History of European Ideas

ISSN: 0191-6599 (Print) 1873-541X (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rhei20

Intellectual History and the History of Philosophy

Sarah Hutton

To cite this article: Sarah Hutton (2014) Intellectual History and the History of Philosophy, History of European Ideas, 40:7, 925-937, DOI: 10.1080/01916599.2014.882054

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2014.882054

History of European Ideas, 2014
Vol. 40, No. 7, 925–937, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2014.882054

Intellectual History and the History of Philosophy

Sarah Hutton*

Institute of Medieval and Early Modern Studies, Aberystwyth University, UK

Summary

The issue which I wish to address in this paper is the widespread tendency in Anglophone philosophy to insist on a separation between the history of philosophy and the history of ideas or intellectual history. This separation reflects an anxiety on the part of philosophers lest the special character of philosophy will be dissolved into something else in the hands of historians. And it is borne of a fundamental tension between those who think of philosophy's past as a source of ideas and arguments of interest to the present, and those who hold that the philosophy of the past should be studied on its own terms, in relation to its immediate context, without reference to the present. The challenge, then, is to re-historicise the history of philosophy, and to keep the philosophers onside.

Keywords: philosophy; history of philosophy, history of ideas, intellectual history, early modern

Contents

> la lecture de tous les bons livres est comme une conversation avec les plus honnêtes gens des siècles passés, qui en ont été les auteurs, et même une conversation étudiée en laquelle ils ne nous découvrent que les meilleures de leurs pensées
>
> —Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*[1]

1. The Proper Subject of the History of Philosophy

To set a distance between particular branches of intellectual history (e.g., history of science, history of religion) and the history of ideas, is, of course, not unusual, history of

*E-mail: sfh@aber.ac.uk

[1] 'The reading of good books is like having 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 thought'; see Descartes, *Discourse on the Method: Selected Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, translated by John Cottingham, Dugald Murdoch, and Robert Stoothoff, 3 vols (Cambridge, 1988), I, 22.

ideas having suffered a crisis of identity in the debates surrounding the approach of A. O. Lovejoy.[2] But the distancing to which I refer is systemic within the Anglophone tradition of the history of philosophy. The philosophers' version of 'the history of ideas' is not the history of timeless free-floating ideas on the Lovejoy model. The history of philosophy, it is commonly claimed, deals with those philosophers and arguments which interest philosophers today. On this view, the history of philosophy consists largely in the analysis of arguments from the past selected according to whether those arguments have present interest. It is therefore the business of the historian of philosophy to mediate past philosophy by applying modern philosophical techniques, to justify a philosophical interest in philosophers of the past by means of philosophical arguments. By contrast, the historian of ideas, it is held, deals with matters peripheral to philosophy, such as the political context, the lives of philosophers, book history, defunct questions, minor figures and other historical curiosities. Since they lack any intrinsic philosophical value (as determined from a modern point of view), such things are regarded as being primarily of antiquarian interest. It is my contention that an approach whose chief end when dealing with past philosophy is to address current problems is not an historical approach, and therefore not worthy of the name of 'history' of philosophy. What is offered in that name is in fact a species of textual exegesis or critical commentary, with no more connection to history than the fact that the authors are dead. Furthermore, even as textual exegesis, the reading of philosophy of the past cannot ignore the historical circumstances of their production without risk of serious distortion.

I would argue furthermore that, far from being distinct from one another, the history of philosophy and intellectual history are closely intertwined. To make any absolute distinction between them is misconceived, since the history of philosophy is properly a subdivision of intellectual history, the difference between them being largely a matter of scope and content. Intellectual history has many branches, embracing not just the history of philosophy, but also the history of political thought, the history of science and medicine, and the history of religious thought. The content of none of these apparently autonomous strands is divided from the rest. The methodologies developed to investigate them have, however, developed in divergent ways. The claim that the history of philosophy is part of intellectual history does not render the 'arguments of the philosophers' irrelevant. Nor does it entail that a historical investigation of the philosophy of the past does not require philosophical understanding. Appropriate methodological approaches apply for the history of philosophy every bit as much as for the other areas of intellectual history. But the history of philosophy requires historical understanding as well as philosophical knowledge. And that historical understanding includes such things as historical and biographical context and the investigative apparatus often dismissed as mere 'history of ideas'. I concede that discussion and reinterpretation of philosophical theories and arguments is, or can be, profoundly interesting, and I would certainly support the view that philosophers today have legitimate reasons for engaging with the philosophy of the past in order to discover within it themes of current philosophical interest. But

