with a Platonic way up and way down, but not much help towards achieving it. If your soul would ‘soare and raise it selfe up to Universall Being and Unity’, he tells us, and so see how ‘all things are but one emanation from power divine’,

so shall you with certainty descend to knowledge of existences, essences, when you shall rest in one universall cause: and Metaphysics, Mathematics, and Logick will happily prove one. . . . All particular Sciences will be subordinate and particular applications of these . . . and the face of the divine Beauty shall be unveiled through all.

This mystical, but rationalistic vision is not that far from Spinoza’s, allowing for differences of style and Spinoza’s explicit identification of God and nature. In Spinoza’s metaphysics the quasi-idealist element is less obtrusive, if it is there at all. (Some have thought that it is.¹²) Whether or not Burthogge did know Lord Brooke’s work, he comments at length on the resemblance between his own theory and the views of Plato and the Academy

¹⁰ Brooke, *The Nature of Truth: Its Union and Unity with the Soule, Which is One in its Essence, Faculties, Acts; One with TRUTH*. Quotations are from pp. 104 and 132.

¹¹ I would prefer not to call it idealism, if only because Brook seems to envisage a science of things in themselves, subordinating diversity to unity.

¹² A key passage is Spinoza’s definition of *attribute*, ‘By attribute I understand what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence’, which seems open to an ‘idealist’ interpretation.

(*Essay*, pp. 74–5), and makes informed reference to Spinoza (*ibid.* pp. 94–8, 109, 116). Nevertheless, he specifically opposes Platonist doctrine. For example, he expressly rejects the view, held by Brook and other Platonists, that the proper object of intellect is truth, holding instead that it is meaning (*Organum*, pp. 11 f.). Brooke, like Spinoza after him, has to deal with falsity in terms of confused perception,¹³ whereas Burthogge has no need for such a sidelong approach. What is clearly meaningful may well be false, and clearly false.

A more fundamental or, at least, more striking difference lies in Burthogge's empiricism. Without the body, he tells us, we would have no sense experience, and without sense experience, we would have no notions at all (*Essay*, p. 57). That, in a way, is Spinoza's view too; but for Burthogge sense experience not only comes first, but cannot be transcended. It is more secure than any general speculation, however harmonious. As Burthogge puts it, echoing Hobbes, 'Assent on Evidence by the testimony of our own Senses rightly circumstanced and conditioned, is as firm as can be, and is called Knowledge' (*Organum*, pp. 68 f.). Burthogge simply dismisses the idea of rising to a God's-eye view of things, an apprehension of reality *sub specie aeternitatis*, the essential starting-point of the Platonic way down (*ibid.* p. 48). Like Locke, he illustrates the authority of the senses over theory by the example of transubstantiation, the example previously offered in the Port-Royal *Logic* to the opposite effect (*ibid.* p. 20).¹⁴

In *An Essay upon Reason* Burthogge develops a sophisticated analysis of sense perception to rival those of Locke and, explicitly, Descartes. Sensation, Burthogge states, never occurs without conception, the proper object of which is the image or idea.¹⁵ Without 'conception', it seems, sensation would not *be* sensation, a form of consciousness. This does not mean that a faculty distinct from sense, namely intellect, is required for consciousness. Contrary to Descartes's view, sense is itself 'a Cogitative or Conceptive Power'.¹⁶ Nor does it mean that the object of sensory conception,

¹³ Burthogge, *Organum*, p. 110: 'In this action [i.e. false belief], there are two things; There is the seeing a Being, and the seeing it under a confused notion.'

¹⁴ Cf. Locke, *Essay*, ii. xxiii. 17; A. Arnauld and P. Nicole, *Logique*, iv. xii.

¹⁵ Burthogge, *Essay*, p. 4: 'Conception properly speaking, is of the Image, or Idea.'

¹⁶ Burthogge, p. 61 f.: '[Descartes denies] that Sensation is Knowledge, and consequently, excluding both Conception and Consciousness from the Idea of it, . . . must

the image or idea, is a blank internal *datum*, as a sensation seems to be for Descartes (and, at least sometimes, a 'simple idea' seems to be for Locke). 'Apprehension, Knowledge, or conscious Perception', Burthogge tells us, 'is of the Object, by means of that Idea, or Image'. Indeed, it seems that the 'idea or image', perceived as external, is the 'object' as we perceive it, the 'immediate' object, the 'thing' in so far as it is an 'object'. An essential aspect of conscious perception, Burthogge claims, is attention, and attention, he explains, is the application of the mind to 'objects'—that is to say, to things as experienced, to 'ideas' taken objectively. Burthogge puts it succinctly: 'Without Attention, no Conception, and without Conception, no Consciousness.' 'Objects', moreover, are necessarily conceived as external to the faculty. In other words, conscious sensation, in being conscious and in being sensation, is intrinsically intentional. The point is close to the point made by some present-day analytic philosophers who call sense experience 'transparent' in that, roughly speaking, to describe the experience just is to describe its external objects as they appear to be. But whereas some of these philosophers would argue that we can therefore exclude mind-dependent or subjective qualitative states from the analysis of perception, Burthogge adopts the closely related, but obverse conclusion that sensible things, in so far as they are 'objects', are mind-dependent. At the same time, sensible objects necessarily appear to us as external, and their perceived externality is prior to any judgement, theory, or intellectual notion:

...the *immediate* Objects of Cogitation, both the Sensitive, and the Intellectual, are, in *appearance*, *external* to their several faculties... in appearance, they are either the very *ultimate* Objects themselves of those faculties, or, at least, do *Exist* in them... for Whiteness *seems* to the Eye to be *in* snow, or in a white wall; and Sound to the Ear, to be in the Air. (*Essay*, p. 70; emphases in original)

The combination of a defeasible-coherence theory of the criterion of truth with a thesis of the intrinsic intentionality and independent authority of sense experience, not to speak of the view that our clearest and most basic notions are themselves drawn directly from sense experience, may seem straightforwardly incoherent. It invites

also deny, that Sense is a Cogitative or Conceptive Power. But then, it is hard to say, what that Idea is, that [he has] of sensation.' These remarks succeed, I think, in at least indicating what is wrong with Descartes's various accounts of sensation.

such criticism as Davidson has brought against Quine's empiricist conception of 'the tribunal of experience' in favour of his own coherentist view that sensation cannot *ground* perceptual belief or supply it with content, but can at best *cause* belief. There are remarks of Burthogge's that can seem like those passages in Locke's *Essay* that suggest that the intentionality of sensation is reducible to our awareness that our blank simple ideas are being caused by something independent of us.¹⁷ But in Burthogge's account the appearance of externality is intrinsic to the sensation, and kept strictly distinct from the perceiver's consciousness of being sensorily affected by something 'really' external, although the two are intimately related. In general, 'objects' appear external because their 'grounds' in reality are external, and that appearance, in normal circumstances, is why we can be sure that their grounds *are* external. Burthogge holds that, unless objects *appeared* to us as external, conscious experience and thought of objects, not to speak of thought about their 'grounds', would be impossible. The appearance of externality 'arises from the very nature of cogitation itself', presumably because cogitation needs objects other than itself (*ibid.* p. 70). But if sensation itself, the bare operation of the senses, can assure us of the existence and character of 'objects', and if we can also be assured that such objects correspond to, or are appearances of, a grounding reality, Burthogge might seem to have gone too far down the empiricist-realist road to leave himself room for a coherence theory of truth.

