

# Analytic Philosophy and History: A Mismatch?

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In recent years, even some of its own practitioners have accused analytic philosophy of lacking historical awareness. My aim is to show that analytic philosophy and history are not such a mismatch after all. Against the objection that analytic philosophers have unduly ignored the past I argue that for the most part they only resist strong versions of historicism, and for good reasons. The history of philosophy is not the whole of philosophy, as extreme historicists maintain, nor is it indispensable to substantive philosophizing, as mainline historicists have it, it is merely advantageous (pragmatic historicism). Against the objection that analytic histories of philosophy are inevitably anachronistic I argue that it is possible to approach past texts with a view to substantive issues and in a critical spirit (contrary to historicist relativism and to misguided interpretations of the principle of charity). Indeed, such an analytic approach makes not just for better philosophy but also for better history.

Lack of historical awareness is one of the prime accusations against analytic philosophy. It unites traditionalist philosophers devoted to the study of the *philosophia perennis* with avant-garde 'continental' philosophers. From a continental perspective, Rorty accuses analytic philosophers of trying 'to escape from history' (1979, pp. 8 f.). From a traditionalist perspective, Ayers lambastes analytic philosophy for its historiographical failings (1978). Combining both perspectives, Rée complains about analytic philosophers' 'condescension' towards the past (1978, p. 28) and Wilshire takes exception to their 'radically ahistorical and modern-progressivist point of view' (2002, p. 4). More recently, some who by common consent are analytic philosophers themselves have joined this chorus of complaints. This prima facie surprising fact is due in part to the establishment of the history of analytic philosophy as a recognized field of study over the last twenty years (see Beaney 1998). Historians of the analytic movement like Sluga (1980, p. 2), Baker (1988, p. ix), and Hylton (1992, p. vii) regularly deplore its lack of historical self-consciousness. But the issue has also received additional attention through the late Bernard Williams, who urged philosophy to adopt a more historical and genetic perspective in general (2002a).

I use the label ‘historicism’ in a wide sense, for any position which promotes historical thinking in philosophy and warns against ignoring or distorting the past. There is an ongoing debate about the virtues of ‘doing philosophy historically’ (Piercey 2003). Unfortunately, it suffers from a failure to distinguish more specific *types* of historicism.

According to *extreme* historicism, proper philosophy is *ipso facto* historical as regards both its methods *and* its conclusions. Thus Krüger assures us that the reason for studying history is not just the ‘pragmatic’ one of ‘studying historical material in order to produce trans-historical philosophical insight’, since the only philosophical insights to be had are themselves historical in nature (1984, p. 79 including n.). In the same vein, Critchley repudiates the ‘validity of the distinction between philosophy and the history of philosophy operative in much of the analytic tradition’, because of the ‘essential historicity’ of philosophy in particular and human culture in general (2001, p. 62). Extreme historicism confines philosophy to the interpretation of past intellectual productions, notably in the hermeneutic tradition to which Krüger belongs, and to historical explanations of how they emerged from social conditions, especially in the Nietzschean and Marxist traditions on which Critchley draws. According to *mainline* historicism, studying the past is *indispensable*, yet only as a *means* of reaching conclusions which themselves are not historical in nature. This view is exemplified by Taylor, who holds that one ‘cannot do’ substantive philosophy without also doing history of philosophy (1984, p. 17). Finally, according to *pragmatic* historicism, studying the past is *useful* to the pursuit of substantive philosophy without being indispensable (Hare 1988, p. 12; Kenny 2005).

We must also distinguish two historicist criticisms. The first is that analytic philosophers tend to *ignore* or despise the past—for want of a better label I shall call this the charge of *historiophobia*. The second is that in so far as they consider the past, they *distort* it, namely by reading features of the present into it—the charge of *anachronism*. Mainstream analytic philosophers have tended to ignore such criticisms. This is a serious failure. The historicist attacks raise important philosophical issues. They continue unabated within academic philosophy, and they are propounded as received wisdom by cultural critics (e.g. Romano 2003).

My aim is to redress this failure by engaging the historicist critics in a sustained debate. Analytic philosophy and history are not such a mismatch, even though they have been through some rough patches. Sections 1 to 4 rebut the first charge. Analytic philosophers do not in general ignore history, they merely resist strong versions of historicism.

Rightly so. Extreme historicism is misguided. Mainstream historicism is more attractive, and will therefore be my main target in these sections. I hope to show that the case for it remains unproven, since the arguments support at most a version of pragmatic historicism. Sections 5 to 7 deal with the second charge. Some forms of analytic historiography are anachronistic. What characterizes the analytic approach to the past, however, is rather the ambition of engaging with historical texts in an argumentative spirit, in order to draw lessons for 'trans-historical' philosophical problems. This problem-oriented and critical historiography is superior both to the historical relativism of extreme historicists and to the excessively pious approach to past philosophy implied by certain hermeneutic principles. Proper analytic historiography makes not just for better philosophy, but also for better history. While I mention specific historical cases to substantiate my claims, reasons of space prevent me from discussing them in detail. Instead, I hope to show that the *general* arguments behind blanket historicist condemnations of analytic philosophy can be resisted on metaphilosophical, historiographical, and hermeneutic grounds.

### **1. Analytic philosophy and historiophobia**

Many analytic philosophers pride themselves on the ahistorical nature of their enterprise. Analytic enemies of metaphysics condemned traditional philosophy as predominantly nonsensical or misguided. And at present a popular naturalistic story has it that analytic philosophy is a scientific discipline; it uses well-controlled techniques to tackle discrete problems with definite results, and hence no more needs to seek refuge in discussing the past than natural science. Quine is credited with the quip: 'There are two kinds of people interested in philosophy, those interested in philosophy and those interested in the history of philosophy' (MacIntyre 1984, pp. 39 f.). And Williams reports: 'in one prestigious American department a senior figure had a notice on his door that read JUST SAY NO TO THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY' (1996, p. 18). The culprit turns out to be Harman (Sorell 2005, pp. 43 f.). But it could equally have been Fodor, who boasts about his 'ignorance of the history of philosophy' and his ability to write a 'book about Hume without actually knowing anything about him' (2003, p. 1).

On this issue, there is even convergence between Fodor and Wittgenstein. According to Ryle, Wittgenstein 'not only properly distinguished philosophical from exegetic problems but also, less properly, gave the impressions, first, that he himself was proud not to have studied other

philosophers—which he had done, though not much—and second, that he thought that people who did study them were academic and therefore unauthentic philosophers, which was often but not always true. Ryle, by contrast, balked at the superior attitude towards previous philosophy which he detected in Wittgenstein and the Vienna circle. Not only had figures of the past ‘sometimes said significant things’, they should be treated ‘more like colleagues than like pupils’ (1971, pp. 10 f.).

As this quotation demonstrates, historiophobia is not a universal affliction among analytic philosophers. In fact, many of them have laid claim to the philosophical mantle of thinkers from the past (see Glock 2008, pp. 92 f.). Thus Oxford philosophers like Ryle drew extensively on ancient philosophy (though their approach has been condemned as anachronistic, see Annas 2004). Indeed, since the 1960s there has been an upsurge in analytic work on the entire history of philosophy, prompting von Wright to speak of a ‘retrospective turn’ (1993, p. 47).