[2] For assessments of Lovejoy, see, *inter alia*, Jaako Hintikka, 'Gaps in the Great Chain of Being: An Exercise in the Methodology of the History of Ideas', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association*, 49 (1975/6), republished in *Reforging the Great Chain of Being: Studies of the History of Modal Theories*, edited by Simo Knuttila (Dordrecht, 1981), 1–18; Moltke S. Gram and Richard M. Martin, 'The Perils of Plenitude: Hintikka Contra Lovejoy', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 41 (1980), 497–511; Donald R. Kelley, 'Horizons of Intellectual History', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 48 (1987), 143–69; Donald R. Kelley, *The Descent of Ideas: the History of Intellectual History* (Aldershot, 2002); Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, 'Making Sense of Conceptual Change', *History and Theory*, 47 (2008), 351–72.

I persist in maintaining that to engage in such philosophical discussions of this kind is not to practise the *history* of philosophy, but to engage in philosophy.

These issues have, of course, been addressed both in theory and in practice by others. Notably, Quentin Skinner's ground breaking essay 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', long ago offered a penetrating analysis of the unhistorical assumptions of historians of ideas and their historically absurd consequences.[3] This essay provides the theoretical foundation of what has come to be known as the Cambridge School of the History of Political Thought. In it Skinner denies that there are perennial, unchanging themes and concepts whose history can be written: 'there is no history of the idea to be written, but only a history necessarily focused on the various agents who used the idea, and on their varying situations and intentions in using it'.[4] Skinner condemns those who attempt to impose the categories of modern analysis on past thinking, charging that in most cases the perpetrators are unaware of, or at least uncritical of, the assumptions which they make and the paradigms they use.[5]

Although Skinner's target is not specifically the History of Philosophy, his examples of worst practice are particularly prevalent in the history of philosophy. One is its methodological weakness arising from its textual basis: that historians of philosophy 'should focus simply on the texts themselves, and study what each classic writer has to *say* about each given doctrine'.[6] Skinner specifically singles out historians of philosophy for their negative attitude to context. A contextual approach, he writes,

> has been consciously resisted, in particular by historians of philosophy and by political scientists, both anxious to insist on the autonomy of textual study. For if the point of studying the timeless classics of these disciplines [great philosophers] is conceived in terms of their 'timeless wisdom', then it is absolutely essential […] to be able to insist that even though they may be 'grounded in the social reality' of their age, they 'are also ageless', 'surpassing' the need to consider any such contingent 'reality'.[7]

Quentin Skinner's theories have been subject to critique, and I am not concerned here either to defend or attack him. Suffice to say for the present that I believe that his reinvigoration of the contextual approach is both laudable and productive. But I am not committed to a Skinnerian approach, least of all to his recourse to speech-act theory to supply the theoretical foundation of the contextual approach he proposes. The great value of his article is its exposé of historical absurdity perpetrated in the name of history, and his demonstration of the kind of absurdities which result from unhistorical readings. And I would certainly agree with Skinner's concluding claim that

---

[3] Quentin Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', *History and Theory*, 8 (1960), 3–53; John Dunn, 'The Identity of the History of Ideas', *Philosophy*, 43 (1968), 85–116, reprinted in *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics*, edited by James Jolly (Princeton, NJ, 1988), 29–67. This also reprints some of his other seminal essays. Skinner published a revised version in *Visions of Politics* (Cambridge, 2002), I, 59–89.

[4] Quentin Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', 38.

[5] Skinner identifies three types of these distorting mindsets, which he calls mythologies (curiously equivalent to Francis Bacon's 'idols of the mind'): the mythology of doctrines, the mythology of coherence, and the mythology of prolepsis.

[6] Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', 31.

[7] Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', 40 (quoting Plamenatz and Jaspers). Skinner is in fact deeply critical of some versions of contextualist history (chiefly Marxist and Naimierite historians) which reduce causality to context and explain ideas entirely in terms of circumstances. See also J. G. A. Pocock, 'The History of Political Thought: A Methodological Enquiry', in *Politics, Philosophy and Society*, edited by Peter Laslett and W. G. Runciman (Oxford, 1962).