I will return to this question of the internal coherence of Burthogge's epistemology. But, first, I want to consider what more Burthogge says, in his second philosophical work, *An Essay upon Reason* (1694), about what notions are and how they are related to sense perception. The relevant chapters, on the role of language in thought,¹⁸ pursue with some subtlety the proposal of *Organum* that notions are meanings. Burthogge starts from the position that 'reason or understanding' allows us to know external objects, that is, to have them in mind, without images of them. He distinguishes between the sensible apprehension of a sentence and the intellectual apprehension of its meaning. Non-human animals are capable only of the former. Animals may sagaciously employ perceived means to

¹⁷ Not that Locke's theory is free from all ambivalence. For discussion, see M. Ayers, *Locke: Epistemology and Ontology* (London: Routledge, 1991) vol. I, chs. 4–8, pp. 36–69.

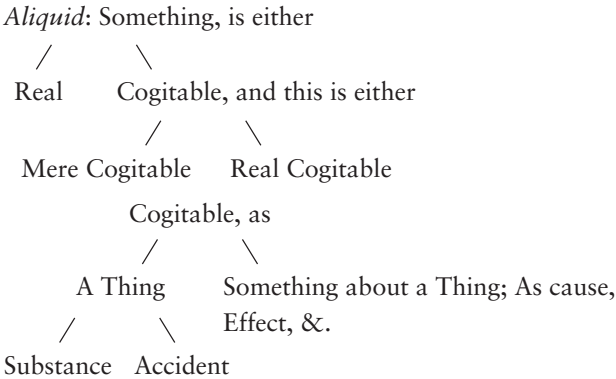
¹⁸ Burthogge's discussion here contains echoes of Hobbes, and was perhaps provoked by Book III of Locke's *Essay*.

ends, but do not reason or judge. Hounds follow the scent; they do not employ such premisses as 'The hare is gone either this way or that way'. If a hound fails to find the scent on one path, and immediately follows the other, it will be scent, not inference, that guides it: 'there is nothing of *Propositions, Major, Minor, or Conclusion*, in the case' (ibid. p. 18).¹⁹ Burthogge does not suppose, as a Cartesian might suppose, that language is made possible by a prior human capacity to form purely intellectual conceptions. He holds that purely intellectual conceptions, and indeed propositional thoughts of any kind, are made possible by language. In a key passage, he explains how the understanding can think of such things as substance, mind, matter, or colour-in-general without (*per impossibile*) employing images of them:

The only Images it has of these, and of all things else that are purely intelligible and mental, are the Words that signify them: Ay, the very *Ideas* the Understanding hath of things, are nothing but its definitive conceptions of them; and definitions as properly they are of *Words* . . . so they are made by words. To such a degree, in this respect, are words of use to the understanding, which cannot work without them; a thing so certain, that even the *denomination* it self of 'understanding', at least in part, arises from hence; for the *Mind* is called (the) Understanding, because it has a power of seeing things *under* Words that *Stand* for them; as well as because it has one of perceiving Substances under Accidents. (ibid. pp. 27–8)

I will return to this second alleged power of the understanding in a minute. With respect to the first, the capacity to employ words in order to think without images of what we are thinking about is illustrated by our capacity (as previously explained by Locke as well as by Hobbes) to employ numerals in order to think of numbers without images of pluralities, and to do so beyond the possible usefulness of any such images. The fundamental semantic connection is, for Burthogge, between words and the world, but it is the world not only as perceived, but as variously considered or abstractly conceived of with the aid of words, or 'under' words. There are different *modi concipiendi*, ways of conceiving of things, 'notions' in a narrow or technical sense. These constitute the categories of objects of thought, which Burthogge sets out in a table, a modified Porphyrian tree (ibid. p. 78).

¹⁹ The example of the allegedly syllogizing hound was traditional.



'*Aliquid*' seems to be regarded as a wholly (even categorically) indeterminate, wholly comprehensive generic name. Real 'some-things' are things in themselves. Cogitables are 'objects', real or chimerical, and all cogitables fall into one of two classes: the first includes substances and accidents, the second (as Burthogge's point might perhaps be expressed) includes things considered in terms of certain roles or relations that are irrelevant to their identity (cause, effect, part, whole, etc.). With respect to the second, Burthogge says, we ordinarily realize that there is nothing in the thing corresponding to the term under which we consider it. By contrast, however, people tend to be deluded into supposing that the real, independent world is actually composed of substances and accidents, notions which 'are the first steps we make towards a distinct Perceivance and knowledge of things'. Even 'unlearned plain men' are liable to reify substance and accident as real and independent terms of a real and independent relation. For example, they think of virtue and vice as real things in a man. The pervasiveness of the substance-accident relation in our conceptions of things Burthogge seems here to ascribe to linguistic necessity, in effect to the fact that, in order to form a judgement or propositional thought, it is necessary to identify a subject and say something about it, at least to oneself: 'there [is] no such thing in the World as a *Substance*, or an *Accident*, any more than such a thing as a *Subject*, or an *Adjunct*; and yet we apprehend not any thing but as one of these' (ibid. pp. 64 f.).²⁰

²⁰ For a slightly less paradoxical presentation of this last view, cf. p. 92: 'Thus the *Notion of Substance* is a Reality of Appearance only, but the things we apply it to, are Realities of Existence.'

Thoughts like some of these were fairly commonplace in the philosophy of logic. The popular *Logic* of the Polish Jesuit Martin Smiglecki, for example, used at Oxford in Burthogge's time, starts with the assertion that all the objects of logic are *entia rationis*, since logic deals with the conceptions or categories under which we think, speak, and reason about things.²¹ Nuchelmans,²² however, draws an illuminating and persuasive connection with certain arguments of Geulincx. Geulincx was lecturing in Leiden at the time Burthogge was there. He published his *Logic* in 1662, the year in which Burthogge took his doctoral degree. A theme of Geulincx's *Logic*, as Nuchelmans puts it, is 'that a thing as it exists in the world cannot possibly be an element of an affirmation . . . the naked thing has to be clothed, as it were, in the appropriate forms of thought and speech'.²³ The substantival expression by which we refer to something in the world expresses a way of conceiving of it such that it can stand as subject, while a predicate expresses a different way of conceiving of it. This point is now extended to epistemology. Things themselves are not changed by our thought, but, to quote Nuchelmans's summary again, 'we can have knowledge of these things only by assimilating and adapting them to the forms of our understanding and the linguistic categories corresponding to these forms'.²⁴ All this gives Geulincx a stick with which to beat the Aristotelians.²⁵ He represents them as continually falling into the trap of projecting on to 'the things themselves those features which they have only in relation to the modes of our thinking by which they are made present to the mind'.²⁶ Good philosophy, on the other hand, will allow for these modes of thinking in its understanding of things.

This general type of explanation of the errors of the Aristotelians, that they mistake logical entities for real ones, was not, of course, peculiar to Geulincx. Bacon accused Aristotle of 'fashioning the world out of the categories', and criticism of scholastic belief in

²¹ Martinus Smigleckius, *Logica* (1618).

²² Gabriel Nuchelmans, *Concept and Proposition from Descartes to Kant*, ch. vi, esp. pp. 117-19. In my comments on Geulincx I am indebted to the whole of this chapter.

²³ Gabriel Nuchelmans, *Concept and Proposition from Descartes to Hume*, p. 116.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 117.

²⁵ Done in *Metaphysica ad mentem Peripateticam*; see Nuchelmans, *Concept and Proposition*, pp. 114-16.