Ryle’s passage also indicates, however, that there remains a conflict with stronger versions of historicism. Analytic philosophers insist that the *exegetical* question of what a philosopher believed can and must be distinguished from the *substantive* question of whether those beliefs are correct (e.g. Russell 1900, pp. xi f.). By the same token, there is a difference between *philosophy* and the *history of philosophy*, contrary to extreme historicism. They also insist that any philosophical insights to be gained from studying the past can be discovered *independently* at least in principle, and that they can be developed without sustained historiography, contrary to mainline historicism. The next three sections reject extreme historicism and resist the arguments in favour of mainline historicism, whilst defending pragmatic historicism.

## 2. Extreme historicism

Naturalistic historiophobes rely on two premisses: *first*, proper philosophy is part of or continuous with natural science, and should therefore emulate the latter’s aims and methods; *secondly*, natural science is thoroughly ahistorical. ‘A science that hesitates to forget its founders is lost’ (Whitehead 1929, p. 107). Scientific research rarely proceeds by arguing with the great dead, and students of the natural sciences are not introduced to their subject through its history.

Nevertheless, some extreme historicists have tried to advance their cause by accepting the first premiss while repudiating the second. Drawing on Kuhn, Krüger insists that a scientific theory  $T_2$  cannot be judged solely by comparing it to the empirical evidence; it must also be

pitted against the previously accepted theory  $T_1$ . Scientific theories can only be understood as alternatives to their *historical predecessors*, because the empirical evidence is equally compatible with different theories (1984, p. 93). MacIntyre is even more forthright: 'the history of natural science is in a way sovereign over the natural sciences ... the superior theory in natural science is that which affords grounds for a certain kind of historical explanation'. By the same token, the history of philosophy 'is sovereign over the rest of the discipline'. The ultimate test of a philosophical theory 'occurs not at all at the level of argument', but rests on its capacity to provide a historical explanation of its rivals (1984, pp. 44, 47).

Kuhn was right to insist that scientific rationality can only be understood by looking not just at the formal structure of scientific theories but also at their historical development. Scientific theories emerge through evolution and, on occasion, revolution rather than out of the blue. However, this no more entails that the *criterion of scientific success* is the explanation of these historical developments than the historical emergence of culinary styles entails that the true test of recipes lies in their ability to sustain a history of cooking. Scientists evaluate theories according to their power to explain and predict empirical data, as well as subsidiary criteria such as simplicity, conservatism, modesty, precision, and facility of computation. Proponents of a new theory  $T_2$  indeed have ample motivation to explain both the failures and the successes of a preceding orthodoxy  $T_1$ . But their target is not to provide a *historical* explanation of  $T_1$  itself, an account of its origins and development, of the motivations of its proponents and of its cultural and political context. It is rather to provide a *scientific* explanation of the *natural phenomena* that are of relevance to the tenability of  $T_1$ .

Krüger sets store by the thesis that scientific theories are undetermined by the empirical data. Even if correct, however, the underdetermination-thesis entails only that in assessing the cognitive virtues of  $T_2$  we cannot rely solely on empirical evidence but must draw on other considerations as well, concerning for instance pragmatic virtues like simplicity. It does *not* entail that we must compare and contrast  $T_2$  with a historical rival  $T_1$ . Indeed, some scientific theories *lack* predecessors, either because they mark the dawn of a discipline or because they concern newly discovered phenomena such as quasars or autism. Finally, even where a scientific theory pits itself against a rival, this process is *not historiographical*. The interest  $T_2$  takes in  $T_1$  concerns only what the latter maintains about nature, not how it arose.

Neither scientists nor philosophers can afford to disregard the theories of their *immediate* predecessors, since these are the rivals against which they have to prove their mettle. I see no evidence, however, that naturalistic historiophobes counsel such complete abstinence. In any event, as regards *remote* predecessors the current argument does not even deliver the pragmatic thesis that it is beneficial to take an interest in them, let alone the stronger claim that it is unavoidable.

Unsurprisingly, most extreme historicists instead contest the *first* premiss of the naturalistic argument, the claim that philosophy is part of or continuous with natural science. Their preferred route has been to align philosophy with the humanities and social sciences. For Gadamer (1960), philosophy is 'hermeneutics', an investigation of the method of interpretation, because the fundamental structures and limits of human existence are determined by the interpretation of meaningful actions and their products. Philosophy turns into a dialogue with texts and with the history of their effects. One of the historical blind spots of analytic philosophers is supposed to be that they are oblivious to the need of situating ourselves in the Gadamerian 'conversation which we are' (Rorty et al. 1984, p. 11).

There is no gainsaying that the cultural sciences are inherently historical, since they seek to describe and explain the development of evolving human practices. *If* philosophy were simply one of the *Geisteswissenschaften*, it would be intrinsically historical. Natural and cultural sciences do not exhaust the options, however. Traditionally philosophy, like logic and mathematics, has been regarded as a priori, independent of sensory experience. Its problems cannot be solved, its propositions cannot be supported or refuted, by observation or experiment, irrespective of whether these concern the natural world or human culture.

Though derided by naturalists, this rationalist picture has recently found support from numerous, otherwise diverse quarters (see e.g. Boghossian and Peacocke 2000). What is more, it has one singular advantage, namely that it squares well with the *actual practice* of contemporary philosophers, naturalists included. Philosophy as a distinctive intellectual pursuit is constituted at least in part by *problems* of a peculiar kind. These problems are supremely abstract and fundamental, and they include questions such as 'Can we acquire genuine knowledge?', 'How is the mind related to the body?', and 'Are there universally binding moral principles?'. Philosophy cannot afford to ignore empirical findings from either the natural sciences or the humanities. Yet there is at least a powerful case for regarding it as a priori in the follow-

ing minimal sense: the distinctively philosophical disputes concern not the empirical data themselves, but at most the relevance they have for such problems. The genuinely philosophical task is not to expand the corpus of empirical knowledge, but to organize what is known in a coherent manner.

If there is a kernel of truth to this idea, it will apply to the cultural sciences with a vengeance. If even neuroscience cannot solve the mind–body problem by itself, cultural sciences like sociology and history will be completely out of their depths. There is no reason why the empirical findings of these disciplines should possess greater potency for solving philosophical problems than those of the natural sciences. It is equally clear that such problems cannot be solved or dissolved simply by historical research into their origins. Observations about the social and historical circumstances within which Descartes espoused a substance dualism neither answer the mind–body problem, nor do they show it to be misguided. If philosophy were transformed into a cultural science or reduced to a history of ideas, it would no longer speak to the philosophical problems.

