



PHILOSOPHY AND ITS HISTORY

*Aims and Methods in the Study of
Early Modern Philosophy*

Edited by

MOGENS LÆRKE, JUSTIN E. H. SMITH,
and ERIC SCHLIESSER

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Introduction

ALMOST ALL PHILOSOPHERS agree that one cannot be properly trained in current philosophy without knowing something of either the historical development of the discipline or without some familiarity with the writings of certain canonical figures. Beyond acknowledging this requirement, however, there is very little agreement as to what relationship, exactly, the study of the history of philosophy should have to contemporary philosophy. Moreover, given that there is little consensus about the purpose that the historiography of philosophy should serve within philosophy as a whole, there is also little consensus about how historians of philosophy should go about their work, that is to say, about what kind of methodology to follow when approaching past philosophical texts. This volume takes a measure of the current range of views on this complicated issue and aims to show a way forward, for specialists in the history of philosophy as well as for philosophers with a theoretical interest in the question of the relationship of philosophy to its history and histories.

While there are many further, finer-grained distinctions to make, it seems that in the English-speaking world of philosophy at present there are two principal ways of thinking about this relationship. First, the history of philosophy is held to be a source of ideas and arguments that may be of use in current philosophy, and it is to be studied as a way of advancing in the resolution of problems of current interest. Second, it is supposed that the history of philosophy is to be studied and understood for its own sake and on its own terms, even when the problems of interest to the figures in this history have since fallen off the philosophical agenda. Representatives of the first line of thinking, who might be called “appropriationist,” criticize defenders of the second approach, who might in turn be dubbed “contextualists,” for abandoning the aim of making a positive contribution to current philosophy and instead engaging in “mere history.”

Representatives of the contextualist approach criticize the appropriationists for sacrificing the original, intended meaning of historical doctrines on the altar of current philosophical fashion, and thus being culpable of a certain species of revisionism. The appropriationists can return the allegations made against them by arguing that there just is no way to really engage with the thoughts of a past philosopher other than by confronting his or her arguments with our own. Learning from past philosophers, and thus also paying tribute to their greatness, is necessarily to pull historical arguments out of the storehouse of history, dusting them off, and reactivating them in our own contemporary context. Consequently, the use of the history of philosophy for philosophy does not lie in the correct historical account of what the intentions of some past philosopher were but instead in the possible solutions that can be extracted from these texts to perennial problems of philosophy. In this fashion, it is simply not philosophically relevant whether the rational reconstructions of past philosophers one develops correspond to the intentions of that philosopher, as long as these reconstructions yield conceptual results and address contemporary concerns in an interesting way.

The contextualists, in turn, defend the principle laid down by Quentin Skinner that “[n]o agent can eventually be said to have meant or done something which he could never be brought to accept as a correct description of what he had meant or done.” But to place Plato or Descartes or Hume in conversation with our own intellectual community, the contextualists worry, is inevitably to impute such unacceptable meanings or actions to past philosophers. It may be true that there is some set of problems that all of these thinkers were focused upon, and that continues to interest us today. But the problem with the “conversational” approach to the history of philosophy is that it is necessarily a one-way conversation: the long-dead figures from the past cannot respond with any more than what they have already said, whereas the living can continue adding and revising and advancing. The contextualist believes that the most urgent thing to do for the scholar of the history of philosophy is to make sure that we have properly understood the full set of reasons a historical figure had for addressing a certain philosophical problem and for attempting a certain solution to it.

It appears, then, that historians of philosophy are caught between their own Scylla and Charybdis, between either being untrue to the aims and intentions of the historical figures or abandoning the project of philosophy altogether in order to engage in social and cultural history, paleography, or the minute forensic work of the archival researcher. Meanwhile, a non-negligible part of the readership of the scholarly output of historians of, for example,

early modern philosophy is instructors and students in introductory courses on the so-called Empiricists and Rationalists; these readers seek illumination of and background material to the canonical figures they teach and study. The potential tensions between the needs of scholarship and service to the discipline have barely been theorized.