²⁶ Nuchelmans, *Concept and Proposition*, pp. 115-16.

'real accidents' is commonly in the same spirit. A general formulation of the criticism occurs in Malebranche's *Recherche*, in the chapter on errors of the intellect, 'the mind's disordered abstractions'.²⁷ But Nuchelmans's speculation is probably correct that it was Geulincx who supplied Burthogge with much of the material for his argument. One way, then, and very possibly the most illuminating way, of viewing Burthogge's 'idealism' is as a certain kind of theory of philosophical error, owing much to a philosophy of logic and incorporating the new philosophers' view of 'the prejudices of the senses' but extended to the whole of human belief, actual and possible, and to all possible concepts. For Burthogge, what we think of as knowledge—and indeed *is* knowledge, in ordinary terms—is necessarily distorted by the forms of perception and thought. Error theory becomes idealism when it is held, in effect, that error is normal, and that there is no conceivable way of allowing for the distorting veils of sensation and of conception or language. This incorrigible distortion, Burthogge emphasizes, is not a contingent consequence of human nature, but follows 'from the very Nature of Cogitation in general (as it comprehends Sensation as well as Intellection) since that the Understanding doth Pinn its Notions upon Objects, arises not from its being *Such* a particular kind of Cogitative Faculty, but from its being Cogitative *at large*' (*Essay*, p. 58).

In its general relation to previous error theory, Burthogge's epistemology resembles Hume's. But Hume draws on previous accounts of how an irrational faculty of the imagination is a main source of error, not to say of madness, and brings them to bear, exuberantly modified and extended, on normal belief. He presents the human world-view, including the belief that there is an independent world at all, as an irrational, contingently structured, logically incoherent but nevertheless natural and useful product of the imagination. Language plays an essential role for Hume only in the explanation of a priori thought and knowledge, and even there it does so thanks to a mysteriously effective association of images with words, themselves sensory images (i.e. impressions or ideas). Rather like Hume and, more significantly, Hobbes, Burthogge takes it that words are images that have meaning through their association with other images or, rather, their association with things through images caused by

²⁷ Malebranche, *Recherche de la vérité*, Bk. III, Pt. 2, ch. 8.

those things. But in Burthogge's story it is the logical forms of judgement, the logical roles of words in propositional thought, that above all systematically shape, and thereby ineluctably distort, our apprehension of the world. Sense gives us external qualia, which reason interprets as predicable of substances or subjects.

Not much is said directly about the substance–accident relation in *Organum*, apart from identifying it as a notion. But there is in that book a somewhat mysterious line of thought relevant to the topic of predication. Burthogge asserts, in effect several times, that for us 'things are nothing but as they stand in our *Analogie*'. As any thoughts of God must employ analogy if they are to go beyond the barren thought of an unknown 'Infinite Excellency', so significant thoughts about anything at all must employ analogy. In making this claim, Burthogge might mean that all predication is a kind of comparison between the things falling under the predicate in question, and he certainly emphasizes the need for 'comparing thing with thing' in constructing a coherent 'scheme of things'. On that interpretation, he is deploying a nominalist point against taking attributes as real beings. In context, however, his talk of 'our analogy' seems to have the more general, quasi-idealist point that, as our knowledge of God is necessarily shaped by human ways of thinking, so is our knowledge of anything. Yet it is specifically the *attributes* of God that are in question, which are, he says, 'but as so many aspects' from a human point of view. So, on either interpretation, the suggestion seems to be that even the natural things we perceive cannot be known as they are in themselves because they can only be known through the application of predicates marking, as it were, mediated glimpses of reality.

By the time of the *Essay on Reason* Burthogge had read Locke's *Essay*, and it shows. The subject–predicate form of judgement now comes centre-stage as the first notion occasioned by sensation. It owes its existence to an intuition we have that the qualitative sensory data perceived as external require explanation as manifestations or appearances of things whose nature is unknown. We are immediately presented in sensation with 'odors, colours, savors, figures, &c.', but when we think of them we 'at the same time conceive, that besides *these* [things] there must be others that have them, in which [they] are'. The things that are had, we call accidents, the things that have them, substances: 'but what those things, which we do denominate Substances, Are, in themselves, stript of all their Accidents, is no wise known: All we know of any substance is, that it is the subject of

such and such Accidents; or that it is Qualified so or so; and hath these, and the other Qualities' (ibid. p. 97). It is a mistake, Burthogge argues, and specifically a mistake of Spinoza's, to suppose that *self-subsistence* is the fundamental or defining metaphysical property of substances. The 'first reflection' of the understanding that gives us the idea of '*subjects*, or substances' is that the apparently external objects of sense (now thought of as qualities or accidents) require support. The idea of self-subsistence, he asserts, is constructed simply to avoid an infinite regress, the idea of a subject which is not itself in a subject. It is a notion that tells us nothing about ultimate subjects, Burthogge argues, echoing Locke on our ideas of substances:

We have no Ideas of any substances, but such as are Notional and Relative. . . . For what Idea have we of Earth, but that it is something material, that it is fixed and tasteless? What of salt? but that of something sapid, and easily soluble in water? And what idea have we of *water*? but that it is something material, moist, and fluid in such a degree, and the like. (ibid. pp. 98–9)

Burthogge accordingly rejects the Cartesian view that the idea of extension constitutes 'a Real, a Positive Idea of Substance', one reason being that 'I can no more conceive any *Real Extension*, than I can any *Motion*, but as a thing that belongs to another'.

Such borrowings or echoes suggest that Burthogge saw Locke as saying what he himself had been trying to say about substance and accident. That might be taken as evidence that Burthogge's epistemology, at least in intention, falls short of idealism, aiming at nothing more radical than the kind of general epistemic humility about the natural world that is espoused by Locke. Some of Burthogge's comments in expounding the Porphyrian schema just discussed might suggest the same. In particular, the class of real somethings, i.e. mind-independent things in themselves, is not, as one might expect, left without example; yet what *example* could a self-respecting idealist give of a thing in itself? We are told that 'such a [real] thing is *matter*, and every Affection, and every System of matter; and such a thing also is Mind'. This might seem to be a sort of arm-waving concession that the reality that gives rise to sensory appearances is no doubt something like what corpuscularian dualism claims it is; even though, as soon as we try to say or think anything specific about it, the very mode of conceiving of reality that we necessarily employ ensures that we remain within

the realm of 'cogitables'.²⁸ (Some of the notorious 'realist' passages in Hume look like similar arm-waving towards an unknowable natural material world.) Burthogge's own panpsychist speculation is frankly and firmly presented as an application of what he calls the 'Refracted, Inadequate, *Real-Notional* way of conceiving'. It is not presented as insight into things as they are in themselves. It is simply the most coherent story we can tell.

A similar interpretation is possible of Burthogge's treatment of space and time: namely, that they are independent realities, but realities of which we can have only a coarse and distorted knowledge. In *Organum* he enjoins us not to analyse our notions too closely,

attempting to know them in their realities, in which [we] cannot; as in Quantity the common Notion of it, how evident is it! 'Tis evident to all men, and none but knows what is meant by it; and he that looks on Quantity but so, observes a due distance; but whosoever looks nearer . . . is confounded with the composition of the *Continuum* (and well he may that takes a Phaenomenon, a Spectrum, an Appearance for a Reality). (p. 40)

This could be taken to go all the way with Lord Brooke and Kant on the unreality of space. Time and place are specifically included in a main list of intentional entities in *An Essay upon Reason*. On the other hand, Locke too argues that difficulties over infinite divisibility are a mark of our lack of a clear idea of extension, and Locke does not draw the conclusion that nothing is extended.²⁹ It is perfectly possible and, I suspect, right to take Burthogge to mean that space and time have to be conceptualized, made into notional entities, so to speak, in order for us to think and reason about them, and measure them determinately. The problems of infinite divisibility reflect our conceptualization, not the pure, unknowable nature of real quantity.