This explains an ironical consequence of extreme historicism. The overwhelming majority of the great philosophers of the past did precisely *not* reduce philosophy to history of philosophy, whether it be the scholarly interpretation of texts or the scrutiny of the social context of their production. Instead, they tackled non-historical problems and aspired to insights of a *non-historical* kind. Extreme historicists can only collapse philosophy into the interpretation of previous philosophy if they regard these ambitions as deluded and the resulting efforts as misguided. Such a rejection of the very project of substantive philosophy is epitomized by a dictum occasionally attributed to Burton Dreben: ‘Philosophy is rubbish, but the history of rubbish is scholarship’ (for a variant see Hart 1971, p. 288, n. 10). There is even a pertinent argument which would favour this defeatism, namely that there are no ‘timeless’ philosophical problems and that philosophical ideas can have validity at best relative to a specific historical context. But in section 6 I shall argue that this historicist relativism is flawed. In any event, if defeatism were correct the scholarly study of philosophical ‘rubbish’ could hardly have the intrinsic importance that extreme historicists assign to it. As a result, extreme historicism faces a dilemma. Either the giants of yore were right to believe that history is not all there is to philosophy. Or they were fundamentally mistaken about the nature and value of their own enterprise, which greatly diminishes the appeal of studying them.

### 3. Philosophy and the framework

The rationalist conception provides a rationale for being sceptical even about mainline historicism. It implies that philosophy depends on a priori reflections concerning atemporal concepts and logical structures, rather than on empirical historical studies. In the Preface to the *Prolegomena* Kant wrote:

There are scholars to whom the history of philosophy is itself their philosophy; the present Prolegomena are not written for them. They will have to wait until those who endeavour to draw from the fountain of reason have finished their business, and thereupon it will be their turn to apprise the world of what happened. (Kant 1783, p. 255)

There is a distinctively Kantian tradition within analytic philosophy. It shares both the view that philosophy differs from *all* empirical disciplines and the reservations about the relevance of history. Kant's distinction between *quaestio facti* and *quaestio iuris* and the ensuing neo-Kantian distinction between genesis and validity fuelled a pervasive, if largely implicit, suspicion of the so-called 'genetic fallacy', the mistake of deducing claims about the *validity* of a theory or the *content* of a concept from information about its historical *origins* and the causes for its emergence. Thus Frege granted that 'the historical perspective' has a certain justification, while insisting that one cannot divine the nature of numbers from psychological investigations into the way in which our thinking about numbers evolved (1884, Introduction).

In one respect, however, rationalism points in the opposite direction. If philosophy is a priori, its past efforts cannot simply be superseded by novel empirical results; hence they may have something to teach us, just as pragmatic historicism has it. Kant allows for this possibility. He only resists the view that history of philosophy is philosophy enough. This view was powerful in the eighteenth century doxography that Kant lampooned, and it re-emerges in extreme historicists of the present.

Willy-nilly, Kant even inspired mainline historicism. For Kant philosophy is a priori not because it describes abstract entities or essences, but because it is not concerned with objects of any kind. Instead, it is a *second-order discipline* which reflects on the preconditions of experiencing ordinary objects, that is, on the conceptual scheme that science and common sense presuppose in their descriptions and explanations of reality. Kant treats this scheme as an immutable mental structure—'pure reason'. From Hegel onwards, however, it was held that our scheme can change, at least in parts. For Hegel 'philosophy [is] its time apprehended in thought' (Hegel 1821, p. 35). It articulates and synthe-



sizes the different branches of a culture into a superior form of wisdom. Less ambitiously, according to Collingwood (1940), metaphysics spells out the ‘absolute presuppositions’ of an epoch, fundamental intellectual commitments that can only be brought to light with the benefit of hindsight through historical reflection. A related mutation of the Kantian picture emerged in Wittgenstein. He accepted that philosophical problems defy empirical solution because they are rooted in our conceptual scheme rather than reality. Unlike Kant, Wittgenstein regarded this scheme as embodied in language, a social practice which is subject to change. Though personally immune to the charms of historical scholarship, Wittgenstein opened the door to a historical understanding of concepts and of the philosophical problems to which they give rise. Philosophy is not *ipso facto* history, yet historical knowledge may be indispensable to tackling the conceptual problems with which it deals.

Several mainline historicists follow this trajectory. They assume that philosophy aims at a special kind of *self-understanding*, an understanding not so much of the non-human world as of our thoughts and practices. In the words of Williams:

The starting point of philosophy is that we do not understand ourselves well enough ... Philosophy’s methods of helping us to understand ourselves involve reflecting on the concepts we use, the modes in which we think about these various things [nature, ethics, politics]; and it sometimes proposes better ways of doing this. (2002a, p. 7)

Similarly, for Taylor, philosophy ‘involves a great deal of articulation of what is initially inarticulated’, namely the fundamental assumptions behind the way we think and act (1984, p. 18).

Instead of Collingwood’s ‘absolute presuppositions’, let us use the more neutral label ‘framework’ for the system of concepts, modes of thought and assumptions that underlie a given culture. As Williams acknowledges, the immediate philosophical task is to articulate *our current* framework, since the ‘concepts which give rise to the [philosophical] questions are ours’ (2002a, p. 7). Why then should philosophy require an understanding of the *past*?

Mainline historicists can rise to this challenge in two ways. One is to argue that philosophy must look at the history of the philosophical *characterizations* of our framework; the other is to argue that it must take into account the development of that framework *itself*.

Taylor chooses the first option, arguing that we can only articulate our world-view successfully by recovering previous articulations. According to him, the most successful challengers to Cartesian conceptions of mind and language—Hegel, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty—

had recourse to history. Taylor recognizes the objection that ‘it didn’t have to be so’; these critics just happened to be German and French professors with ‘a notorious professional deformation which makes them compulsively engage in expositions and re-interpretations of the canonical texts’ (1984, p. 19). Worse still, it wasn’t even so. Wittgenstein’s attack on Cartesianism is at least as compelling; yet it is entirely ahistorical, revolving instead around a dialogue with a fictitious interlocutor.

Taylor’s second argument seeks to exclude the possibility of non-historical philosophical criticism *ab initio*. It maintains that the only way of appreciating that a prevailing philosophical position is merely ‘one of a range of alternatives’ is learning about its origins and the prior orthodoxies that the current one had to contend with. ‘[Y]ou need to understand the past in order to liberate yourself’, because this is the only way of realizing that there are alternatives to the status quo (1984, pp. 20–2; similarly Baker 1988, p. xvii).

This line of reasoning is vulnerable on several counts. First, even if one can challenge a given philosophical articulation  $A_2$  only by being acquainted with an alternative  $A_1$ , that alternative need not lie in the past. *Synchronic* diversity can take the place of *diachronic* diversity. Secondly, even if some articulations are without extant competitors, we would only have to know a past articulation. It would not follow that we have to know the *history* leading from  $A_1$  to  $A_2$ . A doxographic comparison of positions without reference to chronological development would do just as well.

Both objections are avoided by Williams (2006, Ch. 16). Just as the ‘naturalistic’ historicists discussed in section 2 maintain that scientific theories need to provide a historical account of their emergence from their predecessors, Williams intimates that philosophical articulations of our framework must furnish a ‘vindicatory explanation’ of their emergence from their predecessors. As in the scientific case, however, this insistence on a genetic account portrays the debate as more self-reflexive than it is or need be. Even in the case of philosophical articulations of our framework, the crux of the matter is whether  $A_2$  accounts for its *subject-matter* more successfully than  $A_1$ , not whether it can provide a laudatory explanation of its own emergence. Any vindicatory explanation of  $A_2$ ’s emergence presupposes a demonstration of its *substantive superiority* over  $A_1$ , rather than the other way around.

