

Why Study the History of Philosophy?

By Gisela Striker

STUDENTS OF PHILOSOPHY, UNDERGRADUATE AS WELL AS graduate, are usually required to take at least a few courses in the history of their chosen field—say, a class on Plato or Aristotle, Rationalism or Empiricism, Kant or German Idealism. These requirements are often seen as a burdensome relic from the old and unenlightened times when philosophy was regarded as a collection of comprehensive doctrines or “systems” from which one could choose a *Weltanschauung*. Twentieth-century analytic philosophy, however, has tended to associate itself as closely as possible with the sciences, seeing itself either as a branch of science or as a kind of second-order discipline that studies the concepts of the sciences or indeed of ordinary language. During the first half of this century, analytic philosophers would resolutely set aside what used to be called metaphysics as nonsense, and the history of philosophy as a collection of more or less egregious muddles. Given this kind of attitude, it is not surprising that it became a mystery why an aspiring philosopher should waste her or his time studying earlier and outdated versions of the subject. After all, students of physics or chemistry, biology, or astronomy can do perfectly well without knowing anything about the history of the respective sciences, and the history of science has its own separate department in universities.

Although the revolutionary optimism of the earlier decades has largely disappeared, and many analytic philosophers are now quite inclined to take their predecessors seriously, one can still regularly hear variants of the view that real philosophers are or should be concerned with “the problems themselves,” while historians think (only) about what earlier philosophers thought.

It seems to me that there are two distinct claims behind this view—first, that what historians of philosophy do is not philosophy, and second, that contemporary philosophers can learn little if anything from the history of their subject.

To begin with the first claim: given that historians of philosophy are engaged in the study and exegesis of the philosophical doctrines of the past, how could they be expected to come up with anything that might advance the discipline?

I would grant, of course, that historians are not likely to come up with novel

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ideas, at least not in their role as historians. But how many philosophers do? Most of the thousands of philosophy teachers working today would not pretend to be of the rank of a Descartes or Kant, Aristotle or Wittgenstein. What they do, and what they teach their students to do, is to think about philosophical problems in as clear and disciplined, or as deep and imaginative, a way as they can. It would be a mistake, I think, to see the point of their activity only in the books and articles that are its tangible results. Most "systematic" philosophers, whether by inclination or under the constraints of academic teaching schedules, have come to concentrate on a particular set of questions in some more or less traditional field—ethics, epistemology, philosophy of language, and so on — but they do not therefore conclude that their colleagues who work in different areas are not really doing philosophy. It seems to me that as far as thinking about philosophical problems is concerned, historians of philosophy are doing much the same as specialists in systematic fields. In trying to make sense of the arguments and theories of older philosophers, we cannot help but think about the problems they were thinking about—problems which are often versions or interesting variants of questions that are discussed in contemporary systematic debates. One polemical way of describing the difference between historians and systematic philosophers would be to say that it's a matter of taste: historians tend to be those who prefer to read, say, Hume rather than the latest issue of a philosophical journal, or who prefer to do ethics with Aristotle (to borrow a phrase from Sarah Broadie¹) to doing it with the latest school of consequentialists or deontologists. Their prejudice is that there may often be more to be learned from these authors than from our technically more sophisticated contemporaries. It seems highly implausible to suggest that the historian is thinking about Hume or Aristotle *rather than* ethics or epistemology, and if she does, she will not get very far.

One might object that this will not eliminate the difference between the

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exegetical exercise of figuring out what Aristotle was saying about virtue, for example, and a straightforward discussion of questions of desert or moral responsibility. But the line between exegesis and argument is less clear than these labels suggest. The historian who wants to understand a classical author will have to rely on her own sense of what is philosophically plausible, what counts as a

strong or a weak argument, and in this respect she will of course be guided by her training as a philosopher, which can only be that of a contemporary philosopher. This also determines to a large extent which authors or texts she will choose to study: historians of logic or ethics are motivated as much by an interest in logic or ethics as by an interest in intellectual history. Obviously, historical interpretations will be constrained both by the texts they are setting out to explain and by historical background information about the author, if only in order to avoid blatant anachro-

nisms. But whether this should be seen as an intellectual limitation seems to me to be an open question. One could also see it as a challenge to the imagination.