> it is the very fact that the classic texts are concerned with their own quite alien problems, and not the presumption that they are somehow concerned with our own problems as well, which [… is] the key to the indispensable value of studying the history of ideas. The classic texts, especially in social, ethical, and political thought, help to reveal […] not the essential sameness, but the essential variety of viable moral assumptions and political commitments. It is in this, moreover, that their essential philosophical, even moral, value can be seen to lie.[8]

Since Skinner's main concern is the history of political thought, it is from the political scientists that the main tide of criticism has been generated. A good deal of this has come from those alarmed that their discipline has been dissolved into historical dust, with the result that political thought has been detached from its history. These critics are concerned to reconnect the history of political thought with the theory and practice of politics today. As Ian Hampsher-Monck notes, the strength of the contextualist case, with its emphasis on the strangeness of past theories, 'seemed to have been bought at the cost of contemporary political availability of past political theory or propositions or concepts within it […]'.[9]

To this chorus of objection, one might want to add, on behalf of philosophers, that there are special characteristics of philosophy for which Skinner makes insufficient allowance. There are several grounds on which philosophers might plead exception from Skinner's general observations. First of all, philosophy is a text-based discipline. The material records of philosophy are the texts in which it is preserved. Oral dialogue has long since been replaced by the written word. Unless new technologies open the way for alternative possibilities, there is no getting away from text as the primary source and record of philosophy.

Secondly, as Richard Popkin has observed, philosophy lays claim to timelessness: 'Unlike many other intellectual fields, philosophy as written usually presents itself as independent of any particular time and place. It presumes to deal with problems that have had various expressions since ancient times […]'.[10] Since the rules of logic, like the rules of chess, are held to be the same for any period, philosophical arguments stand or fall according to criteria which are held to be immune from contingency. In consequence, philosophers might reasonably argue that since philosophical arguments do not admit of historical contingency, they cannot be discussed or explained historically. Historical circumstances cannot overrule the intrinsic value of arguments.

Thirdly, perhaps uniquely among modern disciplines of thought, philosophy is integrally connected to its past. Practising philosophers are generally (though not always) highly conscious of their forbears in their chosen fields (even if they do not trace these back very far). By time-honoured tradition, going back at least as far as Aristotle, much philosophy (but by no means all) is conducted as arguments with other philosophers in the field, and very often those others are dead. Such arguments result in many convictions for error and in many clarifications. In some cases the original proposer might not accept these as either necessary or relevant, and this is especially true when he or she is no longer alive and able to respond. Be that as it may, the analysis of the writings of great

[8] Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', 52.
[9] Iain Hampsher-Monck, 'The History of Political Thought and the Political History of Thought', in *The History of Political Thought in National Context*, edited by Dario Castiglione and Iain Hampsher-Monck (Cambridge, 2001), 159–74 (168).
[10] *The Columbia History of Western Philosophy*, edited by Richard H. Popkin (New York, NY), xviii.

philosophers from the past is an essential part of the process of interpreting them for present consumption and keeping them 'alive' for today. As Popkin points out, 'philosophers continue to read books written over two thousand years ago as if the are at all relevant—even most relevant—to understanding current philosophical problems and solutions'.[11] Discussion and reinterpreting is part of the business of philosophising, and this fosters that sense of there being perennial, even 'timeless' issues in philosophy. Even when proposing new methods, philosophers draw on and respond to inherited issues and structures of thought. As Donald Rutherford puts it, philosophising involves a continuous process of recycling:

> Philosophical theories are rarely, if ever, entirely new creations. More often, they are built with bricks and timber scavenged from philosophy's past. Thus, while the innovators depicted themselves as razing the edifice of Aristotle's system in order to begin anew, what they built in its place was a structure assembled with materials borrowed from other ancient schools and from Aristotle himself. In no case was there a simple rupture with the past – the old replaced with an entirely novel way of thinking.[12]

The continuous process of discussion and review at the heart of philosophy contributes to the view that there are issues and arguments which persist across time and that there are perennial themes and questions constitutive of the subject. In this respect philosophy functions as a kind of perpetuation of its past—a past which is kept perpetually familiar in the present by virtue of its self-referring continuity, a very different position from Skinner's claim that what is interesting about dead philosophers is that they are different—so different in some cases that we cannot talk to them.

However, even if we concede an 'eternally present' dimension of philosophy, or that philosophy has its perennial themes and questions, this does not dispose of the question of how the history of philosophy should be pursued. It simply means that perennial themes, and 'timeless' propositions, are properly part of philosophy, and therefore the proper subject of the history of philosophy. To concede an assumption of timelessness as one of the special characteristics of the pursuit of philosophy, or to concede that 'the past' is in some sense present to philosophical concerns, is not to concede that this is the basis on which to pursue the history of philosophy. On the contrary, these working assumptions help to explain how the history of philosophy has come to be misidentified with the practice of philosophising.