Finally, both Williams and Taylor maintain that one can only overcome a philosophical position  $A_n$  if one is familiar with a prior position  $A_{n-1}$  from which it emerged. Fortunately, that contention is belied by

astute yet historically uneducated critics like Frege, Wittgenstein or Quine. It also engenders a vicious regress. For it entails that our immediate predecessors could only have moved from  $A_{n-1}$  to  $A_n$  because they were already familiar with  $A_{n-2}$ , and so on. Yet this is one regress of which we know that it stops somewhere. For a vast majority of cases Frede is right when he writes: 'we always do philosophy against the background of the philosophical views and the philosophical reasoning of at least our immediate predecessors' (1987, p. xiv). This cannot be a pervasive requirement, however, otherwise our subject could never have started.

#### 4. Genealogy

Let us turn to the second option. The underlying idea is that articulating our framework presupposes knowledge of its history. According to Williams, more baneful than the neglect of the history of philosophy has been the neglect of 'the history of the concepts which philosophy is trying to understand' (2002a, p. 7). This position underwrites a broader historicism, since it makes philosophy dependent not just on the history of *philosophy* but on the entire *history of ideas* and perhaps even on *history in general*, depending on what forces shape our concepts. But how can it be sustained, given that the philosophical problems we currently confront have their roots in the present framework?

One proposal is to transpose the need for *alternatives* from the philosophical articulation to the articulated framework. Knowing about the history of our current framework liberates us from regarding the latter as unavoidable. This is what Skinner has in mind when he writes that 'the indispensable value of studying the history of ideas' is to learn 'the distinction between what is necessary and what is the product merely of our own arrangements' (1969, pp. 52 f.).

If we are to understand our framework in a philosophically enlightening way it is indeed crucial to establish what aspects of it, if any, are indispensable rather than optional products of contingent circumstances. Otherwise we cannot assess, for instance, Strawson's claim that 'there is a massive core of human thinking which has no history—or none recorded in histories of thought' (1959, p. 10). Nevertheless, the historicist argument runs into trouble. As regards philosophical articulations, at least there was no doubt as to the existence of diversity. As regards the framework itself, it is not even beyond dispute that there *are* genuine alternatives. Anti-relativists from Kant through Strawson to Davidson have insisted that *au fond* human beings all share the same framework and that the alleged differences between epochs are merely superficial. If

they are right, the argument that philosophers need to be familiar with alternative frameworks from the past is simply a non-starter.

There are good reasons for resisting the attack on the possibility of alternative frameworks (Dancy 1983; Hacker 1996). In that case, however, the historicist argument fails on other grounds. If the apparent diversity of human cultures cannot be dismissed as deceptive, then it is synchronic as well as diachronic. Our framework differs from that of the ancient Greeks; yet it also differs, for example, from that of extant hunter-gatherers. Once more, synchronic diversity can take the place of diachronic diversity. Historiography is only one source for recognizing diversity, the other being *cultural anthropology*. Indeed, Wittgenstein and Quine have consciously employed *fictional* rather than actual anthropology to highlight the possibility of alternatives. This may even have the advantage that we can tailor the envisaged frameworks to the philosophical problems under discussion.

Williams employs a different argument for the need to look at the development of the framework. According to him, in the case of scientific concepts like that of an atom the question whether the same or a different concept is employed in different epochs and cultures does not matter much to ‘what may puzzle us about that concept now (for much the same reason that the history of science is not part of science)’. Unfortunately, Williams does not divulge this reason; and it is difficult to see why *philosophical* problems concerning scientific concepts should be less sensitive to conceptual variations than philosophical problems concerning non-scientific concepts. Be that as it may, Williams argues that the question of whether the same concept is employed in different settings *does* matter for *some* philosophically contested concepts, namely those intimately tied to human interaction and communication, concepts like freedom, justice, truth, and sincerity. In these cases it is imperative, he insists, to appreciate that their historical variants represent ‘different interpretations’ of a ‘common core’. We may be able to understand that core through functionalist reflections on the role these concepts fulfil in satisfying the demands of human life, as in fictions of a ‘State of Nature’ which purport to explain the emergence of morality, language or the State. ‘But the State of Nature story already implies that there must be a further, real and historically dense story to be told’. Therefore we need a Nietzschean ‘genealogy’, a ‘method that combines a representation of universal requirements through the fiction of a State of Nature with an account of real historical development’ (2002a, p. 7).

Williams defends genealogy against the accusation of relying on a genetic fallacy. According to him this charge ‘overlooks the possibility

that the value in question may understand itself and present itself and claim authority for itself in terms which the genealogical story can undermine'. Thus liberal conceptions of morality 'claimed to be the expression of a spirit that was higher, purer and more closely associated with reason, as well as transcending negative passions such as resentment', and hence a genealogy is capable of displaying them as 'self-deceived in this respect' (2002a, pp. 7–9; see 2002, pp. 20–40, 224–6).

If Williams is right, one reason why history is indispensable to philosophy is that the genesis of certain concepts or beliefs is crucial to their content and validity. That is to say, what such concepts or beliefs amount to and whether they are legitimate will depend on the source from which they derive. Even then, however, the basic idea of a genetic fallacy still stands. All Williams has shown is this: *if* a practice, belief or mode of thought *defines* or *justifies itself* in terms of a particular origin, then that origin becomes relevant to its analysis and justification. The reason is *not* that there is after all no distinction between genesis on the one hand, content or validity on the other. Participants in the Catholic practice of ordination, for instance, defend it by reference to the idea of apostolic succession, and hence to a particular origin. In other cases the genesis of a practice provides a reason for or against it even if it is not actually adduced, for example when a legal norm has not been adopted through proper procedures. Yet the investigation of either the actual or the best possible reasons is not per se genetic; it merely takes on a genetic aspect in *specific* cases.

Concepts like that of a sun-burn or of lava are genetic in that they apply only to things with a certain origin. Even in these cases, however, it is not the history of the *concept itself* which is part of its content, but the history of its *instances*. To elucidate that content, philosophers only need to note that historical dimension; unlike empirical scientists who apply such concepts they do not need to examine the actual origin of potential candidates.

Finally, it is the status quo *alone* which determines whether a given concept is genetic or whether the actual or optimal justification of a belief or practice invokes its origins. Even if liberal morality originally laid claim to superior breeding, this entails *neither* that its current proponents justify it in this manner, *nor* that this is the best possible justification. If neither of these options holds, genealogy will be immaterial to the philosophical merits of liberal morality. And whether they hold does not depend on the historical origins of liberal morality.

Williams characterizes a genealogy as a 'narrative that tries to explain a cultural phenomenon by describing a way in which it came about, or

could have come about, or might be imagined to have come about' (2002, p. 20). The inclusion of the last two disjuncts distances his genealogy from Nietzsche's own, and assimilates it to a functional account, one which explains or justifies a phenomenon by pointing out that it serves a specific role in an actual or fictional practice. As Williams realizes, however, a functional explanation is not per se *genetic*. It is one thing to know the function of an organ, another to know its evolutionary emergence. Similarly, one can reflect on the function of our concept of knowledge (Craig 1990), without speculating about its origins. What counts is the *current role* which the concept has.