In addition to the contextualist and appropriationist approaches practiced in Anglo-American philosophy, there is a third approach more familiar from Continental philosophy, in which one's philosophical position is developed dialectically with a tradition that is often simultaneously constructed for that purpose. Sometimes work done in this mode sets the agenda for renewed detailed engagement with the history of philosophy. Scholars working in this tradition tend not to agree with the contextualists that the best thing to do is to let past figures "speak for themselves" and even tend to doubt that we can know what they were saying independent of our own interest in using them for some end or another of our own. But they also often disagree with the appropriationists, who tend to mine past philosophy for timelessly good arguments; for Continental historians, philosophy, as a dialectical activity, tends to be understood as a fundamentally historical process rather than a timeless source of truths. Thus, a Continental historian will not mine the past for usable nuggets, but will rather attempt to build on the past in a way that is both attentive to it and, at the same time, seeking to overcome its historically conditioned limitations. A scholar in this tradition is, like the appropriationist, eminently a philosopher rather than a historian, to the extent that she rejects the task of recovering the past figure's world, and instead prefers to use the past figure to make sense of her own world. As with the appropriationist, though, there is the lingering danger that this sort of scholarship does not do justice to the actual concerns of the historical figure whose work has selectively been called into service.

What, then, is to be done? Most significantly, the once widespread view of history as strictly irrelevant to the current practice of philosophy, warranted by a certain interpretation of logical positivism, has by now gone almost completely extinct. As a result, in most philosophical circles one no longer needs to expend any effort justifying an interest in Descartes, say, as such. One needs only to give an account of how Descartes relates to one's philosophical interests. Another significant development in the English-speaking world has been an increase in attention to original-language texts, to the less familiar or unpublished works of philosophers, to the so-called minor figures with whom the major thinkers were in contact, and to the development of ideas and arguments over the course of a philosopher's life. Thirty years ago, among

English-speaking philosophers the names “Descartes” and “Kant” were taken to stand for fixed sets of views, and ones that could be expressed in English just as well as in German, French, or Latin. Today, as a result of the work of Daniel Garber and many others, this once common approach to historical figures now seems to most researchers far too simplistic, and today almost everyone at least strives for a somewhat higher-resolution picture of the actual historical person who stands behind the familiar arguments. There has also been, in recent years, a growing interest in questions of methodology in the history of philosophy.

This volume aims to create an inclusive discussion such that a range of different methodological approaches from different traditions of philosophy can be read alongside each other and be seen in sometimes very critical conversation with each other. In order to achieve this we invited leading specialists in what is known as “early modern” philosophy (roughly the period between Descartes and Kant) to address the methodology of the history of philosophy.

The present collection reflects the rapid internationalization of research that has opened up the field to a wide range of approaches much less (if at all) present on the horizon of Anglo-American scholarship, say, thirty years ago. This increase in exchange between various national traditions has heightened the sensitivity among scholars to methodological issues. Moreover, it has given rise to a sort of second-order, metaphilosophical problem. For the historian of philosophy trying to address these different approaches in a balanced fashion, and extracting something useful and coherent from them, questioning the role of her discipline within philosophy as a whole is no longer just a question of how philosophy relates to itself and its history. It is also a question of how various traditions for thinking about such meta-philosophical issues relate *to each other*, and of reflecting on the conditions under which these traditions may inform each other in a productive way.

We have assembled prominent and upcoming scholars, with a wide range of philosophical orientations, to contribute new essays on the subject of the relationship between philosophy and the history of philosophy. The contributors include both specialists in the history of philosophy as well as philosophers who work primarily on current problems in systematic philosophy but who have a pronounced interest in history. The contributors have been chosen among specialists working in the area of early modern philosophy, broadly defined. This choice does of course to some extent reflect the areas of specialization of the editors. There are, however, also good, intrinsic reasons for focusing on this period. Ancient philosophy, and to some extent medieval

philosophy, are areas in the history of philosophy that are already and necessarily very much informed by historical considerations. It is generally recognized that any philosophical exchange between contemporary philosophers and ancient philosophy requires the historical work of philologists and historians in order to be possible at all. Not so with early modern philosophy. Early modern philosophers are often taken to be those who are “closest” to ourselves in terms of basic problems, concerns, and approaches. They often write in the vernacular rather than Latin, thus reducing the need for translations. For these reasons, it is with the early modern philosophers that basic questions of how to approach them—as if they were colleagues with whom you discuss philosophy in the hallway of the department, or rather as if they were historical aliens speaking a different philosophical tongue—come up with the greatest urgency. From the point of view of practical methodology, the relation between early modern philosophy and philosophy is the most problematic, and therefore also the most interesting, interface between the history of philosophy and contemporary philosophy. The volume will, however, be of interest to a wide variety of specialists, teachers, and reflective students of other periods as well.