From a historical perspective, to treat the history of philosophy as present engagement with past philosophy or as illustrative of perennial themes is fraught with problems. 'Timelessness' may be a useful working assumption in the practice of philosophy, but it fosters approaches to the history of philosophy which are profoundly unhistorical. The fundamental fallacy about the assumption of timelessness is that in practice the 'timeless' issue is judged from the perspective of a particular point in time—namely, the present. The criteria for identifying perennial themes are therefore themselves historically contingent in the fundamental sense that they are governed by a particular conception of what constitutes philosophy as a discipline. 'Timelessness' in philosophy is not therefore immune to historical contingency, and the retrospective assessment it makes of past philosophy is coloured by present concerns. 'Perennial problems' and timeless issues turn out to be the things which interest philosophers now. The claims for there being perennial themes and problems are themselves historically contingent in the respect that

[11] *Columbia History of Western Philosophy*, edited by Popkin, xviii.
[12] Donald Rutherford, 'Innovation and Orthodoxy in Early Modern Philosophy', in *The Cambridge Companion to Early Modern Philosophy*, edited by Donald Rutherford (Cambridge, 2003), 11–38 (15).

philosophers have not always had the same goals in all times and in all places. For example, the idea that philosophy should be engaged in the pursuit of truth was a powerful one in earlier times, but it is no longer regarded as the primary purpose of philosophical enquiry. Perennial problems are not 'eternal' problems, but issues that arise in time, continue across time and are modified by the discussion they generate.

The picture of philosophy which the myth of its the 'timelessness' produces is, to be sure, familiar, because it is based on the picture we take for granted today. But the picture it produces of the past is seriously distorting. As Susan James points out, twentieth-century views of philosophy as

> a scientific and secular form of enquiry distinct from psychology [… have] shaped our understanding of historical texts and led us to read them mainly as addressing the metaphysical, scientific and epistemological issues that now tend to be seen as the core of the subject.[13]

Those who conceive philosophy in this way construct philosophy's past to support it, but the result is a selective, even distorting picture of philosophical history:

> they focus on philosophers whose work most easily answers to the preconceptions created by this interpretation; they select from the works of favoured philosophers, those which strike them as most relevant and coherent; and having thus shaped the subject, they string philosophers together into schools and traditions. This process yields maps of the past which are, from the perspective of certain contemporary issues and problems highly informative. But for travellers of a more historical bent, it is as though the contour lines were missing. The landscape is flattened, stripped of many of the vistas and surprises that enliven a journey, and deprived of a singularity and complexity that makes a region distinctive.[14]

Furthermore, if the history of philosophy is conducted as a continuing conceptual dialogue between the living and the dead, it will only engage with those who are still part of the conversation—Descartes, perhaps, or Leibniz—or with topics that continue to be discussed today (e.g., 'the problem of future contingents' or the nature of substance). In practice this inevitably means that these topics are represented by those figures perceived to be the canonical greats—and even they are represented by a narrow selection of arguments, at the expense of their philosophy as a whole: Descartes is reduced to the 'cogito', Leibniz to 'the identity of indiscernibles'. Descartes' *Principia philosophiae* has been overlooked, while his *Meditations* is treated as a defining text of modern philosophy. Furthermore, those who are not considered part of the conversation become invisible—women philosophers, for example. And topics that no longer fascinate philosophers (such as logic and the scholastic notion of 'anti-peristasis') never come up for discussion. When present interests change, the conversation ends. The most notorious example of utter disinterest in past philosophy is logical positivism, which made it its business to expose all the inherited problems of philosophy as the outcome of linguistic misunderstandings and lack of logical precision. The '[r]especters of history', are disparaged as

> those who think that the work of the great philosophers of days past conveys important insights into the truth of things; who do not see the present as

[13] Susan James, *Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* (Oxford, 2000), 15.
[14] James, *Passion and Action*, 15–16.

> discontinuous with the past in affording a new theory that makes all philosophizing that antedates discovery of 'the true method' obsolete and useless.[15]

On this view, there is no history of philosophy, but only a history of error—that is to say, a history of how everyone else 'got it wrong'. Such an attitude does have the advantage that it clears the way for historians, because it leaves the past to them, to make of it what they will. From a philosopher's point of view, however, this history is a waste of time, for it is empty of philosophical content and therefore of interest.