It is surely true that Locke, like other 'New Philosophers', shared Burthogge's view that the substance-accident relation has no existence in independent reality. And both held that our conceiving of reality in terms of the substance-accident relation reflects our limited epistemic access to reality. Yet there seems to be an important

²⁸ In *Organum* Burthogge suggests that if we try to think of the world in purely mechanical terms, we simply end up with 'an Empty, Dry, and Barren Notion of the World' (p. 32).

²⁹ Locke, *Essay*, II. xxiii. 3 I.

difference. There is nothing in Locke's theory of thought or of 'mental propositions' that absolutely requires that some of our ideas contain the idea of an unknown subject or substance. Propositional thought is simply the perception or presumption of a relation between ideas. For Locke, I take it, the substance-accident relation that is embodied in our ideas of substances as *things which have* qualities reflects our ignorance of what those things are in themselves. But this does not mean that our ignorance is in principle irremediable, an inevitable consequence of the inevitably propositional form of thought. Burthogge, on the other hand, seems to be arguing *both* that the subject-predicate form arises as a result of the nature of sensation, which 'occasions' the notion of there being something more to things than their observable qualities, *and* that all judgements are necessarily of subject-predicate logical form and therefore, distortingly, bring the world as we conceive of it under that form. This combination may look problematic, but it raises interesting questions about the role of material or 'substantial' objects as the fundamental subjects of predication in natural language. The present point, however, is that Burthogge at least *wants* to have proved that our ignorance of things in themselves is in principle irremediable, a consequence of the very nature of 'cogitation at large'. That difference from Locke, I would suggest, tips his cognitive humility over into idealism.

Whatever the differences between them, both Locke and Burthogge face a cogent line of objection. Both can be taken to hold that sense perception gives us only what have to be conceived of as accidents belonging to an unknown substance or subject. In other words, substantial things or bodies are not perceived as such, but only their qualities. Yet Locke talks of 'sensitive knowledge' of the 'co-existence' of different qualities in the same substance, and both Locke and Burthogge include spatial properties such as shape among the qualities perceived. What is it to perceive the coexistence of qualities in a physical thing, if not to perceive a body as variously qualified, and how could we do that, or perceive a body's spatial properties in the way we do, without the body being perceived as a body? How is it, too, that sensation presents colours and other qualities, as Burthogge puts it, as 'external' and 'in things themselves', unless we perceive the things as existing in space, and indeed as affecting us visually?

One way the argument could go here, of course, is further in the direction of Kant and, indeed, many present-day conceptualists. I would myself prefer to move in a quite different and realist direction by stepping right out of the idealist web in which Burthogge and those conceptualists have enmeshed themselves, while acknowledging the questions that Burthogge's empiricist idealism raises as to the relation between sensory content and logical form. My proposal is that the primitive objects of sense are not qualia, whether experienced as external or as internal, but bodies or matter disposed in space. The fundamental debt that logical form owes to the way we perceive the world consists, roughly speaking, in the fact that the senses pick out physical structure, distinct elements of which serve as potential objects of reference. Language plays no role in the individuation of some such objects. In particular, discrete, edged bodies are the naturally, physically unitary individuals that are pre-conceptually picked out by us in sense experience itself, the sensorily given subjects of primitive propositional thought and utterance. 'Accidents' are first ascribed to them—that is to say, predicates are applied to them—according to the various ways they strike us, salient points of resemblance and differences between them. The possibility of reference to 'accidents' themselves is (to simplify somewhat) a function of the nominalization of predicates. Events, relations, and other such individuals are similarly sliced out by ways of talking, by linguistic categories. Speculative explanatory theories give us further objects of reference (protons, neutrinos, and the like), and here, indeed, we must aim towards universality and coherence, while accounting for the experienced phenomena. As I have said, this approach, unlike the others, involves a clear step out of the idealism or conceptualism of such as Burthogge. For it holds that the senses give us access to the physical structure of reality, to physical structure in the most literal sense. It must also insist on a firm, but not necessarily sharp, boundary between observation and theory.

However that may be, the historical lesson that I have tried to draw from the consideration of Richard Burthogge's philosophy is to the effect that the source of modern idealism cannot be identified with one decisive factor, such as (as some have argued) the epistemological problems raised by extreme scepticism of the senses. Platonic monism, as we have seen, was an important factor. Error

theory, from Bacon to Malebranche, was also important. The question of scientific method, and of the possibility of scientific knowledge, was important. Hermeneutics and toleration theory were important. And, as Gabriel Nuchelmans has argued so effectively, the theory of logical form was crucially important. When all this is taken into account, it becomes apparent that what is centrally characteristic of the idealist tradition is radical conceptualism, rather than the kind of anti-materialism or phenomenalism propounded by Bishop Berkeley.

Hope, Fear, and the Politics of Immortality

STEVEN NADLER



I

There may be no early modern philosopher whose thought is more amenable to treatment by analytic philosophy than Spinoza. By presenting his ideas *more geometrico* in the *Ethics*, with its definitions, axioms, and deductively ordered propositions, he in fact appears to have done most of the analytic philosopher's work in advance. All too frequently, however, analytic discussions of Spinoza's philosophy get bogged down in details. Looking with a highly focused attention at the trees—and their branches and twigs and leaves—and disputing over the relationships between individual propositions and demonstrations and corollaries, we often lose sight of the forest. And what a grand forest it is. Spinoza's philosophical system is one of the richest and most multi-faceted in the history of philosophy, and certainly one that remains vitally relevant today.

A broad understanding of Spinoza's overall philosophical programme, whatever else it may involve, requires at the very least an explanation of both how the *Ethics* lays the metaphysical, epistemological, psychological, and moral foundations for the critique of religion and the political theory of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, and, conversely, how that incredibly bold religious/political work can contribute to our comprehension of the important theses of what Spinoza surely considered his philosophical *magnum opus*.

To the extent to which analytic approaches to Spinoza's thought ignore these questions, they fail to do justice to Spinoza's philosophy, especially its systematic character. I am still astounded by Jonathan Bennett's claim, right at the beginning of his fascinating

book on the *Ethics*, that 'I do not find [the *Theological-Political Treatise*] helpful in understanding the *Ethics*'.¹ More generally, while the concern shown by most analytic studies of the *Ethics* for the minutiae of its propositions has given us some interesting and highly illuminating insights, the relative paucity of analytic interest² in the moral-theological-political project to which it belongs has left some of Spinoza's most important claims in the shadows.³

It might be argued that this is a failing not so much of the analytic approach to the history of philosophy *per se*, but simply of the way in which it happens to be implemented. That is, perhaps the problem is only a contingent one, and does not represent an inadequacy endemic to analytic history of philosophy. I do not think that this is the case, however. Analytic history of philosophy is by its nature focused on terms, theses, and arguments. It looks for clarity and distinctness in definitions, and validity and soundness in reasoning. By contrast, the systematic unity of the various parts of a philosopher's thought and the thematic connections between his works is rarely a matter of argument. No amount of careful, minute analysis of a thinker's propositions and justifications will reveal the system and large-scale project; on the contrary, it necessarily draws our attention away from that big picture to the finer details. And despite Spinoza's careful and methodical exposition, he is nothing if not a big-picture philosopher.