Still, there remains the second question: what can historical exegesis contribute to present-day philosophical debate? I would argue that the historian's contribution consists in keeping available the thought of past philosophers as a resource that would otherwise be lost or inaccessible. In order to engage in a serious discussion with a classical author, to find out what his views were on a given question, or whether his perspective was different from ours, it is usually not enough to read his relevant works, not even if one can read them in the original language. It is the task of historical exegesis to spell out, in contemporary language, what exactly the questions were, how the arguments were supposed to work, and what answers were being offered. Systematic philosophers tend to find historians' debates tedious and exasperating, but since historical exegesis is a matter of interpretation, the historian's work is open to critical scrutiny by others in the same business. (Historians are apt to find the highly scholastic debates of their systematic contemporaries equally tedious and exasperating.) Such debates are needed to keep the historians honest—assuming, as I would, that there is a point in trying to find the correct interpretation of a classical text, and not just to come up with some fanciful or exciting story about what the author might have thought. Generally speaking, Aristotle and Hume are likely to have been more interesting than their commentators. Debates about questions of interpretation can also be fascinating for those engaged in them, and indeed most historians are no doubt interested in exegetical questions in their own right. It can also be fascinating to follow the development of a historical debate—such as, for example, the epistemological dispute between the Stoics and the Sceptics—while temporarily suspending disbelief in some of the premises involved. But this is not all there is to historical research in philosophy, and it seems important to me to emphasize that the invitation to study historical texts with their accompanying burden of commentary need not be understood as an invitation to join this particular kind of debate. Philosophers who don't read Greek may still take a serious interest in Aristotle, or so we hope, even though they cannot enter into disputes about fine points of translation.

The assumption that there is little to be learned from philosophical authors of the past could be justified only by the implausible claim that philosophy has finally reached the sure path of a science, or that we have come up with the one and only correct way of thinking about philosophical questions. It may well be that many people believe just this today, as some of their predecessors have done in the past, but here the history of philosophy provides a strong counterargument. I do not wish to deny, of course, that there has been a lot of progress over more than two

thousand years, but progress in philosophy does not appear to be of the cumulative sort. It seems to consist, rather, in the recognition of some egregious errors, the refinement of concepts and terminology, and the invention of alternative explanations and theories—much of which is due to the development of other disciplines, especially the sciences. Given this kind of situation, there can be no guarantee that all that was valuable has been absorbed into subsequent theories, all that was muddled or mistaken has been discarded. Hence there seem to be several reasons why it makes sense to keep historical texts and theories accessible. One is, of course, that it may help us to avoid repeating past mistakes. Others are more interesting. Sometimes a philosopher may want to find out why her contemporaries are asking the peculiar questions they do ask, by looking at the developments that led to the present situation. This accounts, I think, for the relatively greater interest taken in the more recent past—the 19th and early 20th century—as compared to more distant historical periods. On the other hand, the Greeks, and especially the Presocratics, have sometimes been studied by those who wished to see “how it all began”. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there is the possibility of finding in an older author different and illuminating perspectives on questions of contemporary concern; perspectives that have, for one reason or another, been forgotten or neglected by the more recent tradition. This has happened, for example, with Aristotle and Kant in recent work in ethics. It has also happened in psychology, where philosophers have tried to look back beyond Descartes for theories that are not tied to the dualism of mind and body; and in epistemology, where empiricism, at least in the Anglophone tradition, seemed for a while to have reached the status of an obvious fact rather than a philosophical theory.

I tend to believe, naturally enough, that present-day philosophers should often find it useful to compare notes, as it were, with their distinguished predecessors. In this modest sense, then, I would claim that the historian’s work is also a contribution to philosophy itself. φ

Endnote

¹ Sarah Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).