2. Presentism

In the face of such scepticism about the value of the philosophy of the past (a scepticism which is in some ways curiously in agreement with Skinner!), to insist on the relevance and importance of the contributions of dead philosophers to contemporary philosophy is a noble enterprise—and it is one which has produced some illuminating studies of the forgotten past. A striking example is the recovery and revival of interest in medieval philosophy. Anthony Kenny, Robert Pasnau and others have done sterling work in reigniting contemporary interest in medieval philosophy by highlighting its conceptual strengths of most relevance today. Robert Pasnau explicitly cites 'relevance within contemporary philosophy' as a criterion of selection for his volume of translations of medieval philosophical texts, noting that 'often the connections to modern discussions will be immediate and striking'.[16] Early modern philosophy too has been the beneficiary of this kind of presentist approach. As Donald Rutherford notes, the 'canonical figures' of seventeenth-century philosophy

> have been celebrated for the depth and rigor of their treatments of perennial philosophical questions, concerning, for example, existence, modality, causality, knowledge, obligation, and sovereignty, as well as for their efforts to push philosophy in new directions, challenging many of the assumptions of ancient and medieval philosophy. In this connection, it has been argued that epistemology assumes a new significance in the early modern period as philosophers strive to define the conditions and limits of human knowledge. Yet early modern philosophers make major contributions in almost every area of philosophy, and in many cases their conclusions continue to serve as starting points for present-day debates.[17]

The grounds of Rutherford's recommendation of early modern philosophy perpetuates an old view, deriving from Hegel, that modern philosophy originates in the seventeenth century, in particular with Descartes.[18] If the special character of seventeenth-century

---

[15] Nicholas Rescher, 'The Rise and Fall of Analytic Philosophy', in *Essays in the History of Philosophy* (Aldershot, 1995), 131.

[16] *The Cambridge Translations of Medieval Philosophical Texts,* Volume 3: *Mind and Knowledge*, edited by Robert Pasnau (Cambridge, 2002), 1. See also Anthony Kenny, *Aquinas on Mind* (New York, NY, 1993); Robert Pasnau, *Metaphysical Themes, 1274–1671* (Oxford, 2011).

[17] Donald Rutherford, 'Introduction', in *Cambridge Companion to Early Modern Philosophy*, edited by Rutherford, 1–10 (1).

[18] To pinpoint the modern moment somewhere is nothing new. In the seventeenth century, Rudolphus Goclenius regarded all philosophy prior to Socrates as *philosophia vetus* and all post-Socratean philosophy as *philosophia nova*. Leibniz's category of 'recentiores' extends back to the fifteenth century. Scholastic philosophers distinguished between the *via moderna* of Ockham, Buridan and Marsilius of Inghen and the *via antiqua* of Thomas Aquinas and Albertus Magnus. Another measure of modernity frequently applied is the rise of the modern conception of science as a separate discipline from philosophy. The prophet of this development is taken to be Francis Bacon, and its supreme representative, Isaac Newton.

philosophy is held to be its anticipation of current philosophy in its methods and themes, the story of modern philosophy will be told with the preoccupations of contemporary philosophy in view. Indeed it is commonly told as a story of secularisation, the emergence of modern science and confidence in progress which is represented by the figures who are taken to be the most distinguished exemplars of these trends: Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, Spinoza and Leibniz. Paradoxically, assessments which accord special status to the seventeenth century by virtue of its treatment of 'perennial philosophical questions' tend to emphasise seventeenth-century philosophy's rupture with its past. This contradicts what I referred to earlier as the 'working assumption' about the perennial nature of philosophical interests. Such assessments also serve to reinforce the view that what matters about the philosophy of the past is what matters to philosophers today.

A more historically nuanced version of this position underlies another view of the history of philosophy exemplified by *The Rise of Modern Philosophy* (1993), which classifies early modern philosophers in terms of the novelty of their philosophical theories—or lack of it.[19] According to the 'ancient–modern distinction' proposed here, the moderns are those thinkers who reject the authority of antiquity, while those philosophers who retain traditional approaches to philosophy and respect for classical thinkers are grouped with the ancients. The ancient–modern distinction can claim to be grounded historically, since many seventeenth-century philosophers position themselves by reference to new or ancient philosophy. And many of them thought about philosophy in relation to the *novatores* and *philosophia antiqua*. Descartes did so by explicitly making a new start, dismissing his philosophical predecessors. Bacon, no less of an iconoclast, represented the history of human intellectual achievement as a river in which what is weighty has sunk from view, and only the inconsequential froth has floated down to the present. Others, like Kenelm Digby, John Sergeant and Ralph Cudworth, explicitly sought a balance between old and new. Tom Sorell therefore has good grounds for his claim that the ancient–modern distinction is, up to a point, one which philosophers of the time would recognise:

> A consciousness of the difference and tensions between the outlooks of the ancients and moderns is present in many broadly philosophical writings in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In this respect the ancient-Modern distinction cannot be said to be foisted on the period discussed here in the way that the rationalist/empiricist distinction has been.[20]

