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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 philosophiæ 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 erronées d'Anthoine Villon dit le Soldat Philosophe, & Estienne de Claves medecin chymiste... ou sont doctement traictez les vrays principes des corps & plusieurs autres beaux poincts de la nature; & prouvée la solidité de la doctrine d'Aristôte* (Paris: Chez l'autheur, 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

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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.