II

On the face of it, Spinoza makes it very easy for us to see the relationship between the two most important texts of his *œuvre*. One of the central metaphysical themes of the *Ethics* is the way in which all things in nature follow with deterministic necessity from

¹ Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1984), p. 7. See also R. J. Delahunty, *Spinoza* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), which appears in the arch-analytical series 'The Arguments of the Philosophers'.

² The works cited by Bennett and Delahunty aside, most full-length studies of Spinoza discuss both the *Ethics* and the *Theological-Political Treatise*, of course, but many tend to make only a half-hearted effort to relate them, content to point out 'parallels' and 'consistency' or use isolated claims from one to illuminate isolated claims from the other.

³ For example, the great difficulty that many commentators have with understanding the doctrine of the eternity of the mind in Part V of the *Ethics*; see below.

the eternal attributes of God or Nature, *Deus sive Natura*. God does not act for the sake of any ends, and therefore there is no teleology either within nature or for nature as a whole (with the exception of the ends that human beings set for themselves in their projects). There are, in other words, no final causes in nature. 'Nature has no ends set before it, and all final causes are nothing but human fictions.'⁴ Spinoza further insists that all of our prejudices and superstitions arise from the presumption that there *are* such final causes, that God and nature do operate teleologically. 'All the prejudices I here undertake to expose depend on this one: that men commonly suppose that all natural things act, as men do, on account of an end; indeed, they maintain as certain that God himself directs all things to some certain end, for they say that God has made all things for man, and man that he might worship God.' Now since the *Theological-Political Treatise* opens with an attempt, through a kind of natural history of religion, to show just how organized religion has its origin in such prejudices, one would naturally think that the *Ethics* therefore represents, in its anti-anthropomorphic conception of God and non-teleological picture of nature, a prolegomenon to the *Theological-Political Treatise's* critique of religion. This much, I believe, should be clear to any careful reader of the two works.

Without denying the importance of this view of the relationship between Spinoza's metaphysical ideas, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, his theological-political thought—a view which is surely right, and which has been the focus of most scholarly approaches to the unity of his system⁵—I want to try to add to our understanding of how the *Ethics* relates to Spinoza's political theory by shifting our attention from the early parts of the work, where he presents his conception of God and nature, to the later parts, and especially to his account of the eternity of the mind and the consequent denial of personal immortality in Part V. I argue that, as

⁴ *Ethics* I, Appendix. (I use the standard format for citing passages in the *Ethics* (E) by Part, proposition (p), scholium (s), corollary (c). Thus, E1p2oc1 is *Ethics*, Part I, proposition 20, corollary 1.)

⁵ See e.g. Richard Mason, *The God of Spinoza* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), ch. 4; and Edwin Curley, 'Notes on a Neglected Masterpiece (II): The *Theological-Political Treatise* as a Prolegomenon to the *Ethics*', in J. Cover and M. Kulstad (eds.), *Central Themes in Early Modern Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1990), pp. 109–60.

important as the radical conception of God and nature is to Spinoza's critique of religion, it is his denial of the immortality of the soul that represents the real foundation for his ideal conception of political society, and especially for the elimination of ecclesiastic influence in the affairs of state. More particularly, since the passive affects of hope and fear are what initially lead individuals to concede their personal and civic autonomy to religious authorities (as opposed to secular political authorities), it is the weakening of the efficacy of these emotions—by eliminating the eschatological doctrine that generates their long-term power over us—that is crucial for a truly liberal, secular, democratic polity. In other words, one important key to the unity of Spinoza's system, to seeing especially how the *Ethics* and the *Theological-Political Treatise* fit together, is his account of the eternity of the mind, understood as a denial of the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, as well as his discussion of the emotions of hope and fear which that doctrine feeds.

In this way, I am taking up a challenge issued by Edwin Curley at the end of his essay 'Notes on a Neglected Masterpiece (II): The *Theological-Political Treatise* as a Prolegomenon to the *Ethics*'. After going through Parts I–IV of the *Ethics* and showing how their themes are present (or, in some cases, absent) in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, he stops short at Part V: 'I think that there is not enough to say on that subject to warrant a special section.' He does make a few suggestions as to how to integrate Part V with the treatise, but they are very sketchy and abstract. And he insists: 'I do not find in the TPT any hint of the doctrine in Part V which has caused interpreters the greatest difficulty: the eternity of the mind.'⁶ Now, as I hope to show, the doctrine of the eternity of the mind—understood as a denial of personal immortality—is in fact centrally present in the treatise as the implied solution to what is perhaps the pressing political (and historically most immediate) problem of the work: i.e. freeing the state from the influence of ecclesiastic authorities.

III

Analytic philosophical approaches to Spinoza have not been kind to the doctrine of the eternity of the mind and its place in Spinoza's

⁶ Curley, 'Notes on a Neglected Masterpiece (II)', pp. 149, 151.

system.⁷ It causes even the best Spinoza scholars to throw up their hands in frustration. Thus, Curley confesses that 'in spite of many years of study, I still do not feel that I understand this part of the *Ethics* at all'. He adds: 'I feel the freedom to confess that, of course, because I also believe that no one else understands it adequately either.'⁸ Bennett is a bit less charitable. He insists that this part of the *Ethics* is 'an unmitigated and seemingly unmotivated disaster . . . rubbish that causes others to write rubbish'. He concludes that 'the time has come to admit that this part of the *Ethics* has nothing to teach us and is pretty certainly worthless . . . this material is valueless'.⁹

While I am sympathetic to Curley's temperate lament, I find Bennett's complaint utterly surprising. I would think that it should be reasonably clear to anyone who steps back for a minute from the propositions themselves and thinks deeply about Spinoza's overall project that the final doctrines of the work are not at all 'rubbish'. While it is indeed a difficult theory to understand, I believe that in the light of such a broader perspective it should be evident what work the doctrine of the eternity of the mind is supposed to do, and especially how it forms an important link between the *Ethics* and the *Theological-Political Treatise*.

For reasons of focus and concision, I begin my discussion with a simple but not unproblematic assumption: namely, that Spinoza did indeed deny the personal immortality of the soul. I realize that this is far from being entirely clear from the text of the *Ethics*, as so many commentators have pointed out. I also realize that, in fact, more scholars are inclined to find in Spinoza's work an account of human immortality than are disposed to see him denying such a doctrine.¹⁰ I have argued elsewhere, and in great detail, for the claim that in Part V Spinoza has in mind nothing less than a denial

⁷ Nor have they been kind to the *Theological-Political Treatise*. It is either treated merely as a source for supporting quotes in studies of the *Ethics*, or ignored altogether (as Bennett proposes to do). There is yet to appear a full-length, analytic treatment of the book comparable to those provided for the *Ethics*.

⁸ Edwin Curley, *Behind the Geometric Method* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 84.