Williams's response is that functional accounts of our discursive practices 'are simply false'. The value of these practices 'always and necessarily goes beyond their function', because their participants are rational agents who have their own reasons for engaging in them (2002, pp. 34 f.). But this observation suggests rather that a philosophical understanding of a practice must look *beyond* functional explanations in general, notably to the way in which the *agents themselves* would or could explain what it amounts to (rather than its genesis or function, of which they may well be ignorant) and justify its pursuit. It does not entail that the functional explanation must be temporalized by looking at the genesis of either the concepts, *or* the practices that give them point, *or* the agents that sustain them.

Revealingly, Williams's own purportedly genealogical vindication of the virtues of truthfulness does not presuppose any history, actual or invented. To be sure, he considers a State of Nature involving a fictional society with primitive speakers. But the net justificatory yield of the exercise is that a practice of acquiring true beliefs and sharing them sincerely with others is advantageous to rational social creatures, since it allows them to pool information that is not directly available to any one individual. Williams strives hard to take this line of reasoning beyond a purely utilitarian defence of an instrumental value. He insists that the beneficial practice of sharing information would be unstable unless its participants regarded accuracy and sincerity as good in their own rights. To this end he enriches the functional story by considering further aspects of the context of the practice, as well as potential threats to it. But the vindication relies purely on what it would be rational for creatures with human capacities, limitations, and requirements to do within various scenarios. It does not depend on how the creatures or the scenarios emerged. The philosophical case of *Truth and Truthfulness* is anthropological-cum-epistemological rather than historical.

Williams may be right to contend that certain *specific* discursive practices are or should be based on genetic justifications that invite historical scrutiny. Yet he has not provided a *general* reason why any philosophical reflection on a concept or belief should *require* either a historical or a fictional account of its emergence. The popularity of mainline historicism notwithstanding, the absence of a compelling general case in its support should not come as a surprise. It is notoriously difficult to demonstrate for *any* specific method that it is essential to philosophy as such; some practitioners are even confident that they can attain philosophical insights without rational argument.

In this respect, the study of history is no worse off than many other procedures that have been declared indispensable to philosophy. In fact, it may be better off than many, since it is demonstrably useful. This may sound like an unexciting conclusion. But in philosophy the most modest positions are often supported by the strongest arguments. It is important to recognize that several points advanced by mainline historicists in fact count in favour of pragmatic historicism. One such point arises from the aforementioned difference between philosophy and empirical disciplines. Like other cognitive achievements, philosophical understanding is accomplished through a communal effort. Furthermore, given the partly a priori and conceptual nature of philosophy, and the combination of continuity and change in the relevant concepts, the community of ideas relevant to our contemporary philosophical problems is not exhausted by contemporaries. The problems, methods and theories of the past have not simply been overtaken by empirical progress. As a result the endeavours of past thinkers remain a valuable source of inspiration, both positively and negatively. As mentioned above, for scientists and philosophers there is a definite premium on situating one's efforts in the context of the ongoing debate. And in philosophy, that context has a historical dimension that reaches back further. For instance, we could scarcely be confident to see through the errors of complex philosophical views without the benefit of previous discussions.

At the same time we should acknowledge that for *individual practitioners* drawing on the history of philosophy can also have disadvantages for their substantive philosophizing. Even if the insights of past thinkers are real rather than presumed, relying on them can deprive one not just of an opportunity to hone one's intellectual skills, but also of the potential benefits that accrue from recognizing alternative possibilities or even from fruitful errors. There is a need to balance the gains of doing philosophy historically against those of thinking off one's own

bat. Unlike pragmatic historicism, extreme and mainline historicism cannot do justice to this desideratum, the former because it simply reduces philosophy to the history of philosophy, the latter because it regards philosophizing off one's own bat as impossible.

None of this militates against the aforementioned benefits of historiography. *Philosophy as a whole* profits substantially if the results of non-historical brainstorming are understood and assessed against the background of previous philosophical efforts. More specific benefits attach to knowledge of the evolution of our framework (as opposed to knowledge of unrelated synchronic alternatives). For one thing, certain previously dominant features of that framework may have receded, yet play an important role in our current philosophical puzzles. While in principle it is possible to retrieve such features from the current employment and function of these concepts, it may be easier to bring them into view by looking at earlier stages. Thus Anscombe (1958) and MacIntyre (1981) have suggested that some of our deontological concepts originally derived from the idea of a divine command. *If* they are right (and it is a substantial *if*), it will help to explain why these concepts seem to lay claim to an authority which is puzzling from a secular perspective. For another, if we are to profit from the philosophical reflections of the past, we must recognize conceptual differences and shifts concerning key terms. Otherwise we shall misidentify the questions and intellectual needs that these reflections addressed.

## 5. Anachronism and problematic histories

The second historicist protest against analytic philosophy is that it fails to heed this warning. Analytic philosophy, the story goes, is anachronistic because it treats the figures of the past like contemporaries whose ideas address our current preoccupations. According to Ayers, analytic philosophy pursues a 'programme of flattening the past into the present' (1978, p. 55). Hacking speaks of the 'pen-friend approach to the history of philosophy' (2002, p. 27), while Baker and Hacker accuse mainstream Frege scholars of treating him 'as an absent colleague, a contemporary fellow of Trinity on extended leave of absence' (1984, p. 4).

Analytic philosophers for their part have responded with a charge of *antiquarianism*. Traditional historians of philosophy, they allege, regard the past as a museum which is to be treated with veneration rather than critical scrutiny. As a result their narratives are irrelevant to substantive philosophical problems, whatever their historical accuracy. In this vein Broad contrasted his own 'philosophical' approach to history with a



‘historical and philological’ one (1930, p. 2). The spirit of a history of ideas which brackets questions of philosophical truth and cogency was epitomized by Ross. After a lecture he was asked by a student whether Aristotle was right. He replied: ‘My dear child, you must not ask me such questions. I merely try to find out what Aristotle thought. To find out whether what he thought is true or not is not my business but that of the philosophers’ (Künne 1990, p. 212). Such a pure history of ideas leaves open deliberately the *philosophical* issues raised by the past. It should not come as a surprise, therefore, that analytic historians have gone beyond it. But they have moved in different directions.

One historiographical perspective with analytic echoes is what Passmore calls ‘polemical’. Its ultimate aim is to expound the commentator’s own views; to this end it turns past thinkers into mouthpieces of contemporary views. In this vein, Broad suggested that scholarship is philosophically irrelevant. The only interest of our predecessors, he contends, is that ‘the clash of their opinions may strike a light which will help us to avoid the mistakes into which they have fallen’ (1930, pp. 1 f.).