In practice, as Tom Sorell admits, to assess thinkers in terms of their adherence to old or new philosophy produces fuzzy results: no philosopher belongs unproblematically to one category or the other. It turns out that the iconoclastic moderns (Bacon and Descartes) are beholden to their predecessors in important ways. Bacon himself recognises the debt of his contemporaries to the ancients by means of another metaphor: that of the moderns as dwarfs sitting on the shoulders of the giants of antiquity. But it is perhaps a virtue of the 'ancient–modern' classification that it blurs the distinction between the camps, thereby acknowledging the possibility of interconnections between canonical figures and other

[19] *The Rise of Modern Philosophy: The Tension between the New and Traditional Philosophies from Machiavelli to Leibniz*, edited by Tom Sorell (Oxford, 1993).
[20] Tom Sorell, 'Introduction', in *The Rise of Modern Philosophy*, edited by Sorell, 1–14, 11.

philosophers. Another recommendation of this scheme is that it is potentially more inclusive, since it admits non-canonical figures. It also makes it possible to examine the reception of new ideas, and to see that even admirers of the ancients can be credited with openness to innovation. However, a drawback of the ancient–modern distinction is that it implies a tension between old and new and equates importance with novelty. Even if the break with the past is a not such a clean one as innovators like Bacon and Descartes claimed, to analyse seventeenth-century philosophy in terms of a criterion of antiquity or novelty implies acceptance of the view that there *was* a break between modern developments and the past, and that this was the crucial characteristic of the modern mindset. In consequence, those philosophers who retain older modes of thinking and respect for ancient philosophers risk being identified as conservative. And those philosophers who tried to hold a balance of old and new ideas too easily appear to be muddled thinkers for their failure to recognise the incompatibility of old and new, or merely their nostalgia for humanist ideals—or both. The idea that the receptivity of some thinkers towards new ideas might actually be philosophically indebted to their grounding in ancient philosophy is simply incoherent.[21] The ancient–modern classification addresses the shortcomings of older classificatory schemes, such as the rationalist–empiricist narrative, but it is not immune from the charge of 'presentism'. It has the virtue of raising the issue of the major–minor dichotomy but has not resolved it.

It must be acknowledged that the historiography of philosophy has moved on considerably in the last fifty years and continues to be the subject of lively debate.[22] The three books just cited have made important contributions to widening horizons in the history of philosophy. Recent historiography of early modern philosophy in particular has addressed the need to broaden the purview of the history philosophy. In *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* (1998), editors Michael Ayers and Dan Garber grapple with the fact that the philosophical canon has shaped our view of the philosophy of seventeenth century. In squaring modern interests with past actualities, they have made it their business to deliver an object lesson on ahistorical reading of early modern philosophy, pointing out that to isolate the canonical greats from the philosophical context in which they worked is seriously distorting:

> Commentators in the analytic tradition in particular, writing very much out of their own philosophical interests and preconceptions, have often lost sight of the complex context in which philosophy was written. In doing so, they not only have distorted its achievements but also have often denied themselves the tools necessary for the interpretation of the very words and sentences they continue to expound.[23]

Good evidence that this lesson has hit home can be found in *The Cambridge Companion to Early Modern Philosophy*. As the editor, Donald Rutherford acknowledges,

---

[21] The archetypal case is Ralph Cudworth, whose globally ambitious *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678) is freighted in classical erudition and modern learning. He looks back to the Greeks and across at his own contemporaries, among whom he noted what appeared to him to be striking echoes of ancient philosophy. Cudworth's erudition has been called 'stupefying' and dismissed as 'eccentric'.

[22] See, for instance, Robert Pasnau's open letter to prospective Ph.D. students: Robert Pasnau, 'Why Study History of Philosophy?', *Leiter Reports*, 16 March 2011, http://leiterreports.typepad.com/blog/2011/03/why-study-history-of-philosophy.html (accessed 5 January 2014); Justin Smith, 'A Response to Robert Pasnau on Studying the History of Philosophy', 17 March 2011, http://www.jehsmith.com/1/2011/03/a-response-to-robert-pasnau-on-studying-the-history-of-philosophy.html (accessed 5 January 2014).

[23] Michael Ayers and Dan Garber, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, edited by Michael Ayers and Dan Garber (Cambridge, 1998), 1–6 (4).