The contributions to the volume all seek to go beyond the standard ways of doing history of philosophy sketched here. The chapters can be roughly divided into four general orientations. First, the largest group of chapters (Lærke, Smith, Vermeir, Goldenbaum, and Waugh and Ariew) advocate methods that promote history of philosophy as an unapologetic, autonomous enterprise with its own criteria within philosophy. Within this group, Lærke, Smith, Vermeir, and Goldenbaum offer competing ways to professionalize the history of philosophy by focusing on its proper method. They offer exemplars from a wide variety of disciplinary practices: Lærke turns to anthropology to conceptualize a notion of historical truth embedded in a controversy; Smith turns to archaeology as a model for an interdisciplinary approach to the history of philosophy; Vermeir explores the merits of genealogical approaches; and Goldenbaum models the historian of philosophy on the careful detective who seeks out clues. The first three chapters also include trenchant criticism of Skinner’s influential methodological writings. Ariew and Waugh make the case for the benefits of a contextual approach to history of philosophy and remind us of the days when factually accurate history of philosophy could not be taken for granted.

Second, three chapters (Catana, Klein, and Kolesnik-Antoine) can be seen as historicizing the history of philosophy from within. They argue that history of philosophy without historiography is blind to highly relevant features

of its past. Catana focuses his account on the development of the very idea of a “systematic philosophy.” Kolesnik-Antoine explores how an image of what Cartesian philosophy essentially is was constructed by nineteenth-century scholars. Klein explores the methodological lessons that can be drawn from within the past philosophical texts we study, focusing in particular on Spinoza’s conception of philosophical and non-philosophical readers in order to discuss what kinds of readers of philosophical text *we* are, and *must* be, from a Spinozist perspective.

Third, four chapters (Della Rocca, Schliesser, Nelson, and Melamed) argue for history of philosophy as a means toward making contributions to contemporary philosophy. In particular, they agree that the history of philosophy plays a crucial role in overcoming the confines of present philosophy. Drawing on the principle of sufficient reason, Della Rocca takes aim at what he calls the “method of intuition,” which he claims privileges common sense. Nelson also expresses reservations about the role of common sense in the way the contemporary emphasis on enduring problems in philosophy blinds us to the systematic nature of significant (and often incompatible) philosophical projects of the past and present. Yet another attack on common sense is mounted by Melamed, who argues against the principle of charity, which he claims prevents us from using the history of philosophy as a way to improve our philosophical understanding. Schliesser advocates creating new concepts through which past and present philosophy can be fused. Della Rocca and Schliesser argue their case by re-telling the history of the origins of analytic philosophy. Representative of all four chapters is Nelson’s insistence that there is a crucial difference between an analytical presentation, which he embraces, and substantive analytical philosophical commitments, which he rejects for the historian of philosophy.

Finally, two chapters (Domski, Schmaltz) explore the relationship between the history of philosophy and the history of science. They both do so by deploying the resources of a classic (1992) article by Margaret Wilson. Against the hopes of the generation following Thomas Kuhn, Schmaltz argues that history of philosophy and history of science are distinct approaches that can sometimes learn from each other but should remain separate. By contrast, Domski argues that a more integrated approach is possible, but only if we abandon the idea that the past is a reservoir of conceptual resources. Rather she insists that philosophical reflection on the past can enrich the foundations of present debates.

The Anthropological Analogy and the Constitution of Historical Perspectivism

Mogens Lærke

1. Introduction

IT IS A noteworthy fact that among historians of early modern philosophy the question of methodology, i.e., of *how* it should be done, often tends to be swallowed up by worries about *why* it should be done. To some extent, it is also an unsurprising fact. To be sure, Gary Hatfield is right to say that “there is little reason for today’s contextually oriented historians to consider themselves lonely revolutionaries. Nor should they bemoan a lack of appreciation from ahistorical colleagues.”¹ Nonetheless, the history of philosophy remains a subordinate topic in most Anglo-Saxon philosophy departments. Moreover, framing the question in this fashion has become somewhat of a standard approach. Hence, even if their philosophical colleagues may no longer scoff (so much) at the history of philosophy and no longer ask (as much) for justification as previously for the peculiar activity historians of philosophy are engaged in, the latter largely continue to behave as if it was the case.