The polemical approach invites an immediate objection. One cannot assess ‘whether the old boy got anything right’ unless one has established what his views were in the first place (Rorty et al. 1984, p. 10). This point is well taken, however, by most analytic historians (Passmore 1966, p. 226). The only way of circumventing it is to bracket questions of interpretation completely. Thus Broad declared that he was interested only in the answers to the substantive questions ‘suggested’ by previous authors. More recently, Kripke has purported to provide an account of ‘Wittgenstein’s argument [on rule-following] as it struck Kripke’, rather than a faithful exegesis (1982, p. 5). In so far as it uses past figures merely as Rorschach blots, such an approach amounts to historiophobia by the backdoor.

A third analytic stance is doxography. It does not abstain from attributing views to authors of the past. At the same time, it rests content with comparing and contrasting positions, without fretting over the wider context or actual relations of intellectual influence. Thus Dummett recounts a ‘history of thought’—of propositions and arguments standing in abstract relations of support or conflict—rather than a ‘history of thinkers’ (1993, Ch. 1). Doxographical approaches are committed to exegetical accuracy; yet in so far as they tell any developmental narrative it is a fictional reconstruction from a contemporary perspective. As a result, they are open to the historicist challenge that what a thinker thinks is accessible only by placing his thinking in a historical context.

To varying degrees, therefore, polemical, Rorschach, and doxographical approaches commit the sin of anachronism. Fortunately, they do not exhaust the options for analytic historians. A majority of them favours what Passmore calls 'problematic histories'. This approach is based on the aforementioned idea that philosophy has its roots in problems of a special kind, and that its history is an evolution of these problems and of their solutions. Problematic historians ponder questions like: why were people exercised by certain questions, why did they utilize certain methods for tackling them, and why did they find certain solutions attractive? Problematic history is by no means the prerogative of analytic philosophers. But it has been especially congenial to analytic historians. On the one hand, problematic histories deal with the actual development of philosophy. On the other hand, they do so in a philosophical spirit. They seek to understand how these developments contributed to the content of our contemporary problems and theories.

## 6. Historicist relativism

Problematic history has not been spared historicist fire. Krüger complains that its 'assumption of the persistence of problems is at odds with the claim that philosophy advances', to which it is also committed, and leaves it at a loss to explain the emergence of new problems. Furthermore, philosophical problems are not 'autonomous' but change along with the wider cultural and social *context* (1984, pp. 81–5).

But problematic histories do not need to assume that philosophy inevitably progresses. Furthermore, progress does not rule out the persistence of problems. For it can consist in gaining a *better understanding of the problems* and the options for tackling them. This is precisely one of the things analytic philosophers have aspired to. Moore put philosophical difficulties down to 'the attempt to answer questions without first discovering precisely *what* question it is which you desire to answer' (1903, p. vi). And in a spirited plea for analytic philosophy Beckermann points out that philosophical progress 'often amounts to the clarification rather than the solution of problems' (2004, p. 10; also Kenny 2005).

Problematic historians, including analytic specimen like Passmore and von Wright, can also acknowledge the embeddedness of philosophy. Understanding a text properly often requires acquaintance with its philosophical and cultural context. One real bone of contention is whether it inevitably requires knowledge of external social factors, as historicists (Rée 1978, p. 30; Hylton 1992, p. 3) and sociologists of

knowledge (Kusch 1995) suggest. Contrary to their assumption, it is actually a moot question which contextual features have what kind of relevance to interpretation. In so far as there is a general answer, it depends on hermeneutic issues that historicists have tended to shirk (see Sect. 7). It should be obvious that those aspects of the context which the author herself assumes to be familiar to readers or which concern tacit assumptions of her reasoning are more important than the economic conditions of the text's production. More generally, if we seek a philosophical understanding of the content of a text rather than a genetic (historical, sociological, psychological) explanation of its creation, there is a strong case for insisting that only those contextual features matter which the author herself could adduce in its explanation and defence (see Frede 1987, pp. ix–xxvii; Skinner 1969, p. 28).<sup>1</sup>

The real crux is whether embeddedness militates against an ambition which *is* central to analytic historians: to understand the past in order to derive substantive philosophical lessons. Whilst this ambition is compatible with acknowledging the 'horizontal' impact of the context, it presupposes that there is also 'vertical' continuity across time. The problems, arguments and claims of remote philosophical theories must be intelligible to *us*, so that we can assess them for their *trans-historical merits*.

Precisely this possibility is denied by a distinctly historicist version of relativism. If correct, this historicist relativism would not just vindicate accusations of anachronism against analytic historians, it would also lend succour to extreme historicism. For it implies that the attempt to come up with objectively valid responses to timeless philosophical problems and arguments is futile, and hence that the enterprise of substantive philosophizing should be abandoned in favour of an exclusively historical-cum-sociological examination of philosophical ideas.

Historicist relativists inveigh against the idea of 'eternally available' problems and positions (Rée 1978, pp. 12, 28). The 'sense of continuity' driving analytic historians is 'illusory', they believe. There is insufficient 'agreement in concepts and standards to provide grounds for deciding between the rival and incompatible claims' of different 'modes of philosophical thought' (MacIntyre 1984, pp. 33 f.), and consequently 'attempts to pass judgement on the worth of philosophical positions *sub specie aeternitatis* are misconceived' (Baker 1988, p. xii).

<sup>1</sup> My preferred route to that conclusion runs as follows. An author has first-person authority about what *she means* by a sentence or text. In so far as texts are simply expressions of speaker's or author's meaning, this settles the issue. A complication arises because there is a potential difference between *author's meaning* and *literal meaning*, what the sentence or text *actually means* in a linguistic community at a particular time. Extreme forms of externalism notwithstanding, however, competent speakers must be able to explain even the literal meaning of their expressions (see Glock 2003, pp. 247 f.).

Many historicists seem to assume that such relativistic conclusions are guaranteed by the fact that we always understand and assess a philosophical position from our own perspective. From this it follows that what we *believe* to be the content and validity of a philosophical view is inevitably shaped (to a greater or lesser extent) by our specific historical circumstances. It does not follow, however, that what content and validity these views *actually* have is relative to such circumstances. For we must distinguish between what is believed to be the case and what is actually the case. I cannot believe that *p* yet—at the same time—believe that my belief that *p* is false. But of course this does not prevent me from acknowledging that this belief may *turn out* to be false. For this reason, there is no incoherence in the ‘absolutist’ ambition to find out what is actually true, for instance with respect to the questions of what a given philosophical position amounts to and whether it is correct.

Accordingly, historicist relativism cannot be vindicated simply by appeal to the ‘perspectival’ nature of belief. A weightier argument in its support derives from Rorty’s claim that fundamentally different philosophical positions are incommensurable: they cannot be assessed objectively from a neutral standpoint (1979, Ch. VII). Incommensurability comes in two versions, semantic and methodological or epistemic (see Sankey 1999). *Semantic* incommensurability has it that we lack objective standards of assessment because there is semantic variance between the vocabularies of different theories. But *meaning variance* does not entail *translation failure*. There is no one-to-one correspondence between Russian and English colour terms, but this does not militate against compound translations such as ‘light blue’. Even in the more fraught cases familiar from scientific revolutions, nothing prevents followers of a theory  $T_2$  from *modifying* their conceptual apparatus in order to gloss  $T_1$ , notably by introducing new terms or constructions based on their own vocabulary. It is a moot question whether such procedures always yield synonymous phrases. Even this kind of translation failure does not entail mutual *unintelligibility*, however, since proponents of  $T_2$  can acquire the conceptual apparatus of  $T_1$  without endorsing it. Aristotelians and Kantians who hold to the centrality of enduring particulars are capable of mastering the ‘perdurantist’ idiom of space-time worms, even if they regard it as derived and confusing. ‘Aetna erupted’ is not synonymous to ‘Part of the life-long filament of space-time taken up by Aetna is an eruption.’ Nevertheless, it is obviously possible to understand both sentences and to realize that they necessarily have the same truth-value.