> [w]hat the new history of early modern philosophy has stressed, however, is that abstract philosophical problems acquire a determinate content within a specific intellectual context – one that must be appreciated in order to understand the theories and arguments of the philosophers in question.[24]

Historians of philosophy have begun to recognise that the intellectual context is not exclusively philosophical. As J. B. Schneewind points out, resources for that intellectual context often come from outside philosophy:

> To learn what resources were available to a philosopher, we must look outside his or her writings. We may need to examine theological works, sermons, political pamphlets, old editions of classical authors, contemporary dictionaries, and literary writings, as well as the other philosophers our subject read.[25]

Those 'other philosophers' might be the canonical greats of the past and the famous names of the present. But they might just as well be so-called 'minor' figures. And it has come to be realised that study of such figures can illuminate the work of their more famous contemporaries. Rutherford again:

> […] it is increasingly acknowledged that our understanding of a canonical text can be deepened by reading it in conjunction with the works of a philosopher's immediate predecessors and contemporaries – works that often supply an illuminating background for its interpretation.[26]

While this more contextual approach is welcome, what is taken to be 'context' is still largely determined by what is taken to be canonical. A greater emphasis on context involves widening the repertoire of figures discussed—a Desgabets, for example, or a Cudworth, might be included. But how far the repertoire might be widened is unresolved. Context, furthermore, still tends to be treated as 'background', implying that it is a secondary aspect of the history of philosophy, even outside the limits of history of philosophy proper.

The pressure for change is growing in the face of new methodologies and changing ideas of what philosophers today find interesting in the philosophy of yesteryear. For example, latterly Conal Condren, Stephen Gaukroger and Ian Hunter have edited a collected work which advances the *persona* of the philosopher as an operative concept in the development of philosophy in any period. This focuses on how the pursuit and nature of 'what constitutes philosophy' is shaped by the identity, status and above all self-image of the philosopher, as constituted by institutional, social and personal factors.[27] More recently, a younger generation is pressing meta-philosophical questions to explore the problem of the relationship of philosophy to its past. This may be illustrated from a recent collection edited by Mogens Laerke, Justin E. H. Smith, and Eric Schliesser, in which contributors discuss the way the history of philosophy is perceived and practised by drawing variously on anthropology, genealogy, archaeology, the history of science, and the idea of the past as 'process'.[28]

---

[24] Rutherford, 'Introduction', in *CambridgeCompanion to Early Modern Philosophy*, edited by Rutherford, 3.
[25] J. B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy* (Cambridge, 1998), 551.
[26] Rutherford, 'Introduction', in *Cambridge Companion to Early Modern Philosophy*, edited by Rutherford, 2.
[27] *The Philosopher in Early Modern Europe: The Nature of a Contested Identity*, edited by Conal Condren, Stephen Gaukroger, and Ian Hunter (Cambridge, 2006).
[28] *Philosophy and its History: Aims and Methods in the Study of Early Modern Philosophy*, edited by Mogens Laerke, Justin E. H. Smith, and Eric Schliesser (Cambridge, 2013).

There is also an important respect in which philosophers' 'unhistorical' view of past philosophy is changing the historical landscape. As new interests arise in present-day philosophy, so new questions are asked of the past and new narratives emerge.[29] New philosophy requires new histories—modern European philosophy, for instance, does not find its themes and preoccupations treated in traditional histories of philosophy. In the wake of the women's movement of the late twentieth century, women have begun asking whether and if so where were there any women philosophers in the past. In response to the omission of female philosophers from the story of philosophy, feminist philosophers have started to rewrite histories to include them.[30] We await corresponding results for the philosophy of the emotions or of animal ethics. As Richard Popkin noted:

> The history of philosophy will be written many more times in terms of emerging themes and theories; in terms of the interests and concerns of thinkers yet to come; and in terms of new information and insights about the past.[31]

Popkin's comment reflects not just the obvious fact that new information leads to historical insights. It also iterates the truism stated earlier, that philosophers have not always had the same goals at all times and in all places and that present preoccupations colour perspectives on the past. But to shift the point of departure in the present will not of itself produce a historical account of philosophy's past, but a one-way conversation between living and dead. New departure points highlight the need for rethinking the way history is written. So, for example, when trying to include women philosophers in the history of philosophy, feminist historians of philosophy soon discovered that they are not served well by the familiar narratives which sort philosophers according to classification schemes such as rationalists and empiricists or in relation to the established canonical greats. The historiography itself has had to evolve to address this problem.[32]

3. A Way Forward: Conversations of Philosophers

Having raised some issues concerning the unhistorical treatment of philosophy's past, I shall conclude with suggestions for a way beyond the deadlock between philosophers and historians, by proposing an approach to the history of philosophy which aims to preserve the perceived special character of philosophy without treating intellectual history as extraneous to the subject. One thing on which historians and philosophers can, perhaps, agree is that, in practice, philosophy is integrally related to both its past and its present. Most philosophers do not and did not live and work in isolation from one another or from their forbears. Notwithstanding the claims of would-be innovators and iconoclasts, philosophers' ties with past philosophy have always been strong. Many were (and are) in