It must however be possible to study the history of philosophy in a way that is both methodologically conscious and does not sound like a perpetual excuse. Why that is desirable is not only a question of institutional self-vindication. The apologetic mode of methodological discourse has done much damage in creating considerable confusion about the kind of truth historians of philosophy are supposed to dislodge from past philosophical texts. In this chapter, I say something about what is required for the establishment

1. Hatfield (2005), 88–89.

of a historiography of philosophy overcoming this problem, i.e., what I call an unapologetic historiography of philosophy. Next, and more important, I discuss one way of studying the history of philosophy that satisfies those requirements. I argue how an oft-repeated comparison between the historiography of philosophy and contemporary cultural anthropology, habitually invoked in order to support arguments in favor of relativist if not outright skeptical arguments about historical truth, can be put to a more constructive use. First, by spelling out the epistemological implications of some methodological intuitions most acutely formulated by anthropologists, I sketch out a method for the historiography of philosophy dubbed *historical perspectivism*. This method stresses the role that contextually internal perspectives play in the constitution of the true historical meaning of past philosophical texts. By such internal perspectives, I understand interpretations of texts developed by agents moving within the relevant historical context, i.e., agents who took an active part in the historical debates to which the text is a contribution. Finally, I discuss how historical perspectivism is also a form of *historical actualism*, in that it excludes from the horizon of correct historical reconstruction perspectives or interpretations that are merely contextually *possible*, including only those that are actually deployed within the relevant context.

2. Requirements for an Unapologetic Historiography of Philosophy

I believe that an unapologetic historiography of philosophy requires that we respect the following three points.

First, one must do away with the misconception that the historiography of philosophy will *ever* manage to justify itself vis-à-vis other sub-disciplines by posing as philosophy *simpliciter*. Requiring that historians of philosophy should simultaneously “do philosophy” puts them in the impossible position of having to cater for historical exactitude and philosophical truth at the same time, constantly running from one camp to the other. One readily available issue from this exhausting exercise is to mediate between these two poles by means of a philosophy of history, defending the idea that there is something inherently historical about the philosophical enterprise as such. Hegel’s history of philosophy is the most famous variant of such a strategy. Charles Taylor is a more recent example of a historian of philosophy taking that route.² While often ingenious,

2. Taylor (1984), 17–30.

solutions of this kind, however, suffer from one fatal strategic flaw. They require that our philosophical colleagues be converted to the philosophy of history proposed before they are properly conditioned to see the value of the history of philosophy. But most of them are as unlikely to do that as they are to recognize the value of the history of philosophy in the first place.³ Justifying the historiography of philosophy requires that the discipline be defined in such a way that it caters *equally* for a wide range of possible philosophical positions and not only for positions that fall within the category of philosophy of history. However, the most straightforward option for doing that is equally desisting from catering for them at all. Historians of philosophy would then simply behave toward their colleagues in other branches of philosophy as the latter already behave toward each other, including toward historians of philosophy. It would be perceived as unreasonable if historians of philosophy demanded that contemporary epistemologists should conduct their research in such a way that it would be helpful for the historiography of philosophy. So why should the reverse be the case?

Next, it should be emphasized that the historiography of philosophy deals with the interpretation of past philosophical texts.⁴ Whatever counts as “philosophical” is a matter of discussion and subject to considerable historical variation. One may also wonder when exactly it is that a philosophical text becomes part of the “past.” However, it is uncontroversial that the interpretation of past philosophical texts is indeed what the historian of philosophy is concerned with. This does not imply that traces of historical practices other than writing, such as, for example, scientific measurement and experimentation, are irrelevant for the study of the history of philosophy.⁵ It does not mean either that what counts as past philosophical text should necessarily be narrowly defined as words written on pages.⁶ It simply means that the study of whatever counts as non-textual traces by definition only is relevant for the historian of philosophy to the extent that they are conducive for understanding the meaning of primary texts. Now, it is a radically different question to ask about the correct interpretation of a text than to ask why we should take an interest in or adopt the position it propounds. The historian of philosophy must then, qua historian, emphatically distinguish the levels of *meaning* and *truth* of historical texts and restrict his professional business

3. For a reaction of this kind, see Graham (1982), 37–52.

4. See Garber (2001), 235; Kenny (2005), 22.

5. See Vermeir, this volume.

6. See Smith, this volume.