Historicist relativists maintain not merely that understanding the content of past theories requires acknowledging their context. They invoke semantic incommensurability by suggesting that outside of their original environment these theories no longer *have the same content*, and hence that any attempt to understand them in our contemporary idiom is doomed. What they repudiate is neatly epitomized by Bennett's view that 'we understand Kant only in proportion as we can say, clearly and in contemporary terms, what his problems were, which of them are still problems and what contribution Kant made to their solution' (1966, back cover). To this Ayers objects that we can only interpret a past thinker 'in his own terms' (1978, p. 54). Taken literally, this would confine interpreters to the vocabulary of the author. The obvious difficulty is that this vocabulary is often unfamiliar to us. In such cases, Ayers's prescription obliges us to explain an obscure text in other, equally obscure terms. But in order to understand something more than nominally, we must be able to explain it in terms that are *intelligible to us*.

One might retort that we can render an ancient theory intelligible simply by immersing ourselves in its vocabulary. There is an important insight in this proposal. Immersion in the past can lead to ideas and distinctions which are not readily available in contemporary idiom. Witness the incorporation of Aristotelian and Kantian terminology into post-war analytic philosophy. It does not follow, however, that we can understand an old vocabulary, let alone adopt it in a responsible manner, without being able to *explicate it in our own*. For this would require that an individual operate two distinct vocabularies *with* understanding, yet *without* any capacity to explain the terms of one in terms of the other to any degree. The idea of such 'semantic schizophrenia' is mystifying. Even if it can be coherently explained, moreover, it should be the last resort in accounting for the relation between different theories.

Semantic incommensurability is not a palatable option for historicists. If the figures of the past were so alien that we could never comprehend them in contemporary terms, studying them would be futile. It should not come as a surprise, therefore, that historicists ultimately grant semantic commensurability, at least when their own readings are at stake (e.g. MacIntyre 1984, pp. 42 f.). Apparently the threat of incommensurability hangs like a thick fog over the history of our subject when it is approached by the rude search-lights of analytic philosophers, yet miraculously lifts when historicists cast an elegant glance on it.

Historicist relativism must instead hinge on *epistemic* incommensurability. Thus for Rorty there is no vantage point from which to adjudicate between philosophical positions from different periods, since there is no ‘*independent* test of accuracy of representation’, no way of stepping outside of our belief system as a whole and comparing it with reality (1991, p. 6). It is far from obvious that objective philosophical assessment requires such an incoherent feat (Baldwin 2002, pp. 272 f.). One alternative is to judge theories by their *internal* consistency and the extent to which they meet *their own* targets. At the same time, historicist relativism is susceptible to several objections.

For one thing, its relativistic conclusion may be self-refuting, because it is implicitly committed to claiming a correctness which it explicitly rejects. Consistent historicists would have to regard their own animadversions against problematic histories as no more than the expression of a different *Zeitgeist*. Moreover, from the fact that specific philosophical ideas must be understood against the background of a more or less extensive context, it does not follow that they can only be understood by *accepting* that context. We may acknowledge that a particular statement is intelligible, plausible or compelling given other assumptions accepted by the author. This does not prevent us from questioning the statement, if we have reasons to reject those assumptions. Conversely, we can criticize a claim which we may regard as correct on the grounds that it is incompatible with this background. Either way, the need to reckon with context in no way removes the possibility of rational assessment.

Finally, historicist relativists incline towards circular reasoning. On the one hand, relativism is supposed to be a lesson from history; on the other hand, that lesson is only revealed to those who approach history in a relativistic spirit. Hacking draws attention to the immediate way in which a text like the *Meditations* speaks to contemporary undergraduates (2002, pp. 27–33, 56 f.). There is no reason to regard them as deluded. Descartes’ claim that nothing in my experience indicates whether I am dreaming was a heuristic device aimed at laying foundations for a new positive science. But this in no way precludes its use as a sceptical argument. Nor does it prevent a rational confrontation between Descartes’ claim and the counter claims of later epistemologists keen to resist scepticism.

## 7. Hermeneutic equity

We have found no compelling argument against the ‘analytic’ project of assessing ancient theories for their philosophical merit. In fact, the boot is on the other foot. Far from being the only way of revealing the past, to abstain from judgement may even mean to conceal it. To understand her subject, the historian needs to have a genuine sense of what it is to take a stance on philosophical problems. For the detached attitude recommended and occasionally affected by historicists is at odds with the engaged attitude of past philosophers. Furthermore, as Frede has argued (1987, p. xii), a full *historical* understanding of the fact that a philosopher held a certain view requires a *philosophical* understanding of that view. Otherwise we will not be in a position to decide whether he had good reasons for holding it or whether that fact must be explained aetiologically by reference to external factors.

There is a further objection to philosophical abstinence. In the hermeneutic tradition we encounter a ‘principle of equity’ according to which a good interpretation of a text presumes that its author is rational, unless the opposite has been demonstrated. And in analytic discussions of ‘radical interpretation’ (i.e. interpretation of a completely unknown language) we find a ‘principle of charity’ according to which we should not translate utterances of a completely alien language as being obviously false.

To the combatants in the historicism battle, these hermeneutic principles are a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they intertwine exegetical and substantive issues, by suggesting that we cannot even *understand* a text without taking a stance towards its claims. On the other hand, they threaten to open the substantive case only to shut it at once, since they seem to imply that the stance we must adopt is an *affirmative* one. Instead of favouring a hard-hitting analytic approach, this would give succour to the reverential attitude of the traditionalists.

But how sharp is the sword anyway? Note first that the hermeneutic term ‘equity’ is superior to the analytic ‘charity’, since it avoids the suggestion that interpretation requires some kind of moral or cognitive forbearance. Next, we must keep apart three dimensions of equity:

1. assuming that the expressed views are by-and-large true
2. assuming that these views are by-and-large coherent
3. assuming that the utterance or text is suited to the speaker’s or author’s purposes

Some formulations of equity make it appear as if proper interpretation precludes the possibility of ascribing irrational views. In fact, however, equity demands only a *fallible presumption* of rationality, which can be defeated in any individual case. Its proponents insist on a ‘supporting consensus’ (Gadamer 1967, pp. 104 f.), a background of shared assumptions which enables disagreement in detail precisely because it rules out ‘massive error’ (Davidson 1984, pp. 168 f.).