⁹ Bennett, *Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, pp. 357, 372.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Harry Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1935), ii. pp. 310–11; and Alan Donagan, 'Spinoza's Proof of Immortality', in M. Grene (ed.), *Spinoza: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974).

that the soul, construed as a personal self, is immortal.¹¹ To be sure, he argues that there is an eternal aspect to the human mind; in fact, he believes that there are two eternal aspects to the mind: one deriving from its nature as the idea of the body, and another that is constituted by the individual's accumulation of adequate ideas or intuitive knowledge over a lifetime. But neither element in his account of the eternity of the mind amounts to a meaningful doctrine of personal immortality. In fact, such a religiously charged doctrine goes against every grain of Spinoza's philosophical persuasions. To believe that Spinoza's philosophy allows for personal immortality is deeply to misunderstand Spinoza.

Now although I cannot here provide the metaphysical argument for Spinoza's denial of immortality, I hope none the less that the discussion of this paper, by integrating the account of hope, fear, and immortality that I see in the *Ethics* with the political project of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, also provides a kind of secondary, political argument to the effect that the denial of personal immortality is central to Spinoza's philosophical programme. Be that as it may, allow me to take for granted the assumption that Spinoza did deny the immortality of the soul, and let us see what its relevance is for Spinoza's political thought.

IV

The title of Part IV of the *Ethics* sums up very well Spinoza's view of the ordinary human life: 'On Human Bondage, or the Powers of the Affects'. We are, he claims, slaves to the passions. 'Man's lack of power to moderate and restrain the affects I call Bondage. For the man who is subject to affects is under the control, not of himself, but of fortune, in whose power he so greatly is that often, though he sees the better for himself, he is still forced to follow the worse' (EIV, Preface).

The passions, or 'passive affects', are in effect those things that happen in us the causes of which lie outside of our own nature; we feel passions when we are being acted upon by the world around us. All human emotions are functions of the ways in which external things affect our powers or capacities. Love, for example, is simply

¹¹ See Steven Nadler, *Spinoza's Heresy: Immortality and the Jewish Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), esp. chs. 5 and 6.

our awareness of a thing that brings about some improvement in our constitution. We love the external object that benefits us and causes us joy. Hate, on the other hand, is nothing but ‘sadness with the accompanying idea of an external cause’. We hate the object that harms us and makes us unhappy (*EIIIp13s*). Thus all of the human emotions, in so far as they are passions, are constantly directed outward, towards things and their tendencies to affect us one way or another. Aroused by our passions and desires, we seek or flee those things that we believe cause joy or sadness. ‘We strive to further the occurrence of whatever we imagine will lead to Joy, and to avert or destroy what we imagine is contrary to it, or will lead to Sadness’ (*EIIIp28*). Our hopes and fears fluctuate depending on whether we regard the objects of our desires or aversions as remote, near, necessary, possible, or unlikely.

What we so often fail to keep in mind, however, is the fact that the things that stir our emotions, being external to us, do not answer to our wills. I have no real power over whether what I hate is near me or distant, whether the person I love lives or dies. The objects of our passions are completely beyond our control. (This is, of course, all the more so in the absolutely deterministic universe that Spinoza describes.) Thus, the more we allow ourselves to be controlled by these objects—by their comings and goings—the more we are subject to fluctuating passions and the less active and free (that is, self-controlled) we are. The upshot is a fairly pathetic picture of a life mired in the passions and pursuing and fleeing the changeable and fleeting objects that occasion them: ‘We are driven about in many ways by external causes, and . . . like waves on the sea, driven by contrary winds, we toss about, not knowing our outcome and fate’ (*EIIIp59s*). It is, he says, a kind of disease to suffer too much love for a thing that is mutable and never fully under our power, even when we do, for a time, have it within our possession.

Sickness of the mind and misfortunes take their origin especially from too much love toward a thing which is liable to many variations and which we can never fully possess. For no one is disturbed or anxious concerning anything unless he loves it, nor do wrongs, suspicions and enmities arise except from love for a thing which no one can really fully possess. (*EVp20s*)

The solution to this predicament is an ancient one. Since we cannot control the objects that we tend to value and that we allow to

influence our well-being, we ought instead to try to control our evaluations themselves and thereby minimize the sway that external objects and the passions have over us. We can never eliminate the passive affects entirely. We are essentially a part of nature, and can never fully remove ourselves from the causal series that links us to the world of external things. ‘It is impossible that a man should not be a part of Nature, and that he should be able to undergo no changes except those which can be understood through his own nature alone, and of which he is the adequate cause . . . From this it follows that man is necessarily always subject to passions, that he follows and obeys the common order of Nature, and accomodates himself to it as much as the nature of things requires’ (EIVp4). But we can, ultimately, counteract the passions, control them, and acheive a certain degree of relief from their turmoil.

The path to restraining and moderating the passions is through virtue. Human virtue for Spinoza consists in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding: the acquisition of adequate ideas and the intellectual intuition of the essences of things. When we perceive things *sub specie aeternitatis*, through reason and *scientia intuitiva* (the second and third kinds of knowledge) and in relation to God, what we apprehend is the deterministic necessity of all that happens.

EIIp44c2: It is of the nature of reason to perceive things under a certain species of eternity.

Dem.: It is of the nature of reason to regard things as necessary and not as contingent. And it perceives this necessity of things truly, that is, as it is in itself. But this necessity of things is the very necessity of God’s eternal nature. Therefore, it is of the nature of reason to regard things under this species of eternity.

We see that all bodies and their states and relationships—including the condition of our own body—follow necessarily from the essence of matter and the universal laws of physics; and we see that all ideas, including all the properties of minds, follow necessarily from the essence of thought and its universal laws. Such insight can only weaken the power that the passions have over us. When we come to this level of understanding and realize that we cannot control what nature brings our way or takes from us, we are no longer anxious over what may come to pass, and no longer obsessed with or despondent over the loss of our possessions. We regard all things

with equanimity, and we are not inordinately and irrationally affected in different ways by past, present, or future events. The result is self-control and a calmness of mind.

The more this knowledge that things are necessary is concerned with singular things, which we imagine more distinctly and vividly, the greater is this power of the Mind over the affects, as experience itself also testifies. For we see that Sadness over some good which has perished is lessened as soon as the man who has lost it realizes that this good could not, in any way, have been kept. Similarly, we see that [because we regard infancy as a natural and necessary thing], no one pities infants because of their inability to speak, to walk, or to reason, or because they live so many years, as it were, unconscious of themselves. (EVP6s)

The third kind of knowledge, in particular, by revealing how all things ultimately depend on God (or Nature) and its attributes, puts one in an intellectual union with the highest possible object of human knowledge. As this state of knowing represents our *summum bonum*, we strive to maintain it; and because its object is eternal and unchanging, we can do so. What, in the end, replaces the passionate, unstable love for ephemeral ‘goods’ is an abiding intellectual love for an eternal, immutable good that we can fully and stably possess, God.

EVP32: Whatever we understand by the third kind of knowledge we take pleasure in, and our pleasure is accompanied by the idea of God as a cause . . .

Corollary: From the third kind of knowledge, there necessarily arises an intellectual love of God. For from this kind of knowledge there arises Joy, accompanied by the idea of God as its cause, i.e., Love of God, not insofar as we imagine him as present, but insofar as we understand God to be eternal. And this is what I call intellectual love of God.