[29] *Columbia History of Western Philosophy*, edited by Popkin, xvii and xx.
[30] For an overview, see Charlotte Witt, 'Feminist History of Philosophy', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2012 edition, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2012/entries/feminism-femhist/ (accessed 5 January 2014).
[31] *Columbia History of Western Philosophy*, edited by Popkin, xvii.
[32] For examples of different approaches, see *A History of Women Philosophers*, edited by Mary Ellen Waithe, 3 vols (Dordrecht, 1987–1991); Jacqueline Broad, *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 2002); *Feminist History of Philosophy: The Recovery and Evaluation of Women's Philosophical Thought*, edited by Eileen O'Neill and Marcy P. Lascano (Dordrecht, 2014).

dialogue with one another, personally or through letters or indirectly through their writings. Cross-referencing to one another is also evident from the themes which they treat and the arguments which they employ. There is a sense in which philosophy is constituted of interchange between philosophers, and this engagement is, as Descartes put it in the quotation which heads this essay, a 'conversation'. We can think of philosophical 'conversation' in different ways—literally as actual dialogue, metaphorically as implied discussion through the themes that are treated and arguments which are employed. In philosophical debates in the past, as now, the interchange might be with one's contemporaries or with one's predecessors, direct or indirect, personal or impersonal. An important aspect of the conversation of philosophers is and was the reading and interpretation of philosophical texts, and the cumulative inheritance of responses, *glossae*, objections, replies, refutations and critiques which perpetuates philosophical traditions and keeps debates alive. As in all conversations, some voices are likely to dominate, some are more persuasive than others and there are enormous variations in tone, ranging from polite to polemical, matter-of-fact, intemperate, dismissive.

If the living practice of philosophy is constituted of conversations of this kind, the history of philosophy might fruitfully be treated as an ongoing conversation—not a one-way conversation between present and past, but a series of conversations in a variety of directions, all located in the past. The conversation which I have in mind is not one between the living and dead, but a historicised 'conversation' among the dead. Crucially, to pursue the history of philosophy as an inter-philosophical dialogue is not to track a one-way conversation between modern philosophy and the past. But it historicises that dialogue, eschewing as far as possible the perspective of the present by returning it to its original context.[33]

To pursue the history of philosophy through the idea of philosophy as a conversation acknowledges that the origins and interchange of ideas are important aspects of the history of philosophy. The advantage of adopting a 'conversation model' is that it recognises philosophy's connection with its past. It picks up on the idea that philosophers engage with one another, that the pursuit of philosophy involves dialogue in some sense of the term. The conversation model assumes that a distinctive feature of philosophy is its engagement with other philosophy, including its past. It accepts that at any point in time, present interests colour philosophers' understanding of their past and drive their interest in it. Prior to the twenty-first century, dialogue with other philosophers was just as likely to be a dialogue with the distant past as with the recently dead. Some of the most distinctive innovations in the history of philosophy resulted from creative engagement with earlier, even ancient, thought.

A further advantage of the conversation model allows voices to be heard which would otherwise be discounted or overlooked. It therefore has the potential to offer a fuller and more integrated account of philosophy, which sets figures now classed as 'marginal' or 'major' thinkers in relation to each other, without making assumptions as to their relative philosophical standing. It makes it possible to bring into the frame individuals and groups who have been overlooked—notably women philosophers. Instead of emphasising the

[33] This is an approach which I have adopted in my *History of Seventeenth-Century British Philosophy* (forthcoming with Oxford University Press).

break between philosophy and its past, the conversation model makes it possible to trace continuities across periods, thereby yielding a better understanding of how new developments took place. As an 'eavesdropper' on past conversations, the historian of philosophy must be equipped with the tools to listen in. To treat the history of philosophy requires that we acquire the skills that make it possible to listen in on those discussions. Essential qualifications include knowledge of relevant languages and, crucially, some knowledge of philosophy. And to understand what is being discussed requires consideration of the social, political and cultural conditions in which those conversations took place. That is indeed the province of the intellectual historian, but it is every bit as much the business of the historian of philosophy.

Acknowledgements

This paper was originally given at a workshop on 'The Practice of Intellectual History Today' at the European University Institute. My thanks to the organiser, Ann Thomson for inviting me, and to the other participants for their comments.