There remains disagreement on the scope of the required consensus. Quine prohibits only the ascription of beliefs that are evident empirical falsehoods or explicit logical contradictions. Davidson, by contrast, occasionally favours charity ‘across the board’, to all types of beliefs, and entreats us to ‘maximize agreement’ with the interpretees. This procedure is forced upon us, he reckons, because in radical interpretation we neither know what the natives think nor what their utterances mean. Assuming that they believe what we do is the only way of solving this equation with two unknowns (1984, pp. xvii, 101, 136 f.).

This kind of equity would indeed rule out any *significant* disagreement with an interpreted text. But it is misguided. In intra-linguistic communication—philosophical exchanges included—we can take for granted a shared understanding of most expressions, an agreement which opens up the possibility of disagreeing in our beliefs. Even in radical interpretation the maximization of agreement is not inevitable but would lead to misinterpretation. It is wrong to ascribe opinions we take to be correct even in cases in which there is no explanation of how subjects could have acquired them. Interpretations should ascribe beliefs that it is *plausible* for people to have, whether or not they coincide with ours (Glock 2003, pp. 194–9).

A second argument for maximizing agreement concerns reference. It would be misguided to entertain the possibility that the beliefs of a subject about a topic *X* are *all and sundry* wrong; for in that case we have no longer any grounds for assuming that these views are indeed about *X*. ‘Too much attributed error risks depriving the subject of his subject matter’ (Davidson 1984, p. 200). This insight does not, however, support Davidson’s stronger thesis that *most* of a subject’s beliefs about *X* must be true, and that the errors we normally lumber our predecessors with are too massive:

how clear are we that the ancients ... believed that the earth was flat? *This* earth? Well, this earth of ours is part of the solar system, a system partly identified by the fact that it is a gaggle of large, cool, solid bodies circling around a very large, hot star. If someone believes *none* of this about the earth, is it certain that it is the earth that he is thinking about? (1984, p. 168)



'Yes!' is the correct—if unsolicited—answer to Davidson's rhetorical question. To be thinking about the earth one does not need to be right on the scientific topics he mentions. All that is needed are identifications like: 'The vast body on which we are currently standing' or 'The body which comprises the continents and the oceans'. Consider someone who points to the ground and says sincerely: 'We are currently standing on an enormous flat disk. If you continue moving in the same direction you'll eventually fall off the edge'. That person clearly believes the earth to be flat, just as we believe it to be spherical.

Two of these hermeneutic lessons apply directly to philosophical interpretation. First, we cannot simply maximize agreement, since it would be blatantly anachronistic to credit ancient texts with insights which became available only later. Secondly, the need to comprehend the background does not entail an obligation to adumbrate it. To understand Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* requires a host of contextual knowledge, from details like the legal background of his term 'deduction' to the tension between his a prioristic conception of natural science on the one hand and his empiricist animadversions against metaphysics on the other. None the less an interpreter can avail herself of this background without endorsing it, and without averting her eyes from the aforementioned tension.

In other respects philosophical texts present a unique challenge. Philosophical disputes are of a very fundamental kind, yet without revolving around the basic observational errors that even moderate equity rules out. Often the disagreement is not about the factual truths of empirical claims, but about the understanding of particular concepts. While we can take many terms for granted here, this does not hold for those which are philosophically contested in a particular passage. Accordingly, factual truth is largely irrelevant and conceptual truth cannot be taken for granted. But while this reinforces the need to avoid anachronism when confronting ancient theories, it does not oblige us to presuppose that the latter are true.

As regards the second aspect of equity, there is a case for denying that one can believe *explicit* contradictions. If someone utters a sentence of the form ' $p$  &  $\sim p$ ' without qualifying it (e.g. concerning time or respect), this is a criterion for his not having understood that sentence, and therefore incompatible with his thereby expressing the alleged belief. If so, it is unclear how one *could* entertain beliefs of this kind without undermining one's status as a genuine subject of beliefs. Nevertheless, one can hold beliefs which *turn out* to be contradictory, that is, which defy being spelled out in a coherent fashion.

But when it comes to interpreting *texts*, even the ascription of explicit contradictions is not off limits. For a text is not an immediate expression of a single belief. It may instead manifest beliefs which the author held at different stages of composition. Because of inattention an author may also fail to recognize that a view expressed on page *X* is incompatible with one expressed on page *Y*, or he may simply have committed a slip in writing down the text. Commentators who believe that one must never ascribe inconsistent views to a text have, I suspect, never bothered to reread their own writings.

Similarly for the third aspect of equity. On occasion it is more equitable to regard a text as an obscure expression of the author's message, simply because the alternative would lumber it with views which are evidently mistaken or at odds with other parts of the corpus. Different aspects of equity can come into conflict, which means that we must weigh different considerations, based on our knowledge of each individual case. Therefore equity can never reign supreme, but must be tailored to text and author.

We saw that in order to achieve more than a nominal understanding we need to relate the text to our terms, interests, and beliefs. Now it emerged that we need not project most of our beliefs onto the interpretees. These two points favour the critical engagement with the past espoused by analytic historians. But the most striking formulation of this conjunction hails from Gadamer. On the one hand we relate the text to our own concerns and convictions; on the other hand the text poses a challenge, in so far as its claims are at variance with what we take to be true (1960, pp. 286–90). The ideal result is a dialogue, a 'fusion of horizons'. The interpreter is open to the text precisely because she treats it as a philosophical challenge. She allows the text to question both her own understanding of it *and* her prejudgements about the matter at issue. The dialogue may either necessitate a revision of her interpretation, or of her prejudgements, or it may confirm the original attribution of error. In none of these cases, however, can the interpreter ignore issues of truth and cogency.

Resisting charity across the board makes room not just for counting the interpretees wrong. It may transpire that on some issues they not only hold *different* views, but that they are right and we are wrong! In approaching a foreign text or culture, we must keep in mind the possibility that we might have something to learn. That is one lesson of the hermeneutic tradition which even its analytic admirers have yet to assimilate. But it is a lesson which chimes well with the practice of analytic historians, according to which we should learn from a text by tak-

ing it seriously as raising issues and evincing claims of substantive interest.

The historicist bracketing of substantive issues ultimately fails because philosophical texts make cognitive claims of a non-historical kind. Comprehension of these claims is aided by knowledge of the issues discussed. The idea that the history of a discipline profits from neutrality about the validity of the examined claims or even from ignorance about their subject matter is no more plausible with respect to philosophy than it is with respect to science. The alleged impudence of treating philosophical texts *sub specie aeternitatis* in fact amounts to no more than this: analytic philosophers speak in their own voice, instead of constantly disavowing their own beliefs. Mindful of the difference between belief and truth they are also aware that their beliefs might turn out to be false. And if they are historically conscious, and a rising number of them are, they will also be aware that reading a text from the past puts both the author and the interpreter to precisely this test.

Analytic philosophy pursued in this spirit can avail itself of all the advantages of paying heed to the past that emerged from the historicist arguments. But it need not accept the conclusions of extreme or of mainstream historicism. Philosophy cannot be reduced to the history of philosophy or the history of concepts. And although it can benefit immensely from problematic histories, it can be pursued successfully without them. Finally, both philosophy and its history are better off without the popular prejudice that finding fault with the texts of the past is incompatible with comprehending them.<sup>2</sup>

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