Taking his cue from Maimonides’ view of human *eudaimonia*, Spinoza argues that the mind’s intellectual love of God *is* our understanding of the universe, our virtue, our happiness, our well-being, and our ‘salvation’.¹² It is also our freedom and autonomy, as we approach the condition wherein what happens to

¹² See Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, iii. p. 51. For a discussion of the agreement between Maimonides and Spinoza on this, see Harvey, ‘A Portrait of Spinoza as a Maimonidean’, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 18 (1980): 151–72, esp. 161–2. Harvey notes—rightly, I believe—that ‘the view that the knowledge of “the actions” of God is knowledge of nature is typically Maimonidean’ (p. 162).

us (especially to our states of mind) follows from our own, intrinsic nature as thinking beings and not as a result of the ways external things affect us. Spinoza's 'free person'—'one who lives according to the dictate of reason alone' (*EIVp67*)—bears the gifts and losses of fortune with equanimity, does only those things that he believes to be 'the most important in life', takes care for the well-being of others (doing what he can to insure that they, too, achieve some relief from the disturbances of the passions through understanding), and is not anxious about death. His understanding of his place in the natural scheme of things brings to the free individual happiness and true peace of mind.

V

The two passions or emotions that clearly concern Spinoza the most are hope and fear. Both relate to an uncertainty over what the future may bring. Hope, he claims, is simply 'an inconstant Joy which has arisen from the image of a future or past thing whose final outcome we doubt'. We hope for a thing whose presence, as yet uncertain, will bring about joy. We fear, however, a thing whose presence, equally uncertain, will bring about sadness (*EIIIp18s2*). When that the outcome of which was doubtful becomes certain, hope is changed into confidence, while fear is changed into despair. To live a life according to hope and fear is to be governed by an anxious state of expectation or dread that is essentially incurable. Spinoza, no doubt, is in basic agreement with Seneca that both hope and fear belong to a mind in suspense, to a mind in a state of anxiety through looking into the future. Both are mainly due to projecting our thoughts far ahead of us instead of adapting ourselves to the present. Thus it is that foresight, the greatest blessing humanity has been given, is transformed into a curse. Wild animals run from dangers they actually see, and once they have escaped them worry no more. We however are tormented alike by what is past and what is to come.¹³

The reason why, for Spinoza, these two emotions are of special importance is the crucial role they play in our everyday lives and the contribution they make to maintaining us in a perpetual state of 'bondage'. Hope and fear make possible a secondary, conventional

¹³ Seneca, *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*, Letter V.

kind of bondage that supplements the original, 'natural' slavery to the passions that ordinarily characterizes the multitude. For hope and fear lie at the foundation of organized, sectarian religion. They keep us in a state of obedient expectation for what ecclesiastics, who know how to manipulate these emotions, hold out as the ultimate reward and punishment.

In the Preface to the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza begins by alerting his readers to just those superstitious beliefs and behaviours that clergy, by playing on ordinary human emotions, encourage in their followers. A person guided by fear and hope, the central emotions in a life devoted to the pursuit of temporal advantages, turns, in the face of the vagaries of fortune, to superstitious behaviours calculated to secure the uncertain goods he desires.

If men were able to exercise complete control over all their circumstances, or if continuous good fortune were always their lot, they would never be prey to superstition. But since they are often reduced to such straits as to be without any resource, and their immoderate greed for fortune's fickle favors often makes them the wretched victims of alternating hopes and fears, the result is that, for the most part, their credulity knows no bounds. In critical times they are swayed this way or that by the slightest impulse, especially so when they are wavering between the emotions of hope and fear. . . . No one can have lived in this world without realizing that, when fortune smiles at them, the majority of men, even if quite unversed in affairs, are so abounding in wisdom that any advice offered to them is regarded as an affront, whereas in adversity they know not where to turn, begging for advice from any quarter; and then there is no counsel so foolish, absurd or vain which they will not follow. Again even the most trivial of causes are enough to raise their hopes or dash them to the ground. For if, while possessed by fear, they see something happen that calls to mind something good or bad in the past, they believe that this portends a happy or unhappy issue, and this they call a lucky or unlucky omen, even though it may fail them a hundred times. Then again, if they are struck with wonder at some unusual phenomenon, they believe this to be a portent signifying the anger of the gods or of a supreme deity.

Thus, people are led to pray, worship, make votive offerings, sacrifice, and engage in all the various rituals of popular religion, trying to make things go their way.

They regard it as a pious duty to avert the evil by sacrifice and vows, susceptible as they are to superstition and opposed to religion. Thus there is no end to the kind of omens that they imagine, and they read

extraordinary things into Nature as if the whole of Nature were a partner in their madness.

At the root of it all are the passions of hope and fear, and the fleeting material goods of this world—whose comings and goings are beyond our control—to which those emotions are directed.

We see that it is particularly those who greedily covet fortune's favors who are the readiest victims of superstition of every kind, and it is especially when they are helpless in danger that they implore God's help with prayer and womanish tears. Reason they call blind, because it cannot reveal a sure way to the vanities that they covet, and human wisdom they call vain, while the delusions of the imagination, dreams, and other childish absurdities are taken to be the oracles of God. Indeed, they think that God, spurning the wise, has written his decrees not in man's mind but in the entrails of beasts, or that by divine inspiration and instigation these decrees are foretold by fools, madmen or birds. To such madness are men driven by their fears.¹⁴

Thus the origins in human nature, according to Spinoza, of superstition.

Unfortunately for those who have a vested interest in the maintenance of such beliefs and behaviours—that is, ecclesiastics—the emotions are as fleeting as the objects that occasion them, and therefore the superstitions grounded in those emotions are subject to fluctuations. As soon as we get what we want, hope changes to satisfaction, and we stop praying. This instability is not good for ambitious and self-serving clergy, who want to see those superstitious actions transformed into more fixed practices that will serve as the groundwork for their institutionalized religion. They thus do their best to rectify the situation and give some permanence to those beliefs and behaviours. Their hope is that people will continue to engage in religious practices even when they are not immediately gripped by the passions that originally stimulated the superstitious behaviour. Even better, if they can somehow keep the populace in a *permanent* state of hope and fear, then a certain stability in religious practice will follow. In this way, 'immense efforts have been made to invest religion, true or false, with such pomp and ceremony that it can sustain any shock and constantly evoke the deepest reverence in all its worshippers' (TTP, Preface, G iii. 6–7/S51).

¹⁴ *Theological-Political Treatise* (TTP), Preface, G iii. 5–6/S 1–2 (G = *Spinoza Opera*, ed. Carl Gebhardt, 5 vols. (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1925; vol. v, 1987); S = the translation by Samuel Shirley 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2001)).

Religious leaders are generally abetted in their purposes by the civil authority, which threatens to punish all deviations from theological orthodoxy as 'sedition'. The result is a state religion that has no rational foundations, a mere 'respect for ecclesiastics' that involves adulation and mysteries, but no true worship of God. (There can be no question that Spinoza was thinking of the contemporary situation in the Netherlands, where Calvinist preachers, conspiring with the more conservative class of political leaders, tried to influence state policy and control the social behaviour of Dutch citizens.¹⁵ His discussion of the downfall of the second Hebrew state, in fact, with its causes in the usurpation of political power by the Temple priests, who, 'inflamed with the desire to combine secular and religious rule', seized 'the right of government, thereby holding absolute power' (TTP, ch. 17, G iii. 220–1/S210), must be read as a cautionary tale for the Dutch Republic in the 1660s.)

The sectarian religions of his day are, in Spinoza's eyes, nothing but formalized superstition. They all depend on a false, anthropomorphic conception of God. They portray in their theologies a divine being who 'directs all things to some certain end', God as a goal-oriented planner who then judges how well the course of nature conforms to his purposes. It all begins with a certain naïve wonder about the world and ends with enslaved folly.

[People] find—both in themselves and outside themselves—many means that are very helpful in seeking their own advantage, e.g., eyes for seeing, teeth for chewing, plants and animals for food, the sun for light, the sea for supporting fish . . . Hence, they consider all natural things as means to their own advantage. And knowing that they had found these means, not provided them for themselves, they had reason to believe that there was someone else who had prepared those means for their use. For after they considered things as means, they could not believe that the things had made themselves; but from the means they were accustomed to prepare for themselves, they had to infer that there was a ruler, or a number of rulers of nature, endowed with human freedom, who had taken care of all things for them, and made all things for their use.

And since they had never heard anything about the temperament of these rulers, they had to judge it from their own. Hence, they maintained that the Gods direct all things for the use of men in order to bind men to

¹⁵ One example would be the attempts in the 1650s by the stricter leaders of the Dutch Reformed Church to regulate behaviour on the Sabbath. For a discussion of the political context of Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*, see Steven Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), ch. 10.

them and be held by men in the highest honor. So it has happened that each of them has thought up from his own temperament different ways of worshipping God, so that God might love them above all the rest, and direct the whole of Nature according to the needs of their blind desire and insatiable greed. Thus this prejudice was changed into superstition, and struck deep roots in their minds.¹⁶

In fact, God is nothing but Nature and its laws. And ‘Nature has no end set before it . . . All things proceed by a certain eternal necessity of nature’. A judging God who has plans and acts purposively, on the other hand, is a God to be obeyed and placated. And this is a most convenient fiction for opportunistic preachers. They can play more easily on our hopes and fears in the face of such a God. They prescribe ways of acting that are calculated to please that God, that will allow us to avoid being punished by him and earn his rewards. They take advantage of our credulity and institute formal sectarian rites that insure that our conformity will persist even during those times when the emotions that originally sustained our obedience are on the wane. That is why the preachers fulminate against anyone who tries to pull aside the curtain and reveal the truths of Nature. ‘One who seeks the true causes of miracles, and is eager, like an educated man, to understand natural things, not to wonder at them, like a fool, is generally considered and denounced as an impious heretic by those whom the people honor as interpreters of nature and the Gods. For they know that if ignorance is taken away, then foolish wonder, the only means they have of arguing and defending their authority is also taken away’ (*EI*, Appendix, G ii. 81/C 443–4).

If our greatest good and highest virtue is the life of reason, the achievement of a true understanding of the essences of things and of their ultimate dependence on the first principles of Nature, and consequently a proper conception of ‘God’, then the purposes of such religion are an obstacle to our true happiness and well-being.

VI

The greatest and most powerful ‘carrot and stick’ combination wielded by ecclesiastics—the one which makes the most compelling

¹⁶ G ii. 78–9/C 440–1 (C = *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley, i (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985)).

and lasting appeal to our hopes and fears—is, of course, the promise of an eternal reward in heaven and the threat of an eternal punishment in hell. Spinoza believes that Catholic priests, Calvinist ministers, and Jewish rabbis all take advantage of our tendency toward superstitious behaviour by persuading us that there is an everlasting blessedness to be hoped for and a never-ending torture to be feared after this life. Such doctrines are not only perfectly suited philosophically to their task, but have also tended historically to be quite effective in achieving the desired effect. They induce in believers a permanent, lifelong state of hope and fear, and a consequent willingness to do what it takes to meet the conditions for salvation.

Of course, these infinitely intimidating promises and threats can succeed in achieving their desired end—obedience—only if a person also believes that his soul will continue to live, as his persisting *self*, after the death of the body. What is thus essential for religious authorities to succeed in their project of entrapping us is the doctrine of personal immortality! Without the conviction that there is something that awaits *me*, as a disembodied soul, postmortem; if I believe that everything that constitutes *my* happiness and well-being comes to an end when I die, then I shall have no hope of eternal reward or fear of eternal punishment. And without these emotions governing me, there will be no reason for me to give up my autonomy so quickly to an organized religion that promises me a sure route to eternal salvation. Spinoza's project of naturalizing (de-anthropomorphizing) God is an important and effective step in undermining the power that religious authorities have over me, both as an individual and as a member of the state. So is his deflationary account of the Bible in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, where he argues that it is but a work of human literature, and not literally the word of God or a source of absolute truth. Without divine authority behind Scripture, and with its claims to philosophical, historical, and political truth rejected, the preachers lose one more weapon in their battle for political and social supremacy. But equally important is the denial of personal immortality. I believe that Spinoza thought that the best way to free us from a life governed by hope and fear, a life enslaved by these passions, a life of superstitious behaviour and subservience to self-appointed spiritual authorities, is to kill it at its roots and eliminate the foundational beliefs on which these emotions, at least on their large scale, are

grounded.¹⁷ Without a belief in immortality, we can focus on our happiness and well-being in *this* life.

There can be no greater threat to the power of the clergy than Spinoza's 'free person'—the individual who lives the life of reason and who is little troubled by the passions. Spinoza claims that such a person 'thinks least of all of death' (EIVp67). This is, in part, because the free person knows the truth about human life, the mind, and nature. Because he does not believe in immortality, he is not anxious about what is going to happen to him after his death. He is not troubled by hope and fear, for eternal rewards and punishments, and therefore is unwilling to concede his autonomy to religion.

VII

The *Theological-Political Treatise* represents an impassioned plea for a secular, liberal, and democratic state, one characterized not by religious control over the mechanisms of the state but, on the contrary, by the civic control of at least the outward observances of religion. The revelation in the *Ethics* of the nature of hope and fear; of the role they play in our ordinary lives; of the obstacle they represent to our freedom, autonomy, and happiness; and of the route to diminishing their influence over us by eliminating the doctrine of immortality that gives them their strongest support, therefore, represents in turn an important contribution to Spinoza's overall political project of undermining the press by religious authorities for political and social power. It does so just because those authorities need to play on and manipulate our hopes and fears if they are going to achieve their political aims.

Moreover, when we consider the political dimensions of hope and fear in Spinoza's system, as these are presented in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, and especially the way in which they cause us to throw ourselves at the mercy of ecclesiastic authorities, we can also see why, regardless of what one thinks can be made of Spinoza's propositions and arguments for the doctrine of the eternity of the mind in Part V of the *Ethics*, nothing could be further from the spirit of Spinoza's philosophy than a doctrine of the

¹⁷ Like the emotions generally, hope and fear cannot, according to Spinoza, be entirely eliminated from a human life, for a human being will always be 'a part of Nature'. Still, their influence on us can be weakened.

personal immortality of the soul. Such a doctrine, more than any other, strengthens those debilitating emotions in us and makes it less likely that Spinoza's own secular, democratic political goals could be accomplished.

In this way, we can see how unlikely it is that a purely analytic approach to Spinoza's *Ethics* can succeed in making sense of the final doctrines of Part V, least of all if it insists on ignoring the broader philosophical and political project of which they are a part. My conclusion, it should be clear, is not that we should abandon analytic history of philosophy. I do not mean to denigrate its goals, or even its methods. Its contributions to understanding and assessing the ideas of the great dead philosophers are invaluable. And I am not just saying that both analytic history of philosophy and a more contextual approach are mutually consistent, and should coexist side by side, with each making its own particular contribution. Rather, what I am claiming is that analytic history of philosophy's very own goals—understanding what a philosopher did say, could have said, and even should have said—cannot be achieved unless it pays attention to the large picture within which the theses and arguments it is so interested in are to be situated.

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